NEW WORLDS SF

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ARTHUR SELLINGS · JAMES COLVIN
RICHARD WILSON · JOHN BAXTER
GEORGE COLLYN · ETC

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All manuscripts must be double-spaced, typed on quarto paper with a top-sheet containing title, author's name, word-length and author's address. A stamped, self-addressed envelope must accompany all submissions.

A RARE EVENT

ONLY ONCE BEFORE has a World Science Fiction Convention been held in Britain. This was in 1957 at London's Kings Court Hotel. It was attended by hundreds of SF enthusiasts, publishers, writers, editors and artists from all over the world—there were even a few from behind the Iron Curtain. John W. Campbell was the Guest of Honour and amongst the American personalities were H. Beam Piper, Bob Silverberg, Harry Harrison, Ray Nelson, Sam Moskowitz, Forrest Ackerman and others. Well known British writers were there in strength—Wyndham, Clarke, Eric Frank Russell, Aldiss, Ballard, Sellings, John Christopher, Tubb, Bulmer, Brunner, James White and, of course. John Carnell. It was an exciting affair and it gave many readers a chance to meet their favourite authors for the first time for—as always—it was informal.

World Conventions are usually World Conventions in name only. They are generally held annually in different parts of the United States. The location for the next convention is voted on at the current one and, since Americans are usually the only members, they tend to vote for locations in the States. Rather selflessly, they voted for London in 1956 and last year they voted for London again. That means that a truly international World Convention—the 23rd—will take place this year. It will be held at The Mount Royal Hotel, Mayfair, from August 27 to 30 and Brian W. Aldiss will be Guest of Honour. Many American and European SF personalities have already joined, as have their British counterparts. It is sure to be even more exciting than the one held in 1957. The attendance fee will be 21s. or $3.00 and the hotel is offering special room-rates for members. Further details can be

obtained from the Chairman, Miss E. A. Parker, 43, William Dunbar House, Albert Road, London, N.W.6.

The U.S. Agent for the 23rd World Science Fiction Convention is Mr. Bill Evans, Box 86, Mt. Rainier, Maryland, U.S.A. Those who are not sure if they will be able to attend but wish to be kept in touch and eligible for voting for the Hugo Award (traditionally voted for by World Convention members) can become members for 15s (or $2.00) and pay the difference when they arrive at the convention hotel.

For those who can stand the pace, there will be two SF Conventions this year. The annual BSFA convention has Harry Harrison as its Guest of Honour and will be held in Birmingham over the Easter week-end. If you wish to attend, a registration fee of 5s. should be sent to K. M. P. Cheslin, 18, New Farm Road, Stourbridge, Worcs.

A chance to win a year's supply of NEW WORLDS free, plus new books recently published, plus artwork, is given by a raffle organised by an SF film group called Group 65. Tickets are 1/- each and can be obtained from The Secretary, Group 65, 36, Winscombe Crescent, Ealing, W.5. The draw will be made at the Easter Convention. The group offers ten tickets for 7/6d., which is a pretty low price for a subscription.

The most recent issue of the BSFA journal to hand—VECTOR 29—has an excellent long article on SF characterisation by David Busby. Busby also contributes a very well executed front cover. If you are not already a member of the BSFA, it should be worth joining if only to get VECTOR. There are other advantages as a glance at our small-ad columns will show you.

Arthur Sellings brings his amusing novel to a conclusion that has more than one twist in the tail . . .

THE POWER OF *Y*

Arthur Sellings

MY NAME IS Max Afford. I run an art gallery in London, capital of Europe, in the year 2019. Art dealing has been complicated these past four years by *Plying*, a costly process of multiplying objects by up to twenty times by taking slices out of their 4th-dimensional extensions. There is a random factor, so that nobody can tell the actual original—except me suddenly as I discover that I have an odd PSI power. A strictly redundant gift—until I present a painting to President Georges Masson . . . and discover that he is a duplicate.

I contact Joanna Miles of the Plying Service. She is curt. My rich Aunt Clarissa thinks I may be mad. Returning to my apartment, I am bundled into a car and doped.

I come to in a padded cell. Joanna had contacted my aunt, suspecting that Security were after me. My aunt has had me snatched off to Dr. Cabell's private hospital. Ex-Senator Guy Burroughs, an old friend of the family, listens to my fantastic story—for Plying a living creature is supposed to be impossible—and we plan action.

But first—to keep things above board—I have to establish my sanity.

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HAD TO PROVE you're sane lately?

If so, you have my sympathy. And if you have the experience in prospect, don't be comforted by all those popular psychology articles that say that *every*body's neurotic, even (or especially) psychiatrists, and that normality is a nice wide bracket these days.

Hah! Does an astronaut want to prove that there's no life on Mars—a prospector that there's no oil in his particular desert? Isn't there, even in the most dedicated

doctors and psychiatrists, just a *tiny* desire to discover a kick or two in those bacteria . . . a clot of inferiority in even the smallest bellicose vein?

The fact that at least two people had recently suspected my sanity didn't help. Nor did the smooth injunctions to "Speak your mind frankly, we're your friends, Mr. Afford," from Dr. Cabell and his crew. I didn't want that kind of friendship.

Then you know that they're putting you down as hostile and unco-operative and suspecting that some cornered psychosis is covering up like mad. So you change tack and find yourself talking glibly and over-brightly. They have a word for that, too . . . rationalisation.

I lost my parents at an early age—that was also unfortunate, with its connotation of insecurity. When Cabell suggested hypnosis, I felt the budding of a persecution complex, with Dr. Kingsley Cabell as Persecutor-in-Chief. I refused the offer as levelly as I could. With the secret I had, I couldn't submit to any suspension of my control.

It was one hell of a situation.

On top of all of which, I remembered what Freud had had to say about artists, that they were only a special kind of neurotic. And people who live off them? But luckily it turned out that Dr. Cabell was a post-Jungian, and post-Jungians actually *like* artists it seems.

I got out, but it took me a week. Even so, Dr. Cabell shook hands with me with a "Now, remember, take it easy. And if there's the slightest anxiety—"

I hurriedly boarded Aunt Clarissa's Rolls-Royce. Clarissa made the expected polite enquiries as to my well-being. I hadn't seen her or anybody from the outside world during the past week, and even Clarissa's presence was comforting. I might have been safe in Hallucination Hall, but I felt a damn sight safer out of it. I settled back to enjoy the ride from Hampstead to home.

After a while I caught sight of a car in the rear mirror —and remembered that I had noticed it a couple of miles back. It was a black turbine job—I knew the make—small but very fast. But it seemed content to hang behind us at

the stately rate of fifty kilometres that Humphrey maintained.

"What's the matter with you?" Aunt Clarissa asked, rather testily. "What are you craning your head for?"

I wasn't going to be drawn. "Just looking at the scenery," I said. "Don't forget I've been cooped up behind bars for a week."

But when we arrived outside my apartment building in Bloomsbury, the black car was still with us. When we slowed to stop, it pulled out and took the next left corner. And I could swear it was slowing, too, to pull up immediately it was out of our sight. I had to tell Aunt Clarissa now. I tried to be as casual about it as possible.

"We've been followed all the way from Hampstead by a car."

"Of course," said my aunt. "I should have told you. That's Tom—ex-Detective-Inspector Thomas Mitchison. He's an old friend of Guy's. You'll be seeing something of him, I expect."

That was an understatement. Tom seemed to follow me everywhere. We didn't meet face to face, but at restaurants he sat at the table by the door. He was the man on the stool at the end of the bar. Heaven knows where he was when I went to bed . . . on the fire-escape, probably. He was the only sign of surveillance of my activities, from either side. I had no occasion to visit Aunt Clarissa. Guy Burroughs might as well have been in the middle of the Gobi desert. There was, not surprisingly, no word from Joanna, either. But one morning Fred, the newsvendor on the corner, delivered me the *Sun* in place of the *Times*—a mistake that I couldn't recall his ever having made before—and the top right-hand corner of the first two pages had been torn, exposing a gossip paragraph underneath . . . to the effect that one of the guests at a showing of rare manuscripts had been Joanna Miles of the Plying Service. I didn't take the paper back to Fred, but picked up a *Times* elsewhere that day. How many people were being roped into the act?

That little, barely more than coincidental, occurrence

was the only intimation I got that somewhere wheels might be moving.

Until one morning, ten days later, I was walking to the gallery, as I usually did on fine days. I was passing Tottenham Court Road tube station, when a hand plucked at the hem of my iridex duffel.

It was a flower-woman, one from whom I occasionally bought a buttonhole. I didn't like being pressured into buying, though, and I started to make a protest. My words died in their tracks.

"Act normally, you idiot," said Aunt Clarissa from under a rusty black shawl. Her idea of a cockney accent was ludicrous as she said, "Button'ole, sir?" She extended a white carnation. "That'll be three shillin'."

Old Betsie only charged me a shilling. Auntie took the money, too.

I put the flower in my buttonhole. As soon as I got to the office, though, I took it apart. It was made of paper. The paper was filled with instructions in small characters. The last sentence was *Read Memorise and Destroy.*

I don't know whether Aunt Clarissa expected me to *eat* it. I certainly wasn't going to. I tore it into small pieces and flushed it down the lavatory. But, later that day, I followed instructions.

I took a taxi for the Baker Street cartoon cinema at five-thirty. After the Bugs Bunny—it was Classic Week—I left by the exit that gives directly onto the station and took a ticket for the Elephant and Castle. Obeying instructions, I stood near the doors and, as they were closing at Piccadilly Circus, hopped out and made for the surface where I was to lose myself in the crowds, before getting a taxi to Paddington to catch the 7.26 from Platform Three.

Whoever had concocted these plans had underestimated the difficulty of getting a taxi at that time of the day in the Piccadilly Circus area. That fact made me suspect Aunt Clarissa's hand. That autocratic presence would have had no difficulty. *I* did. I got to Paddington as the 7.26 was pulling out. My ordained destination was Taplow, and the next train wasn't until eight three. I went into the

buffet. I cast a carefully casual eye around as I had a drink and a ham sandwich, but didn't see anyone who looked remotely likely to be a tail.

I caught the eight three—and found, only just in time, that I had to change at Ealing Broadway. I scampered over the bridge, reflecting that I wasn't in training for this kind of business.

I got to Taplow an hour later than schedule—and it had started to rain. And I had a two kilometre walk by my instructions. I turned my duffel collar up and strode off grimly. I was pretty well drenched . . . I trod in two deep puddles in the darkness . . . by the time I reached the shadowy house by the river. I rang the bell, three short rings and a long one. The whisky-smelling harridan who answered asked me what the hell row did I think I was making, so I gathered that I had made a mistake somewhere.

Then I saw that there was another shadowy pile further on. The instructions had said 'at the end of the lane', and optimistically, in the rain-swept darkness, I thought I had reached it. I went on, cursing Aunt Clarissa, Plying, weird talents and all of creation, but I dutifully went beyond the second house to make sure that it *was* the last in the lane . . . I wasn't going to make the same mistake twice . . . and only narrowly escaped falling in the river. As it was, I swung inanely on a low branch before regaining my footing on the slippery bank.

I rang the bell, and sighed deeply when Humphrey answered the door. He led me through to a large oak-beamed room.

"Where in heaven's name have you been?" Aunt Clarissa demanded, glaring up from her chair.

"It wasn't exactly the most direct route you picked," I told her curtly.

"Of course not! But *we* had no difficulty in following routes just as circuitous."

I was somewhat mollified to discover that the 'we' included Joanna. The other person there was Guy Burroughs, who spluttered into his whisky at sight of me. Joanna gave me what I can only describe as a sad look.

"Wring yourself out and draw up a seat," said Guy. "And you'd better have a dose of this." He poured me out a generous glass. After a swig of it I felt slightly less disgruntled.

"Now," said Guy, "let's get down to cases. I—"

In the intense atmosphere, the sound of the bell was startlingly loud. And it was only one ring, not dee-dee-dee-dah.

Humphrey looked in questioningly.

"You'd better answer it," my aunt told him. "Whoever it is possibly saw my nephew admitted, so we must avoid rousing suspicion. There's a shillelagh hanging by the door. Have that in your hand, and if there's any doubt at all in your mind use it. And—ah . . . give one stroke on the gong."

Humphrey retired dutifully, leaving me wondering how my aunt expected him to lay about him with a shillelagh and still find time to administer one stroke to any gong.

But, from the end of the long hall, came no sound of strife or gong; only what sounded like an angry voice. Then footsteps along the hall, and Humphrey came back.

"A Mr. Thomas Mitchison, madame. He's—ah'm—rather indignant."

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HE CAME IN wet and glowering.

"I should be very much obliged," he said, with a Scottish burr adding fierceness to his voice, "if whoever arranges these mystery tours would kindly inform me in advance—and also check with the Meteorological Office."

Clarissa coughed guiltily. "Ah—you did very well, Thomas."

He glared at her from under bushy brows. "D'you mean it was some kind of a test? Well, let me tell you that—"

"I'm sure Miss Huntley didn't mean that," Guy interposed soothingly.

"Humphrey will show you to a hot bath," said Clarissa, "and dry your clothes."

"And, might I suggest—?" said Humphrey, nodding towards the whisky bottle.

"Of course," said Guy.

Humphrey picked up the tray. A slightly placated Tom followed in his wake.

When he was gone I turned accusingly on my aunt.

"You completely forgot about him, now didn't you? The same as you forgot that it takes ordinary mortals a time to get a taxi. And while we're on the subject—"

Guy cut across me. "Now, now, Max. Your aunt is taking care of her end most competently."

I snorted. "This is simply bringing out all her latent conspiratorial talents. She's revelling in it. I move that we restrain her from such activities as dressing up as a flower-seller, for a start."

"Now who's a snob?" my aunt retorted.

I lifted my eyes to heaven.

"Besides, I did it very well, if I say so myself. Bessie was enormously pleased. I increased her takings by nearly fifty percent."

Guy grinned briefly behind his moustache, then sobered. "But there are more important things to discuss. The main item of information only needed looking for in the back files of the newspapers. It was in all of them at the time. But these things are apt to get obscured. Plying was the big event of the day four years ago. People are so used to inventions being team efforts these days. Everybody remembers that Bell invented the telephone and Edison the gramophone. But who invented transistors? Or stereo films?" He addressed me particularly. "And who invented Plying?"

"Er—I'm not sure. Somebody called Trine—or Rhine?"

"And what happened to him?"

"Did anything? Oh yes, he was killed in a plane crash, wasn't he?"

"You see? You only have a vague memory. You might have remembered better—you, me or anybody—if another big event hadn't hit the headlines just then.

"There were *two* inventors of Plying—Professors Klein

and Rockstro. They worked together at Sussex University, Brighton, and it was something they turned up in their academic research at the Davy Laboratory there. That's something like the Cavendish at Cambridge, and is Government backed. When they wanted to develop Plying practically they had to go to the Government for more money—a lot more money. Enough funds were put in to allow Klein and Rockstro to build a pilot plant. It worked, and immediately after, the security wraps went on. The plant at Brighton was dismantled and work started on a full commercial plant on the South Bank. Klein and Rockstro were appointed Director and Deputy Director respectively. This was five years ago, in 2014.

"In January the next year it was announced that the plant was completed and that test runs were taking place. On February tenth Klein was killed in a car—not an airplane—crash. On March nineteen Rockstro failed to report for duty, and on the twenty-first his body was fished out of the Thames. But that news never made better than a two inch column at the foot of page three, because on the nineteenth—the very day that Rockstro had disappeared—some much bigger news broke—the news that President Masson had been taken ill."

I breathed faster suddenly.

"The first bulletins were vague. They didn't mention a stroke specifically. It was only afterwards that it was diagnosed as such—that it could only have been a slight one, and that the President was well on the way to complete recovery.

"Now, what interpretation do we put on that?"

I answered, my voice taut.

"That Klein was got out of the way, that Rockstro was induced . . . bribed . . . forced . . . to Ply the President. Then *he* was got out of the way."

"An attractive theory—for us. But both inquests were straightforward enough. Klein's car smash happened in Kent, where he lived. His brakes failed one night on a steep hill near Sevenoaks. Rockstro had a launch, moored at the South Bank by the plant. It was surmised that he had fallen overboard. The question of suicide *was* brought

up, but there wasn't a scrap of evidence to support it. And there wasn't a whisper of murder in either case."

"Can't these things be fixed?" I asked.

"Fix *two* coroners, *two* separate police forces? As I've been looking into this, and thinking about it, the more I've become conscious of the growth in the operations of Security, so-called. But the police and the judiciary are on public view. So I think you can rule out that possibility. Which doesn't, of course, rule out the possibility—the strong possibility, to my mind—of foul play. We're up against some pretty desperate men."

"If we're up against anybody," I said wearily. Somewhere some adrenalin had ebbed from my system.

Joanna Miles looked up sharply. "What do you mean? You started all this. Are you trying to say that you want to go back on it?"

"Not at all. There *is* some kind of a conspiracy. But how can we be said to be *against* it? I haven't detected that I've been tailed—except by Tom? Has *he* reported anything untoward? Have you? Has any of us?"

Joanna shrugged. "I *know* I'm being watched. I can't define that any more than you can define your feeling about Plied things. I'm also conscious that Security has always been a bit tighter in the Plying Service than seemed justified. I never worried about it before—but I didn't suspect that our line was being tapped that evening without some pretty sure grounds . . . nor without previous experience."

"How about you?" I looked in turn at Guy and Aunt Clarissa.

Guy cleared his throat and toyed with his whisky glass.

Aunt Clarissa was never at a loss.

"There *was* a guard on my apartment block."

"*Was*? How long for?"

"For at least twenty-four hours."

"Exactly. And that was over two weeks ago. Since then, nothing. There's a high wall round this secret. The only crack in it came when somebody evidently panicked. They—and we're still no nearer knowing who *they* are—realised that fact, and the crack's been plastered over again.

Simply by not acting. They've got no need to act. *We* have. But where do we start?"

"I've got a man investigating in Brighton," Guy said. "Seeing what he can turn up on Klein and Rockstro."

"What has he found?"

Guy sighed heavily. "Very little so far. And Miss Miles didn't know them. She started with Plying just after the new director—a man called Guthrie—took over. He's still there, and seems to be completely above board. But here's our file so far—on everything." He held out a sheaf of papers to me.

It was a depressingly thin sheaf. A record of events around March 2015, a few reports from nameless operatives, a few press clippings. I riffled through them dispiritedly—and suddenly stopped.

I leafed back. There were five pictures of Rockstro, clipped from papers and magazines. Only one was full length—a street picture. He was a small dapper fair-haired man. In two of the other pictures his finger was stroking the line from the wing of his nostril to the corner of his mouth—one of those small personal gestures such as all of us have. But, somewhere, it rang a bell. I reached into the inside pocket of my bolero for a pen. I hatched over one picture quickly—darkening the hair, adding spectacles.

I handed the finished product to Aunt Clarissa.

"Does this mean anything to you?"

She looked at it blankly, then handed it back with a slight shrug.

I swore under my breath. Was this going to be another scrap of unsupported testimony?

"What *is* this?" Guy asked, holding out his hand.

He looked at the picture. His eyes widened. "I know this man? Where have I seen him before? *Ach*!" He thumped his brow with the heel of his hand. "Somewhere in some government department or other. That's the trouble—they all dress alike in dark suits. The Quiet Men. The corridors are full of them. Wait . . . I think I've got it. He's some aide of the President's."

"Eureka!" I couldn't help exclaiming. "Don't you re-

member now, Aunt Clarissa? The man who came in with the President?"

"I'm afraid not. I had all eyes for the President." She added bitterly, "Or what I thought was the President."

I wheeled back to Guy. "How many times have you met him, Guy?"

"I haven't *met* him at all, in the precise meaning of the word. He was somewhere to hand when I went to the Palace once with the Opposition leader to see the President on some matter of Parliamentary procedure. That must have been—how long ago?—about three years. Certainly since 2015. I can't remember having noticed him before then—and I used to see much more of the President in the days when I was a Senator. But I remember him that once—and I remember that gesture." He shook his head. "But what are we talking about? This can't be Rockstro. Rockstro's *dead*."

"Is he?" I asked quietly.

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NOBODY SPOKE FOR a very long moment. The only sound at all was the beating of rain on the shuttered windows, the hunting of a lost wind in an old chimney somewhere.

"We've found one of our conspirators," Guy breathed at last. "Frederick Lee Rockstro, alias . . . alias *who*, we can find out without much trouble. He's out there in the open . . . as much as the President is, and evidently just as necessary to *them*, somehow. You can bet they went through channels immaculately. Rockstro was Plied to give him an alibi . . . the perfect alibi, because he's officially dead. And not only officially, he *is* dead—or a duplicate of him is. A simple disguise job, a neatly tailored new identity—and who would think of connecting a discreet Presidential aide with the dead ex-Deputy Director of Plying?

"Now we've got something to work on at last. Unless we're backing a pure coincidence. But something tells me we're not. Maybe we haven't got anything definite, sub-

stantiated. But what we *have* got all points in the same direction—to one day in March, 2015." His eyes travelled in a slow arc, taking in each of the three of us in turn. "Now we have to be extra vigilant. Now, if never before, we have to tread softly."

"Tread softly because you tread on my nightmares," I murmured.

I was almost grateful to my aunt for breaking the spell. "Right then, here are your dispersal routes . .."

Action came swiftly. Three days later, I went for lunch to my favourite Chinese restaurant, the Happy Friends in Limehouse. I have a table booked by standing order for every Thursday. I ordered my favourite menu of chicken and walnuts, lean pork and stuffed peppers. At least, I started to, but Albert Choy, the proprietor, seemed to have other ideas.

"Very sorry, Mr. Afford, number seven not on this morning."

"Number seven?" I looked at the menu. "Shark fin soup? I detest the stuff."

"Sorry, no number seven. Seven this evening."

I looked up into that broad impassive face. It was broad and impassive. But I thought I got the message.

That evening at seven I went back and was shown up to the private dining room, which was usually reserved for parties and such. Sure enough, there was Aunt Clarissa, dressed in a high-necked silk tunic.

"What, no yellow pigment?" I teased her.

"One does not overdo these things," she said haughtily.

"Is Albert Choy on the Strength, too?"

"I've had a twenty percent share in this restaurant for many years."

And I had been going to it for a good few years, too—and I suddenly remembered who had recommended it to me. Not that it needed any recommendation, for the food was excellent. And so was the service. But nobody came for our order now.

"Things have been moving," my aunt said. "So listen carefully.

"The President's aide is called Fearnshaw. As Guy predicted, his men had no trouble in finding that out. Government appointments have to be listed, and everything was done above board—seemingly. Background, federal service grade and all. But the date of his appointment is extremely interesting—March the nineteenth, 2015. Precisely the same day that the President is supposed to have had his stroke."

"*Supposed* to?"

"It's beginning to look as if the story of the illness was a cover, to explain any noticeable change in the President. For Guy's man at Brighton stumbled upon the vital piece of information we've been lacking. Something—somebody—that the tooth comb passed over—for it looks as though a very fine one has been through Rockstro's past. And—the other evening you used a simile about plastering over the cracks—well, somebody came along with a trowel, too. Years ago, I mean, long before we got tangled up in all this.

"But Guy's man did dig up some faint clues that seem to indicate that Rockstro went in for a rather spectacular and ludicrous kind of transvestisism. That was probably the pressure point, blackmailing him to take part in the plot. But the main thing that has turned up is what this person in Brighton was able to tell us. He was a lab assistant—of Klein's, not Rockstro's. Not a scientist, just somebody who fetched and carried and helped to prepare apparatus. He retired before the Brighton plant was dismantled. He left the country, as a matter of fact, to live with a married daughter in Canada, and has only recently returned. Guy's man bumped into him by the merest chance.

"Now—this man was present one night when Klein, evidently without Rockstro's knowledge, carried out an experiment on Plying a living creature. A small dog. The experiment was successful, insofar as both the original and the one copy that was Plied survived—but one of them,

which was surely the duplicate, was confused, easily cowed and without initiative. The experiment—"

"*Confused, easily cowed and without initiative!*" I breathed. "That means—" My aunt was glaring at me. "Excuse me for interrupting. Go on."

"I *will* excuse you, because it seems that you've got the point. Anyway, Klein was interrupted by some noise or other. And they have to be careful about experimenting on live animals with Home Office regulations and everything —and so they should be. When I think of—"

"*Auntie . . .*"

"Very well but it's enough to make one's blood run cold. I shall certainly increase my donation to the Society. Where was I? Oh yes. All evidence of the experiment was destroyed hurriedly, and Klein told our friend to keep his mouth shut about it. Our friend also says that Klein destroyed his notes. Klein was a Jew—and much as his scientific curiosity got the better of him, some old taboo re-asserted itself. Haven't they got some kind of myth about a doppelganger?"

"The Golem," I said. "It's something like our Frankenstein story. I can understand a Jew getting the shakes—or anybody. But not our friend Rockstro apparently."

"Whoever was blackmailing him—if it was that—must have had something exceedingly black on him. Enough to make him give up his career to join a dastardly plot. A plot to replace the President, a man of strength and decision, with a mere copy that could be manipulated like a puppet.

"It was a terrible plot—and everything was so propitious for it. There was the plant, there was the man to commit the deed and there was the means to cover it up by providing a duplicate of the malefactor to be dropped quietly into the Thames. I believe that the movements of the tide can be guaged to ensure that a body is washed ashore."

My eye caught a stir then in the curtains that had been drawn across the doorway. I was instantly alert—but they parted to reveal Guy Burroughs.

"Blast those winding stairs," he said, rubbing his head.

"Sit down, Guy," said Clarissa. "I've given Max the main details of what's been turned up."

"It's beginning to add up to a convincing picture," I said.

"And a horrible one," Guy answered.

"But are we any nearer being able to act?"

"I think so. We now know *where* to act. But to reach that point requires some reasoning. We have to try to put ourselves behind the masks of people—and I'm beginning to get a clearer picture of just who they are—desperate enough, or greedy enough for power, even to conceive of duplicating a President. I think we now know *why* they did it. You can bet that Rockstro repeated Klein's experiment—but, like Klein's but for different reasons, all records of the experiment were destroyed. Now, the act that was passed by Parliament—the Plying Act as it was familiarly known—only stated that Plying of living creatures could not be undertaken. There was nothing in it to say that it was illegal. So the mere fact of duplicating the President—if one can apply such an innocuous epithet to a deed of such enormity—would be probably only a technical infringement.

"Of course, *abducting* the President—for however long it took to perform the deed—would be highly illegal. And whatever has happened since—whatever deeds have been committed under the cover of that act—would total up to something very close to high treason. Which is a capital offence, but one which might be wriggled out of somehow if the plot was discovered, or if it misfired. On the other hand, murder is also a capital offence. One that it might be impossible to wriggle out of. Especially the murder of a President. So that we have to assume—assume? . . . *pray*—that President Masson—the *real* President Masson—is alive somewhere."

"I'm beginning to fear," I said hollowly, "that he's not. I don't think people as desperate as these would stop at anything."

"Don't you? This is a game of power—of politics. Politics is a game played for very high stakes. Even so, politicians have as much love of their skins as the next

person. And we have one person to support my conviction that the real President *is*, in fact, alive. Frederick Lee Rockstro, alias Joseph Talbot Fearnshaw."

"I don't quite see."

"If they would kill off a President as casually as you seem to think they would, what was there to prevent them killing off Rockstro?"

"Hm-mm. You've got a point there. But if they had enough on Rockstro to make him commit the deed—to press the switch for the President's Plying and to set the job up for his own—they'd surely have enough on him to keep his mouth shut. Especially after the deed was committed."

"Maybe—but why have Rockstro around the place afterwards anyway?"

"To keep him handy as a scapegoat in the case of their being detected?"

"Maybe, again. But that would only apply to the period immediately after the act, until they were sure the plot had worked. And he wouldn't be much of a cover for them against a charge of murdering the President. No—I think that Rockstro is their *psychological* shield. They've dabbled in something not only criminal but technically mysterious. Rockstro knows the process. If anything at all, any time, should go wrong, they've got the mechanic to hand. And they've got him to hand, I'm sure, not only to keep watch on the substitute President but also on the *real* President. If you like, both Rockstro and the real President are their insurance policies against ever being found out. In short, I'm as convinced of one fact as I've never been convinced of any fact in my life that the real President is alive—*and in the Palace*."

I stared at him. "In a place that employs thousands of people?"

"That very fact helps our reasoning. There's one place in the Palace where he could be hidden—and only one that I can possibly think of. I know the Palace well. I sat in the Parliamentary chamber for five years. I've been in committee innumerable times. I believe I know."

"Where?"

"I'm not saying yet. All right, you can remove that exasperated look from your face. I'm not being deliberately secretive. I just don't want to stick my neck out until I'm sure."

"Aren't you sure, then?"

"I'm sure he's in the Palace, all right, and I'm sure I know where. No, it's the next step I've got to be sure of."

"Lord!" I complained. "You can be as conspiratorial as Aunt Clarissa at her worst!"

"Can't I, though!" he said gleefully, then sobered. "I'm not being conspiratorial for the sake of it. I'm just trying to keep my nerve steady. Because soon—as soon as we possibly can—we've got to break into the Europa Palace and rescue the President."

eleven

THE WORDS WERE as evenly spoken as if he had just announced that he intended catching the nine fifteen from Euston, or something equally ordinary.

"And we're not blessed with too much time. What the enemy has done so far is only a fraction of what I believe they're capable of. A Presidential election comes up in the autumn—in less than six months' time. President Masson —or the puppet figure of him—will be returned for a third term, have no doubt of that—and then they'll move into top gear. And then there'll be nothing anybody can do anywhere. We'll be living in a police state—a Europe-wide one."

"You said *we* are going to break into the Palace?" I asked. I had resented the fact of being kept out of Guy's confidence. Now I wasn't so sure.

"Of course! You want to be in at the finish, don't you?"

"Ye-es," I said, with as much determination as I could muster.

"*Good*. But I'm afraid you have to go under cover again."

I shrugged. "If I have to. Just so long as it's not to Dr. Cabell's establishment again."

He looked sad and stroked his moustache.

"I—I'm afraid it is."

"Then count me out right now. I'm not going through that again, for you, the President or anyone else. It's a vicious circle. Trying to prove you're sane is one of the surest ways I know of ending up *in*sane."

Guy exhaled in obvious relief, and pleasure for me.

"Oh, my dear chap, it won't be anything like that this time. We've got to imitate the other side, I'm afraid, but that can't be helped. And we've had to take Dr. Cabell into our confidence on this one. Or partly so—as far as we could without him clapping your Aunt Clarissa into the padded cell. No, it's quite a simple job, I believe."

"*What* is?"

"Why—recasting you in a new image, as it were."

It wasn't too bad, I suppose. But the place held too many desperate memories for me to be able to say that I enjoyed my stay.

I was wheeled into an operating theatre by Dr. Cabell himself. He acted as attendant to another doctor whom he introduced as Dr. Hodder. It wasn't drastic. No blood was let, that is. But the synthetic flesh, as it turned out to be, stung like hell as it set. The hairdye job only hurt when some of it inadvertently got in my eyes. They strapped a kind of nylon brace round my shoulders—"It's surprising what a difference *posture* makes," Dr. Hodder said, adding cheerfully, but far too optimistically as it turned out, "But you'll get used to it in no time." But the ordeal, all in all, wasn't in the same class as the mental grilling of my first stay.

It wasn't a bad face they gave me, either. When they let me off the table Dr. Cabell held up a handmirror. It was an improvement on the original, anyway, I had to concede, even if it *was* rather Celtic. My normally dark hair had a shade of auburn and its lankness seemed to have undergone a permanent wave. Under what category of medicine was this included, I wondered . . . prosthetic psychiatry?

"The flesh job will last ninety days," the other doctor

told me. "The hairdo should see you through about the same time."

"What do I do about the roots?" I asked him.

He guffawed. "If you want to get the face off before the ninety days, use carbon tetrachloride. But be careful not to breathe too deeply as you do it. Petrol's quicker, but don't forget and light a cigarette." He added comfortingly, "The face itself is quite non-inflammable in use."

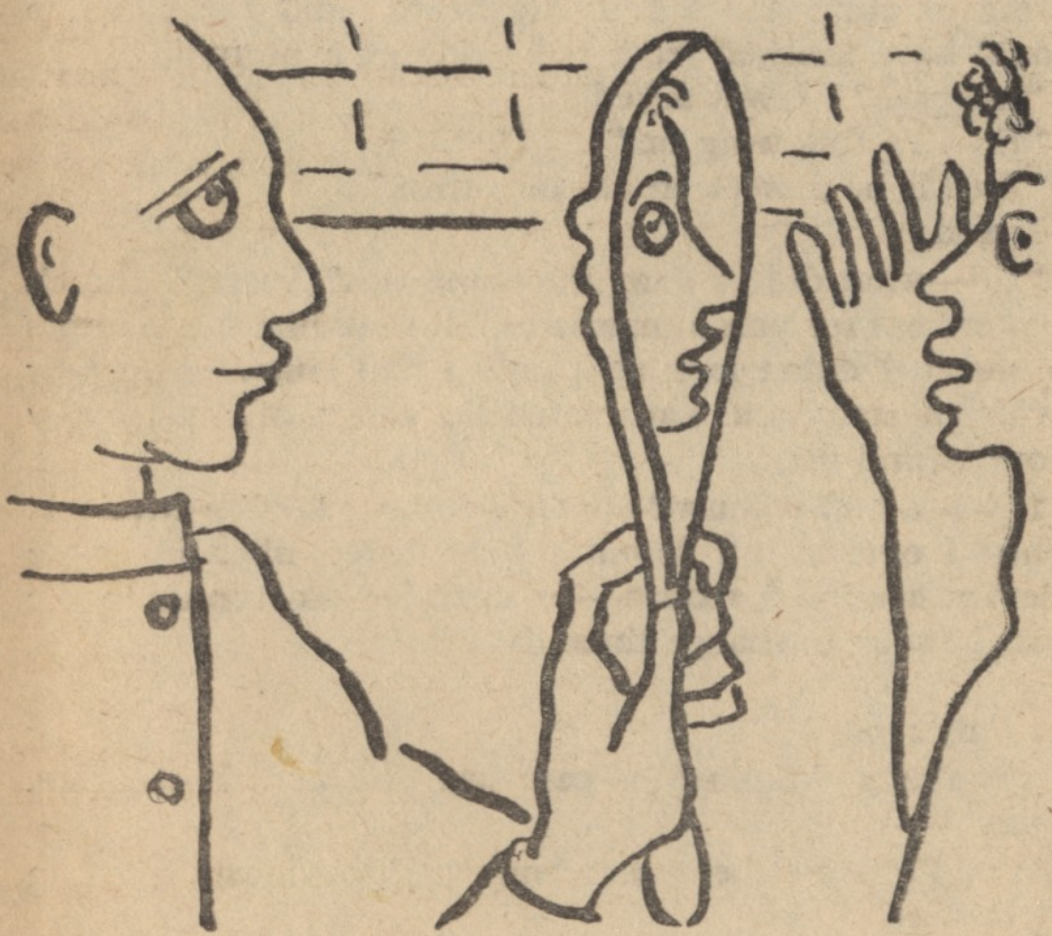
"Do I have to shave it?"

"No—unless you want to keep in practice. And it inhibits the growth of facial hair. You'll just have a week's growth underneath when you take it off."

"Charming," I said.

"It'll itch, but try not to scratch it. It'll spoil the surface."

I was given a suit of rough working clothes and led out of the operating theatre to a different wing of the nursing home. I had a new name, too—Bryan Peters. They kept



me there for a couple of days—for surgical or whatever other reasons I never discovered.

I was driven out of the home in an ambulance. It went down the Edgware Road to Hyde Park and into St. George's Hospital, where it pulled up outside the X-ray department. The attendant in the ambulance ushered me down a long corridor, into a lift, along another corridor and down another lift. We came to some push-bar doors. He looked over his shoulder to see that nobody was about.

"Twenty-five Chatsworth Gardens," he told me, and pushed the door open for me.

By this time I had reached the unquestioning zombie stage. I just walked through. I heard the door close behind me. I walked out into the street.

Chatsworth Gardens—a street of cheap hotels—was in Pimlico. I entered number twenty-five, more than half expecting to find Aunt Clarissa behind the desk in some outlandish disguise or another. But even Aunt Clarissa couldn't have compressed herself to a metre-and-a-half round or cultivated a four-day beard—and I'm sure she would have flinched from red biddy as a perfume.

"Luggage?" I was asked.

"Er—it's following on."

"That'll be a week in advance then."

I paid.

"Uh—what did you say the name was? Peters? There's a letter here for you somewheres." It took him five minutes to find it. I didn't look at it until I had laboured up four flights of stairs and had closed the doors of my frowsty room behind me.

It was a buff-coloured *On Government Service* envelope. When I opened it I found a form letter, filled in in the relevant spaces, a request—or directive—to report to the local Labour Exchange three days later.

I duly reported.

"You're a Mallington-Prestwich operator, I see, Mr. Peters?"

Was I? Somewhere somebody had obviously filled in my dossier.

"Er—yes."

"Very slack time in the field at the moment," the clerk went on cheerfully. "How about a job in the new car factory on the North Circular? Good wages."

"They don't use Mallington—er . . . Prestwiches there?" I tried to get only half a question mark in my voice, cursing that I hadn't been filled in half as carefully as my dossier had been.

The clerk nearly had hysterics. "Mallington-Prestwiches in a *car factory*! *You*'ve got a sense of humour!"

I declined the job gracefully. Somewhere, I fancied, there lay a rendezvous between me and a Mallington-Prestwich . . . whatever *that* was.

The call came a week later. I went to sign the register to draw my unemployment pay, when the clerk on the appointments counter called me over.

"Just in," he announced proudly. "A Mallington-Prestwich operator wanted. Fifty-seven The Colonnades, S.W.1. Give this card to the foreman on the site."

Fifty-seven The Colonnades was one of a row of large houses not far from Victoria Station. The place was scaffolded, the lower windows boarded. The massive door was shut. I lifted the heavy knocker and brought it down. The noise resounded through the emptiness within.

It was a long time opening . . . with a creak of hinges long unoiled. A face peered from the dimness within.

"I'm Peters," I said. "I'm from the Labour Exchange. I've come for—"

"We know what you've come for," said a gruff voice. "Come in."

It was dark inside, and even darker as the great door closed behind me.

"Follow me," the man said. I followed a bulky shadow. And I tripped over another—a hard metallic one—skinning my shin.

"What are you waiting for?" demanded the voice.

I cursed and followed down winding stairs. At last we broke into light.

My guide turned. "Ready for work?" he asked in a different voice. An unmistakable voice. And he laughed in an unmistakable key.

"It's me, you fool—Guy."

He had shaved off his bushy moustache. But I couldn't detect any temporary surgery such as I had undergone.

"There's one law for the rich and one for the poor," I grumbled. "No Dr. Cabell for you, I see."

"We all have our sacrifices to make," he said mournfully, rubbing his naked upper lip.

That—and the donning of a check shirt, workman's trousers and a cap—was enough, anyway, I reflected with some annoyance. He was as well disguised as I was, without a fraction of the trouble.

"What's on?" I asked. I looked at the massive machine that occupied one end of the room. "What's this? Don't tell me, let me guess. A Mallington-Prestwich?"

"*This*? I should say not! I couldn't advertise for an operator for this—not for a site four hundred metres from the Palace. As it was, I had to have it dismantled and shipped in here in crates. No, that was a Mallington-Prestwich you fell over in the hall."

"And what *is* a Mallington-Prestwich?"

"Haven't the faintest idea, old boy. But I know what *this* is . . . a latest model brontium-head boring machine. Take your jacket off. We've got a lot of work to do."

There were just the two of us. The machine may have been the latest model, but the earth it drilled out metre by metre had to be disposed of by time-honoured methods—by shovelling it into sacks and humping the sacks back along the tunnel to the house. We filled the attics, the fourth floor, the second. Guy would stop at intervals and put on earphones, attached to a black box with a metal loop on top. In response to what he heard—or didn't hear—we had to change direction several times.

The first floor got filled, and we had started on the ground floor when, one day, a week after we had begun, Guy took a reading on the box and turned to me exultantly.

"We're getting close. And it's *occupied*. From now on, I'm afraid, we've got to do it the hard way. And no talking near the head of the tunnel."

We backed the drill out on its caterpillar treads and we set to with shovels. It was back-breaking work for another week.

Guy finally put his shovel down and straightened wearily. He took a reading on the box, then beckoned to me silently to help him shove the drill back to the scene of operations. Then he led me back along the twisting, tilting tunnel.

"Well," he said, "it's been a long grind. But soon we shall be able to use the drill again. For the last time. *Tonight*."

That night Tom joined us.

"Now," said Guy, "we come to the crux of our efforts. The point where we save Europe from something horrible —or make the most colossal blunder in history. At this moment our drill is poised against the walls of the deep shelters of the Europa Palace. In those shelters, I'm convinced, the President is being kept prisoner. On the detector I've heard occasional activity. Nothing definite but, for random samplings, what sounds like rather more traffic than a shelter should carry—short of a red alert.

"The only guide I've had is my memory of where these shelters are located, aided by a careful study of external evidence in the Palace grounds. There are certain secret exit points that we've been able to pinpoint, even if they're well hidden . . . *because* they're well hidden . . . the odd small building that there seems no real use for, things like that. Anyway, I'm praying that we shall break out close to the Presidential suite down there, because if he *is* being held in the shelters, that's the logical place within them. I'm also praying that they haven't had a detector on *us*. But we've been approaching them from leeward, as it were. What sounds I've got from the shelters have come through pretty clear of background, but there's a lot behind *us*—Victoria Station, tube trains and heavy traffic.

"Now, when we break through we've got to work fast. I'm going to try to locate the President, while you two cover me. Shoot on sight anybody who gets in the way." He put something that glinted bluely into my hand. "But not to kill, if you can help it. Not until we locate the President, anyway. I've got a kit made up by Tom here—he got the specifications from an old client of his of his Safe Squad days—which is guaranteed to open any safe door made. Now—any questions?"

"Only one," I said, holding up the gun. "Just how do you use one of these things?"

Guy took a last sounding, as we crouched in the narrow tunnel beside him. Then, apparently satisfied, he started up the drill. It had sounded marvellously quiet, muffled by earth, when we had been operating it a way back. But now—knowing that only a thickness of wall stood between it and the climax of this whole fantastic adventure—I only thought how horribly loud it sounded as it whirred into screeching life.

And then it was shaking like mad, its blades eating into thin air, before Guy leapt to turn it off. Then he went in, over tumbled masonry, Tom and I after him.

We were in a long corridor. A green-uniformed figure came round the far end of it. I snapped the safety catch of my gun, but Tom had already fired. His shot went ricochetting with a whine off the walls. The figure ducked back.

Everything happened quickly. Guy went along the corridor calling at each door. His hand was at his belt, on what looked like a bundle of sticks of explosive.

He didn't have to use it. A door flew open and a face looked out. Tom's gun rose. I knocked it down. "No, not him. That's Rockstro—I think."

Guy was after him before he could close the door. I followed. Tom stood guard at the open door.

It *was* Rockstro. There was another figure in the room, getting to his feet. The President. Even in that moment of high tension I knew that this was a different President than the one I had shaken hands with, it seemed a century ago.

Rockstro alias Fearnshaw was backed against a wall, looking down Guy's gun barrel.

"What's going on?" the President demanded. "Who are you?"

"I'm Burroughs," Guy said. "Senator Burroughs. I haven't got time to explain. We've come to take you away."

"Thank God! Will you do me one favour before I leave? Will you give me your pistol for a moment?" He looked at Rockstro with loathing.

"Sorry, Mr. President," Burroughs said. "This character is much too valuable to us." A shot came from the near distance. I heard Tom swear as he fired his own gun.

"You take the President," Guy told me. "While I take Rockstro."

They came out in force as we reached the gaping hole in the shelter wall. Tom's arm was hanging limply, but between us we fired enough shots to send them scuttling back beyond the corner of the passage. We had the twisting tunnel to negotiate yet, though, slowed by an older man and the need to keep watch on Rockstro.

"Here, you take over this character," Guy said to me. "Tom, take the President."

"I'm all right. I can make my own way," the President said.

"Good. Then get along the tunnel—" he turned to fire at a glimpse of green; there was a yelp of pain from the end of the passage—"as fast as you can. If Rockstro misbehaves, Max, shoot him in the arm."

Guy stayed behind as we clambered over the drill and into the tunnel. There was a spurt of firing. I turned to see Guy's head silhouetted against the edge of the drill, haloed in the brighter light from the corridor beyond. Then there was an ear-splitting roar that made the earth all around us tremble.

You go through life these modern days without having to face many profound emotions. Even the one I had just experienced—coming face to face with a President kidnapped in his own Palace—had happened too quickly to register properly. But now, too sick to go on, I felt what I

can only describe as anguish. The dust clouds that swirled along the tunnel, blotting out all light from beyond, were like the smoke of a funeral pyre—of a very brave man.

If ever—God forbid—I again stand beside Guy Burroughs in a crisis like that one, I'm damned if I'm going to let my emotions be tortured like that. For a voice came booming through the dustcloud. "Well, Tom, I don't know whether your kit will open any door, but that's one it certainly closed."

And a moment later the man himself, tattered and grimy but whole and unharmed, came through the cloud after it.

twelve

AFTER THAT, NOTHING was surprising. Not even the fact that Humphrey was waiting with the Rolls-Royce. But before we got past the doors of the house, there were a couple of details to take care of. One Guy performed with obvious pleasure—tying and gagging Rockstro. The other was a hurried check on Tom's injury.

"It's a chipped radius," Tom said matter-of-factly. "But it missed the artery. I'm all right."

"Good man," Guy said.

We drove at a speed that far exceeded Aunt Clarissa's speed limit. Humphrey must have enjoyed being off the leash. We had the road virtually to ourselves at that time of night, and he showed what a Rolls-Royce could do, even one fifty years old, when given its noble head. Within twenty-five minutes we swung onto an unmade road. We slowed down at a place that I recognised—the house by the river at Taplow. Two shadowy figures—Guy's men presumably—were illuminated in the headlights for a second as we wheeled up the drive.

"The President," Humphrey announced, as we entered the oak-beamed room.

I shan't forget that tableau quickly. There was Guy, looking like a refugee from a mine disaster. The President, blinking in the light. Joanna was there, even *her* emotions

moved, quite obviously. Aunt Clarissa seemed about to break into tears, but that didn't stop her approaching the President and making a formal curtsey.

"Take a seat, sir, please," Guy said. "I'm sorry this has all been such a rush."

The President, despite his years of imprisonment, laughed a rumbling laugh. "He rescues me—and then apologises for any inconvenience! But I *will* take that seat. I am the one who must apologise, for I am still bewildered. What's been happening all this time? What's been happening to Europe?"

"I'd like to be able to tell you to take things quietly, sir," said Guy. "But I'm afraid I can't. Neither will I have time to answer all your questions. We're not out of the wood yet. But I'll tell you briefly. Europe's saved. At least, it has been if we get through the last stage of this operation. Miss Miles—"

He nodded at Joanna. She nodded back and left the room.

"That's to telephone a selected few of the Press. A few whom I know personally and whom I trust will arrive to hear the story. My voice will be going out to them on tape. Now, Mr. President—"

"But first, Burroughs," the President interrupted, "I must know this. You call me President. But I've been away for four years. Who took my place? How did they explain it to the people?"

Guy looked at me, then turned back to the President. "You don't know, then," he said quietly. "I feared as much. I'd like to have Rockstro there—" he gestured to the bound gagged figure propped up in a chair—"tell you himself. But we don't have the time. What is the last you remember—before you found yourself in the shelter?"

"It was one night. I think I must have been drugged—for I woke up with a splitting headache. I was in the shelter. That villain there was bending over me. He looked different then . . . he didn't wear glasses, and his hair was fair . . . but it was him, all right. He spoke insolently to me. I reacted immediately, ordering him to have respect for the office of President. His reaction was strange. He

just smiled—and left the room, locking it behind him. The next day he was disguised. And every day, practically, since he has visited me."

Guy turned to me and murmured, "That fits. They must have had the duplicate President in a next door room. That was a test." He turned back to Masson.

"You will have to prepare yourself for a shock, Mr. President. After you were drugged, you were taken to the Plying plant—"

"Plying plant?"

"Oh, of course, it was new then. The Transdimensional Multiplying plant."

"Oh yes—that new process. Did it become established properly?"

"Only too well," Guy said grimly. "You yourself were one of its first subjects. It's your duplicate who has been occupying your office these past four years."

The President stared at him, a terrible look dawning on his face. "Do you think," he asked finally, "I might have a small drink. Brandy, if you have it."

"Of course, sir. I'm sorry."

Humphrey swiftly brought in a glass.

"Thank you," the President said. "I'm not normally a drinking man, but—" He had recovered his composure. "But why should anybody do such a diabolical thing?"

Guy explained briefly.

The President visibly suppressed a shudder.

"And who are the villains responsible?"

"That's one thing I think we *will* let our friend over there tell us." Guy went over and removed Rockstro's gag.

"You've heard enough," Guy told him, "to know that your plot's been smashed. Your only chance now is to talk."

Rockstro was gibbering.

"Please yourself." Guy turned away from him.

Rockstro found his voice. "Bl-Bloomfield, Cavalcanti, Muller, Fernand, Krips, Anstey."

"*God*!" the President exclaimed. "The whole Inner Cabinet?"

Rockstro nodded dumbly.

"I certainly picked the wrong party," the President said hollowly.

"I didn't act out of political motives," Guy said. "There are villains in every party."

"And saints," the President said.

Guy coughed. "Six greedy men—faced with a unique opportunity. The evil welling up in one man, perhaps, and corrupting his colleagues. Absolute power—for a lifetime—it was a big prize to hold out to any man. Power to be wielded behind an impotent figurehead."

"'Power without responsibility—the whore's prerogative throughout history' . . . who said that?" George Masson said bitterly.

"There was at least one other main conspirator," Guy said. He turned back to Rockstro. "Dr. Thorbeson, the President's personal physician. Correct?"

"Not Frank Thorbeson?" the President said. "Even *him*?"

"No," answered Rockstro. "Not him. When the Plied President was taken back to his quarters, Thorbeson was summoned. The story that was told him was that the President had been found collapsed in a strange part of the Palace. The President was confused. Thorbeson did his best to diagnose the condition. He never knew the truth."

"I'm relieved to hear that," the President said. "I should have lost *all* faith in human nature if I found that Frank Thorbeson had betrayed me. But there was another doctor who visited me regularly in the shelter. A drug addict, if ever I saw one."

"That was Dr. Eskern," Rockstro muttered. "He knew what was going on."

"And one or two small fry, without doubt," said Guy. "Members of our green-coated friends, the Security Police, and the like. But it's the big villains we're after. Now, Mr. President, I have to ask you to make a personal statement. Miss Miles will read over to you a broad outline which I have prepared. All you need do is to correct it in any material detail and sign it. I hope it won't be

too much of a strain. And then a brief interview with the Press."

"Certainly," said the President with dignity. "I owe my liberty to you and your companions. I will do whatever is required of me."

Everything was ready. The statement was typed and signed, before Joanna and Aunt Clarissa as witnesses. Rockstro was dumped in an adjoining room with Tom, his arm having been bandaged by Aunt Clarissa, in attendance with a gun in his good hand. Humphrey got some petrol and did a rehabilitation job on my face that would have done credit to a picture restorer.

Joanna left the President to have a little nap until the Press arrived. It was six o'clock in the morning, after all.

We sat and waited.

And waited. By seven-thirty not one journalist had arrived.

"What did you tell them?" I asked Guy. "Did you make it sound important enough?"

"I couldn't tell them just what—except that if they came down here they'd get the story of a lifetime. They're all people who've known me for years. I just can't understand it."

"Perhaps they took it that you were making an announcement to stand at the next elections."

"I hope they all know me better than to think I'd call *that* the story of a lifetime!"

At that moment there was a strange burbling noise from the direction of the room where the President had gone to rest.

We turned. Humphrey was standing there in the doorway, looking as white as his shirt, and stammering, all that famous self-possession gone.

"Whatever's the matter, Humphrey?" his employer demanded. But even in her voice there was concern—a tremor such as even the most autocratic would betray at finding her universe shaken.

From somewhere—from all the long years of tradition—poor noble Humphrey summoned strength.

"Madame—I much regret to inform you that the President has . . . disappeared."

And then he fainted clean away.

thirteen

IT WAS LIKE a nightmare—one of those horrible ones when everything is suspended, every action frozen. Our heads stopped in mid-turn, as if we each realised that none of the others could possibly know what to do, either. We had pursued a thin tortuous thread of right through a world of evil. Our tiny group had dared to think that it could unmask a powerful conspiracy, buoyed up only by their confidence in a man's claim to have a peculiar ability. What we had done would have been utter madness but for our faith that at the end of it would be our proof.

And now our proof had disappeared!!

Everybody started moving and shouting at once. It was the only time that we came near to panic—and perhaps we could be forgiven that. We had been through a lot that night.

Guy was through the door first, leaping over Humphrey's prostrate form. I was next.

"What the devil!" Guy exclaimed, moving to the window. "The window's latched. So are the shutters." He stared for one horrible moment at Humphrey, and I knew what though was going through his mind—because it was flickering through mine, too. That the President couldn't have escaped unaided. He couldn't have closed the windows behind him. The President had trusted his Cabinet—and they had plotted against him. Who could trust anybody? Even the faithful Humphrey?

The horrible thought died in us. There were some things one *had* to believe in. Guy flung up the window and thrust the shutters outwards. Daylight flooded in. By the bushes at the end of the drive a figure turned, and came running at what he must have seen in Guy's face.

"What's the matter, Senator?"

"Did you see anybody leave by this window, Clayton?"

"No, sir. One of us, Brodie or I, have had it under continual observation since you instructed us."

"Will you swear to that?"

"On oath in court if I have to."

"I wasn't thinking of that," Guy told him grimly. "But Judgment Day. My own personal one. If I find that one of my own men has betrayed me. I'll tear him apart with my own hands."

In his state of baffled fury, I could have believed him capable of doing just that.

Clayton stood his ground with the strength of a man who knows that he has nothing to conceal.

"Ask Brodie, sir. Nobody has left—or entered—by this window. You can prove it."

He pointed down. He was standing on the edge of the lawn. A flower-bed, fully six feet wide, stood between it and the wall. The grass was beaded with dew. I hadn't noticed it raining the night before, but the ground looked moist. Clayton planted one foot into it. When he withdrew it there was a clear sharp print of his shoe. There was no other under the window, nor any mark of a ladder either in the bed or the grass. Not that a ladder would have been necessary, for the sill was only three feet from the ground. But a man of Masson's size and age could never have leapt the distance to the grass.

"All right, Clayton," Guy said. "Sorry I blew up. But tell Brodie to scour the grounds. The President's disappeared. And you be extra alert. If you see one suspicious sign report immediately."

Guy turned back. "And there's no fireplace in this room. My God, I've heard of locked room mysteries, but this beats all of them! What happened? What *could* have happened? Did we all fall asleep out there for long enough for the President simply to up and walk out of the back door? Did *I* fall asleep?"

"Did I?"

"*None* of us did," Clarissa said firmly, entering the room. Joanna was tending a still groggy Humphrey in a chair in the main room beyond.

"Then what *did* happen. *Why*? Why should the President *want* to escape. We'd rescued him from four years of living death. We were his friends."

There was a whispering in the air above us—a whispering that grew louder and more rhythmic. I beat Guy to the window this time. A shadow was spreading over the lawn, to be replaced by the black-and-white shape of a jet copter. For a moment I feared that we were being invaded—until I remembered that black-and-white stripes were the mark of a press plane.

The copter settled. There were two men in it—the pilot and one other. The other man—tall and bespectacled in a plum-coloured bolero and slacks—climbed out.

"It's Alan Goodrick," Guy said.

Goodrick saw us at the window. "Where's Guy Burroughs?" he called.

Guy had cleaned up, but he was still in a check shirt and rough trousers—and that moustache was going to take a long time to grow back.

"I'm here, you—" Guy started to roar. Then he gestured to his upper lip. Clayton had come running to the copter. "Clayton, show Mr. Goodrick in. He's Press."

As we turned back to the main room, Guy swore. "*Now* he comes!"

Goodrick came in. "What's this about a story?"

"There's no story," Guy told him, his voice empty. "If you had come earlier you would have had your story. The one I promised you—the story of a lifetime. But—" his shoulders slumped—"perhaps it's better you didn't."

"How do you mean?" But Goodrick didn't pursue it. He must have felt the strain in the air, the edges of hysteria. "I couldn't come earlier. I shouldn't be here now, by rights. Immediately after you rang I had an urgent call from my night editor to get down to the Palace. You may have old and trusted friends, but when you get the kind of three-line whip I did, you—"

"The Palace!"

We all looked at each other.

"God knows what's been going on there," Goodrick said tiredly. "Rumours have been flying like mad. There was nothing I could get my teeth into. So I left somebody there and came down here. I just thought perhaps—"

"Rumours?" Guy exclaimed. "What kind of rumours?"

"There were reports of an explosion. Lights went on all over the place. The Army were called in. The place is virtually barricaded."

"Rumours?"

"No—they're facts. The rumours—well, you can take your pick. Some say that there was a plot to assassinate the President. Some that Secretary of State Bloomfield has committed suicide. Personally, I'm inclined to believe that there's been some kind of power blow-out—something as simple as that. When the rumours start flying, any government has to take quick action."

"You're slipping, Alan," Guy said. "You're a victim of the slow brain-wash like everybody else. Too ready to trust the government."

Goodrick blinked. "What are you trying to tell me? That there *was* a plot to assassinate the President?"

"Something rather more fantastic than that."

Goodrick boggled. "*More* fantastic? But what could—"

"Stick by me, Alan. I need somebody to record what happens, clearly and objectively—if he can. I don't know just what's happened—and I haven't an idea on God's earth what's *going* to happen, but . . . Lord, I must be losing my grip!" He leaped to the corner and turned on the old-fashioned console radio that stood there.

"You won't get anything on that, except morning music," Goodrick said. "What decided me to come on down here was the fact that a D-order was clamped on at seven o'clock this morning."

The inane strains of the latest musical filled the air. Guy cursed and went to switch off. His hand stayed in midair as the music stopped abruptly.

"This is London. Stand by for a special announcement. This is London. Stand by for a special announcement. The following bulletin was issued from Europa Palace two minutes ago. The President of Europe will make a special broadcast, on all radio and television channels, at 0 eight thirty hours this morning. *Ici Londres. M. le President . . .*"

I looked at my watch. Ten minutes to go.

I don't know how we endured those ten minutes. We waited in front of the wall screen, gaping at a test-card.

Then the screen went empty. The banner of Europe—obviously a stock shot—came on. Then suddenly we were looking at the Palace—or what we could see of it behind a bulky balding figure with a lip mike.

He spoke in hushed tones.

"This is Roger Ampleforth, speaking to you from the Europa Palace. Outside, a huge crowd is suddenly quiet . . . quiet after a night of rumour. I have been summoned to the Palace—I arrived by jet copter only a few minutes ago—to put you all in the picture.

"Here are the facts, as they have been given to me by authoritative sources." He looked straight into the camera. "The *most* authoritative source possible. A minor explosion occurred at three thirty hours this morning in the heating plant beneath the Palace. It would not be seemly for me to enumerate the rumours—the very wild rumours—that have been flying about ever since. The only excuse I can find for them is that they stem from devotion to our beloved President . . . devotion and a concern for his safety.

"Well, the President himself is the only person who can dispel such wild rumours. And—here is the President, I think. Yes. The doors to the balcony are opening . . ."

The camera zoomed in to the balcony.

"No, the first figure to emerge is that of Fiscal Chancellor Heinrich Muller. And here is Secretary of State Barrington Bloomfield, and . . . yes . . . he is ushering in the President." A great cry went up from the crowd then. "And the rest of the Inner Cabinet are taking up their places."

"That's not the real President," I breathed. "They're not even bringing the cameras in close."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Goodrick jerk and stare at me.

Ampleforth's voice came from the sidelines. "The President is about to speak."

But the voice that came was not the same voice that I had heard only a few hours before, face to face. This was the zombie voice of the Plied President.

"Citizens of the Federation . . . I stand before you this morning to tell you all that . . ."

And then the voice stopped abruptly. And—*there was a blank on the screen where the President had been*! Through the dying after-image, both of vision and incredulity, the windows behind asserted themselves. I screwed up my eyes against the impossible, but when I opened them that blank space was still there and even at the cautious distance of the cameras I could see the dawning look of horror as the members of the Inner Cabinet turned and stared into nothingness.

"Something seems to have gone wrong with my portable monitor screen," Ampleforth was saying. "Just let me get my binoculars on the gallery. Everything is all right up . . . oh, my good G—"

The screen cut to a startled somebody at a desk, then into a zig-zag pattern of lines.

"*First ours—then theirs*!" Guy exploded. He looked grim. "There's only one person who can start to explain this." He strode out of the room and came back, bearing Rockstro under one arm. He threw him into a chair and removed the gag.

"Now, Rockstro, so help me, you're going to talk. And talk fast. A short time ago the real President that we rescued disappeared. Your gang just paraded the Plied President in front of the television cameras of Europe—and *he* disappeared. In front of millions of people. Now, some time very soon, all hell's going to break loose. Unless—"

"Oh my God, my God," Rockstro moaned. "My nightmare. It's come true . . ." He rocked back and forth in his seat, his hands over his face.

"A nightmare's going to engulf Europe—and possibly the world—if you can't explain."

Then, with startling suddenness, Rockstro straightened. It must have been the scientist in him asserting itself, the brilliant scientist that lay beneath the personal defects, buried by years of deception. When he spoke, his voice shook, but the words were distinct.

"Have you a tape recorder? Then switch it on, for there

may not be much time. I thought of one thing too late. I wanted to go back to the Plying plant and run tests. But how could I even start to explain to *them*? But I was right. I think—no, I know what has happened to the two Presidents."

"There *were* only two then?"

Rockstro nodded. "That was all they dared—all they needed. Thank Heaven for that. That means there's still hope. Hope deferred—but hope."

"Come to the point, man!"

Rockstro grimaced. "That is the point. It's very simple. There are certain technical reasons why I didn't think of the possibility sooner. That my enthusiasm for Plying, the horizons it seemed to open up. The truth is that Plying doesn't take slices out of some spatial extension of matter . . . but from *time*." He laughed briefly and bitterly. "We thought we were getting something for nothing, but we weren't. We were simply getting the use of the future of things. It seems that the sections we got were approximately four years thick—obviously not exactly, because President Two didn't disappear at precisely the same time as President One. President One existed up to the point of section where President Two began, but President Two's section was a fraction more. But, basically what happened was that we Plied the President in 2015. It's now 2019. We had the use of the President's future, from 2019 to 2023—*in this present*."

"Is that why *your* President was confused?"

"No . . . that's not the reason. I carried out two experiments on animals of short life-span—in which four years in difference of age would have shown. It didn't. That's one of the reasons that I didn't suspect the truth earlier."

"But this is incredible!" Guy lowered his face menacingly to Rockstro's. "Are you trying to tell us that a scientist could confuse a dimension of space with *time*?"

Joanna butted in quickly. "That's quite reasonable. Plying is a utilisation of higher mathematics—mathematics and energy. Mathematicians use powers—dimensions—all the time in their work, but nobody's actually *seen* into higher dimensions. Time is a quantity, the same as

space. It's as interchangeable in an equation as any other factor."

"I'll take your word for that, Joanna," Guy said.

"And take mine," said Rockstro pleadingly, "—for what it's worth. But I swear to you that this is the only possible truth. The sub-qualities of a Plied living creature must be due to something other than the dislocation of time involved. Perhaps it's some argument for the existence of a soul. I'm not a philosopher, but I've had a lot of time to think these past four years. A man tries to reason out his own nightmares. But the future we took from things can't have been their *actual* future, only some kind of *potential* future. Otherwise we would have found out, if not with the animals, then with some of the radioactives that were Plied."

I sat there in a daze. The incredible truth was falling into place—but the world was falling about our ears. If before it had seemed impossible to know how, where, to act, now it seemed that there was nothing anybody could do anywhere. Anarchy would be abroad.

"How many does your copter hold?" Guy suddenly asked Goodrick.

Poor Goodrick must have been bewildered at what he had seen and heard, but he managed to answer: "Six."

"We don't need that many. Just three and the pilot. Right." He wheeled back to Rockstro. "Have you a secret phone line to your gang of conspirators?"

Rockstro nodded.

"I thought you might have. Now you, Joanna, this is what I want you to do. Listen, but don't act until I've finished. Get Tom in here to cover our friend, just in case he gives any trouble—though I don't think he will now. Get him to contact his accomplices at the Palace by vidphone—if they haven't flown yet or been torn apart by the mob. He simply has to tell whoever's in charge to expect a jet copter and give it safe landing."

"A black-and-white Siddeley, Press registration P one five four," said Goodrick.

"Have you got that, Joanna? Good. And inform them that there's one person coming in who can tell Europe

just what has happened—Senator Burroughs. Come on, Max. And you too, Alan."

"But say I can't get through," Joanna asked anxiously. "If the Army's there—"

"That's a chance we'll have to take," said Guy grimly. He turned at the door. "Oh, and you'd better tell them that I'll be clean-shaven—more or less."

fourteen

WE CAME DOWN over a Palace copter roof top ringed with guns. I stared down into their black barrels and felt sick. If the authorities had clamped down on the press and TV, it was more than likely that they'd done the same to the telephones—at least, in and out of the Palace.

From below, clearly audible above the whining of the jets, came sounds of tumult. There was a huge crowd in Green Park and St. James's Park. The approaching roads, The Mall, Constitution Hill, even Piccadilly as far up as the Circus, were black with people. But the space immediately in front of the Palace was clear. A solid line of soldiers in the olive-drab of the Federation Army ringed the entire Palace grounds, facing outwards, their arms at the ready.

And they had had to use them. Ambulances were shuttling about the cleared space, the wail of their sirens reaching to where we hovered above them.

We came down—and the guns didn't open up. But we had no sooner touched down than we were surrounded by a ring of troops. *Their* arms—stub-nosed hip guns—were at the ready, too. An officer stepped forward.

"Major Panacki."

"I'm Senator Burroughs. This is Max Afford, and Alan Goodrick of the *Mercury*. And pilot."

"I have to inform you," said the major, "that the Palace is in control of the military. Your message was received and, since it seems that you may have important information, you were promised safe conduct. But I must warn you that one false move on your part and my

men will fire. Is that understood? Now, my commanding officer will receive you."

We followed the major, flanked by troops.

We were taken to a colonel, with whom Guy spoke in low tones while Goodrick and I stood by. And then we were ushered into a large room. I realised with a start that this was the very room where I had made the presentation to the "President"—the room where it had all begun.

Six figures were seated at a conference table. There was an armed soldier standing behind each one of them. The six men looked up haggardly as we came in. One of them—it was Bloomfield—made to rise. He was gestured down by a gun barrel. But he glared up.

"This is an outrage, Colonel! We are virtually being kept prisoner here. I demand that you withdraw your men at once.

The colonel—a short, wiry man—said quietly, "You called us in this morning. Until order is re-established we shall stay here. A Military Council is being convened. You were with the President when he disappeared. You will have to be kept under detention until the situation is clarified."

"But this is unconstitutional! Flagrantly so. In the absence of the President, I, as Secretary of State, assume control."

"I believe that the Constitution states . . . 'in the event of the death or incapacity of the President.' It does not mention his sudden disappearance into thin air."

"But—"

"Nor," Guy put in, "the event of his having been Plied."

Bloomfield subsided, his face suddenly grey.

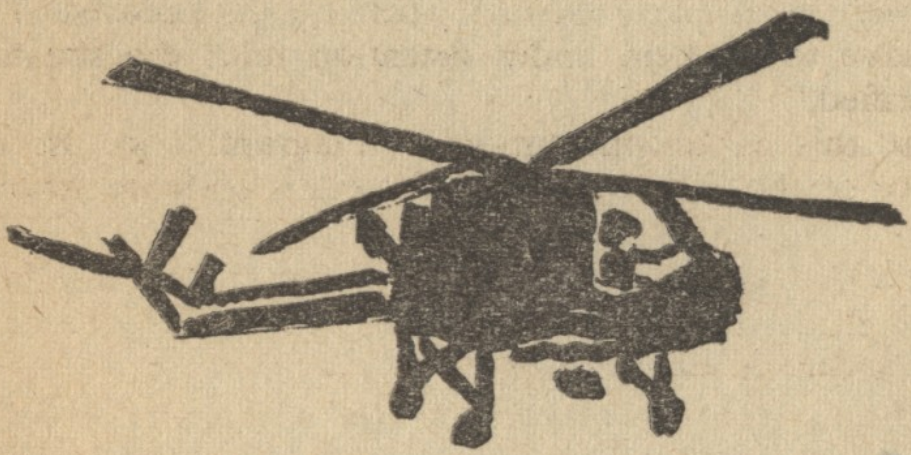
I had little part in what happened after, except to confirm details and to state briefly the strange chance by which I had come to suspect the existence of the conspiracy.

Guy Burroughs handled everything. It was he who supervised the taking of confessions from the members of the Inner Cabinet, the round-up of the minor parties to the plot from holes and corners of the Palace. Dr. Eskern

was found with an opened artery in one of the staff lavatories.

It was Guy who broadcast to the Federation, who started to get things running again. The only military control remaining now, a fortnight after that climatic night at the Palace, is a very heavy one round the Plying plant—which has, of course, suspended operations.

Rockstro did something to redeem himself, by composing what I am told is a brilliant monograph on the implications of time and the Plying principle. He had nearly completed it when he too disappeared. When he had said that time was short, I thought only that he was speaking out of the same urgency that was seizing all of us. But, of course, he was speaking literal truth. There wasn't much time left for *him*. One of the main conspirators will be missing from the forthcoming trial. For Rockstro passed his own death sentence when he had himself Plied—or, rather, when his duplicate went into the Thames to its death. For a man has only one life-



time, whether it runs in sequence or—having been Plied—in parallel. And he only has one death.

As for the President—Rockstro's monograph assures us that—some time in 2023—he will return. The experts confirm this. But from what limbo of "potential time" I don't know, and I'm sure that not even the experts know the answer to *that* one. But it seems that the monograph opens up startling possibilities. If Man can take sections out of the future he has started to manipulate Time itself. So something—the possibility of time travel—has been rescued from the ruins of Plying. There is even talk of being able to organise some kind of expedition to rescue the President from wherever he may be.

But that is speculation. It's *normality* that we all need now. I'm only waiting until I can get back to the Gallery. For I'm still sequestered in the Palace. The admirable Miss Collins forwarded me a sheaf of correspondence and messages. The top one was a complaint from Mrs. Four-eff that her Matisse just vanished from the wall, and what was I going to do about it. All I can say is that she's lucky. If she can hang on for eighty years she will get it back. Which only one out of every twenty ex-proud owners is going to be able to look forward to. Because Matisses and Manets and Constables and Canalettos are vanishing from walls all over the world. And there'll be a lot more over the next four years. At the end of eighty—well it looks as if there's going to be one hell of a lottery.

But the future can worry about that, and the politicians can sort out the legal tangles between now and then. People like Guy Burroughs. *There's* the man for the job of President until Georges Masson gets back.

I don't know how my part in the affair came to be played up the way it has. As I told you in the beginning I only got into this by accident—and I hope I've proved it. Politics is the last thing that concerns me. All I'm thinking about now is . . . no, I occasionally think about Joanna, which isn't very hard, especially she being a career girl without a career now . . . let's say the *main* thing . . . is of all those walls waiting to be filled.

Their job was to service a potential emperor

MORE THAN A MAN

John Baxter

THE FACE ALWAYS came last. Feeling his way through the blackness of the cave Charles Graves found the rough rock wall, wedged the tiny mirror into a cleft and turned on the light. In its minute glow the reflection of his features was barely visible, but it would be enough. He reached for the spray—then paused, looking at his young faintly surprised face in the glass. Was this *his* face? He felt no identification with it, no sense of ownership. Two years on the Special Intelligence Squadron of the Terran Navy and he was already a stranger to himself.

Half hoping for an excuse to put off this final severance, he turned towards the deepest part of the cave where Dave Bailey, the other member of his team, was scuffling the baggage back into the capsule.

"Will I do my make-up now or do you want a hand?"

The noises stopped and a second later Bailey's older rougher face appeared in the light. He looked at his watch by the glow of the mirror lamp, holding the dial close to his face to read the figures.

"I can handle it," he said. "We've got an hour. Plenty of time."

"How's the gear?"

"Almost packed. Get on with your face and I'll do mine when you're through. Did I give you the formula?"

"7S—brown, epicanthic fold, wide nostrils?"

Bailey laid a hand companionably on his shoulder. "That's it, son. Now better get on with it." He disappeared into the darkness and Charles turned back to the mirror.

Flicking on the spray he played the nozzle carefully over his face, working the drug into his cheeks, nose and eyelids. Around the edges of the mouth and eyes he sprayed only lightly so as to leave the big motor muscles

untouched. The sensation was not unpleasant, rather like the flickering warmth of a wood fire playing over the face. As the drug took hold he saw his features smooth, almost smear as they relaxed completely. The drug, a by-product of old nerve gas experiments, deadened and loosened every nerve and muscle in the face. Coupled with the effect of months spent in free-fall it allowed complete remodelling of the face. When the spray seemed to have taken hold, Charles pressed one finger into his cheek. He could feel the pressure but it was softened, almost obliterated by the anaesthetic. When he removed his finger the depression stayed, a tiny well of shadow in his face.

Slowly and with great care he redesigned his features to conform to the standards of Sirius IV. Pinch in the nose, smooth the flesh off the bridge to give an impression of beakiness, widen the nostrils a little, accent the cheek bones with a slight hollowing of the cheeks, slant the eyes, folding a little skin off the brow down across the outer corners, the mouth pursed a little, fuller than usual . . . he leaned back and studied the effect. A sinister, rather cadaverous face stared back at him, expressionless and malevolent. Good enough. People would not be likely to accost such a man.

When Bailey had made up they dragged the capsule out into the open. It was still completely dark, but looking upwards Graves saw a faint glow among the mountain peaks. Dawn was breaking up there on the roof of this planet. Before long it would be down on the high pass they had made their hiding place. Together they bundled the last of their protective clothing and stuffed it back into the little ship. It was almost dawn. An edge of Sirius was showing above the horizon. By now the peak nearest to them was brightly lit and as they watched the light fingered down into the valley where they had landed, touching the frost-stunted trees and glinting on the transparent dome of the capsule. It was time.

Bailey reached into the cabin and threw the battery switch. There was a hum as the repulsors started to warm up.

"Got everything?" he asked shortly.

Charles checked through the litter of equipment at his feet.

"Clothing, staffs, recall beacon—all here."

"What about the pistols?"

He drew two neat black service sidearms from the pack containing the electronic gear. "The first things I checked."

"Right—here goes then." Bailey closed and locked the capsule. A few seconds later the tiny ship rose into the air, hovered above their heads for a moment then shot up vertically into the brightening sky. In a moment it had disappeared. They were on their own now.

The journey down onto the plain was a rough one. With only their staffs to get them over the bad spots they found it a dangerous trip. It would have been a lot easier to use the repulsors to float them down but even in such a remote location it was better to take no risks.

By mid-morning they were in the foothills and at noon they struck a road that led towards their goal, the city of Shifaz. The road was a busy one. As they plodded along on the verge, caravans passed them often, and once a troop of soldiers pounded past mounted on thick set camel-like animals leaving the travellers choking in their dust. It wasn't until a few moments later that Charles realised the troops had been dressed in the green livery of the Hegemony. It might have been amusing to see their reaction had they known that the two men in dirty robes were captains in the Terran Navy, but so impregnable was their vanity that no suspicion ever entered their mind. The visits of intelligence teams to this particular system had assumed the status of milk runs.

They arrived in the city at mid-afternoon. There were Hegemony guards at the gates but the forged credentials identifying Mendolovan Shaz and Calpesitrin Thed, scholars, were accurate enough to admit them anywhere in Shifaz. Pushing through the crowd of bargaining merchants the two men made their way towards the palace, using as a landmark the huge fretted spire that towered over every other building in the city. Charles looked around him in fascination. This was his first trip so far behind

enemy lines as a member of the Special Squadron, and the city both impressed and horrified him. It was a mixture of the gorgeous and the grotesque. At the gates of golden palaces beggars plied their obscene trade; graceful carriages were drawn through the streets by manacled slaves; the roads were rutted and piled with refuse, yet most of the feet that trod them wore gilded sandals or the rich black leather of the Hegemony uniform.

"Incredible," he said under his breath.

Bailey looked around with practiced eyes. He had been to Sirius a score of times. There were no surprises for him in Shifaz.

"You should have seen it ten years ago," he said. "While the Hegemony stooge was still emperor this was one of the most rotten spots in the galaxy. You think beggars are bad. I remember when you'd see a dead body in almost every gutter. They wouldn't let a so-called traitor be buried. He was left there until he rotted, as a warning."

They turned a corner and entered the spacious avenue leading to the imperial palace. It was a beautiful building, a harmonious combination of grace and solidity, fantasy and power. Charles wondered at its presence among the almost brutally simple blockhouses around him. Then he remembered that it had been built since Tanshilloman II had become emperor.

At the palace gates there was the usual crowd of mendicants clamouring for entrance. A bribe to the commandant of the guard allowed them to get past these and into the main audience hall. A further bribe admitted them to the inner chamber where they joined a handful of petitioners whose rich clothing indicated that they too had bought their way in. After an interminable wait there was a blare of horns and the huge bronze doors of the anteroom swung open.

Everybody sank to his knees. A moment later the emperor entered trailed by a gaggle of advisers and officers of the crown. Despite his opulent robes and the huge head-dress he wore the sovereign moved in a brisk, almost businesslike manner. As soon as the various officers had left he removed the head-dress and rested it against the

throne. Obviously he was a man who placed little value in ceremony. In the half hour it took him to work through the other petitioners, Charles had a chance to study the emperor in detail. He could not help but admire the way he dealt with the problems put before him. His answers were brief, succinct and always scrupulously fair. Even those who received an unfavourable decision left without rancour, as if the honesty and fairness of the man sitting in judgment had influenced them far more than personal gain. His manner, his speech, his clear frank eyes; all combined to convince one that here was a man of integrity and intelligence. It was not hard to see why Tanshilloman II was well loved by his subjects.

Finally all the others had been dealt with and had left. He turned to Graves and Bailey and bid them approach the throne.

"And what is your problem, gentlemen?" he asked politely.

"My name is Mendolovan Shaz" Bailey said evenly. "May we speak with you alone?"

The emperor's face did not change. He turned to the guards.

"Go" he said peremptorily. "There are matters I must discuss alone with these men."

When the last soldiers had left the room, Bailey checked the door and clipped a vision scrambler to the lock, For as long as it remained attached nobody could look in or enter. He turned to the emperor.

"Cancellation 763" he said. Then, to Graves. "Right—let's get to work."

Working quickly and efficiently they stripped the man of his clothing. There was no movement from the emperor while this was done. He remained immobile, staring straight ahead. The skin of the body was smooth and hairless like that of all Sirians. Bailey laid his hand on the chest and applied pressure to a spot at the base of the neck. Under his hand the flesh split in a clean bloodless gash. He continued downwards until the whole chest cavity was exposed. There was a gleam of machinery in the opening.

"Looks all right," he said, peering into the opening. "Give me the test contacts."

Charles handed him the equipment and watched him clip it to the terminals studding the outside of the largest mechanism.

"Power's working. I'll do the heat and breath simulators. You check the brain."

Within three minutes they had examined every part of the robot that was Emperor Tanshilloman II. Another two minutes and he was full dressed in his robes again.

"Got everything?" Bailey asked.

"All back in the pack."

"Right. Cancellation 273."

With an abruptness which was the first sign of the robot's mechanical nature Charles had seen, the silent figure jumped back to life.

Bailey bowed. "We thank the Emperor for his wise counsel."

The robot nodded deferentially, distant but not suspicious. He was programmed to accept breaks like the one he had just experienced without comment. Bailey and Graves bowed themselves out.

"Let's get out of here" Bailey said when they were safely through the gate. "We've got four more jobs to do this trip."

They spaced out on schedule and set a course for the next system. Then they settled down to the tedium of planet hopping. Drive units were useless for such short trips as these, and even the atomic rockets could make at best a few light minutes a day. This was a part of service in the Navy that the recruiting posters never mentioned. Various men spent it in different ways. Bailey studied, absorbing book after book and filing their contents in a mind that seemed more like an archives than a functioning human organ. Charles knew that after a few years on intelligence work he too would develop a brain like this, infinitely adaptable, supremely knowledgeable, proof against almost any human error. It was an essential of survival. But for the moment he was still inexperienced—and human.

As the days wore on and even reading became something like torture, Charles turned in desperation to the robots. Assembling and disassembling them became his main activity. It was a disturbing task in some ways, to take what looked like a normal functioning human being and tear it down into a heap of metal and plastic. And even more disconcerting was the thought that each of these figures with which he played so casually was, in its proper setting, a king, an emperor, even a god.

"It's a hell of a way to fight a war" he observed to Bailey on their last day out.

The older man looked up from his book. "It's the only kind of war we can have" he said. "The other kind didn't go too well."

Meaning Dubhe, Charles supposed. He remembered Dubhe well enough, though he had been only a child at the time. It wasn't something that any earthman, especially a Navy officer, could hope to forget. Beyond that star a frozen graveyard of ships stood as a permanent reminder of the suicidal futility of blow-for-blow battling in space. It had been the first and the last space battle. After Dubhe, both sides limped home and reconsidered their strategy. Out of that reconsideration had come the Hegemony's all-enveloping net of colonial outposts and the Earth's plan of robot subversion. So perhaps Dubhe had not been such a total loss after all.

Graves prowled up and down the rack of dangling carcasses.

"It still seems a poor sort of choice" he said. "Robots or battles."

Bailey carefully marked his place and sat up.

"Robots are working too well for us to think about other kinds of fighting. Look at Procyon. We couldn't have taken that with a thousand ships. Yet two years after we planted a robot in the legislature we had a revolt that tossed the Hegemony out of the system and frightened them so much that they don't dare even mention it, let alone think about taking over again. The same thing will be repeated, on Sirius this time, pretty soon, though with enough variation to stop them from getting suspicious.

I don't know whether it's the traditional or gentlemanly way to fight a war—but we're winning. That's what counts, isn't it?"

Graves grimaced. "Is it? I don't know. I suppose it must be. I just can't help feeling uncomfortable about the whole thing. It can't be safe to lean on robots as much as we do."

"Do we have a choice?" Bailey said. He cranked out one of the robots from the wall cabinet and split the chest seam exposing the machinery gleaming inside. "Look at this beauty. An official in the Sirian secret police, designed eventually to be the emperor's right hand man. It has reflexes three times faster than ours; it doesn't need to eat or sleep; it has a memory ten times as efficient . . ."

"But no mind."

"No mind?" He hinged off the side of the robot's head, exposing the titanium sponge of the brain. "What do you call that? A computer than can handle a thousand variables and come up with the right answer every time, an ability to reason that would have astounded Einstein, a recorder that remembers everything it hears and has total recall."

Graves shook his head. "Very impressive—but a machine all the same. It isn't a man."

"True enough" Bailey said, slapping the robot fondly. "It's more than a man. Homo superior."

Charles looked with discomfort at the bleakly efficient expression on the plastic face. *If that's right*, he thought, *God help us.*

Paratin was the single planet of a shrunken dwarf star, a lonely cinder in the eye of NGC 3776. As the ship slid into its endless curving fall around the world Graves stared down with distaste on its barren surface. Day and night sand storms crawled and curved like patches of red heat. At the poles there was some sign of moisture but the scraps of parched and faded green were almost indecent against the blaze of the desert.

"What a hole," he said. "I can't imagine why anybody lives there. Why are we interested?"

Bailey closed his eyes briefly and drew on his memory.

"Wolfram," he said. "Bauxite, some titanium. It's probably the only planet in this sector with any light metals to speak of. Taking it over would be quite a catch."

"Who have we got down there?" Charles asked, checking the hang of his long robe. Coming from an earth where clothing taboos had almost ceased to exist it was a major undertaking for him to wear the uncomfortable clothes the job demanded.

"One of the local chieftains. Doesn't seem to have a name. They just call him the Mudi. At the rate we're going he should be running the place inside three years. Give me a hand with the facial, will you."

There wasn't any need for extensive alterations this time. The people of Paratin were mutated earth stock and the only adaptation they had made was a slight darkening of the skin. Inside five minutes they were ready to drop. The landing on Paratin was as easy and uneventful as these trips usually were. They grounded in one of the sparsely watered polar areas, sent the capsule back into orbit and trekked to the nearest town. There was little there to excite interest. The inevitable Hegemony garrison supplied a couple of slovenly guards at the town gate, considering without interest the landscape of sun, sand and weeds. There was no challenge. The buildings inside the wall were of unpainted mud bricks and there were many of them but most of the town's activity was conducted outdoors in a square crowded with ramshackle stalls. Like all cities on hot dry worlds the town had a deceptively clean wind-swept look. It was only when one entered the cramped houses that one found the smells and diseases that thrived on heat. After a few hours both men were anxious to be out of the place even if it meant facing the sandstorms.

The only beast of burden on Paratin was a shaggy catlike animal roughly the size of a small pony. Its wide flat feet made it ideal for travelling across the sand but nobody on the planet knew enough about genetics to breed a strain with longer legs so travel was slow and jerky. Prepared for a long and uncomfortable journey they headed out into the desert.

Three days later they had still not found their man.

"How much longer do you think we'll need?" Charles asked, crouching nearer to the tiny fire. "We're about out of food."

Bailey frowned and looked out beyond the flames at the darkness. It seemed to crowd in on them, waiting for the fire to burn out so that it could pounce.

"We should have made contact long ago," he replied. "I'm getting a reading all right, but it isn't strong enough to take a fix. There must be one hell of a blockage. Tomorrow . . ."

He stopped, looking out over Graves' shoulder. It took the younger man a moment to realise that there was something behind him.

"Don't move," Bailey said evenly. "Stay perfectly still."

It was eerie, squatting there not daring to move, every muscle and nerve tensed. Motionless he stared into the gloom beyond Bailey. Was that a movement? Or did his eyes play tricks? He stared harder. There was no doubt about it now. All around them were figures closing in. As they neared the fire they resolved into tall silent men draped against the desert wind, veiled and menacing, their faces hidden in shadow.

Slowly and deliberately Bailey stood up. He held out both hands palms uppermost showing that he was unarmed. The men did nothing. Still-achingly slow, Bailey reached towards his belt. Immediately the men tensed and Charles watched in horror as hands jumped to the hilts of the long swords they all carried. But the earthman moved too slowly and deliberately to break the spell. Almost casually he drew from his belt a short carved staff and extended it towards the men. Nothing happened for almost a minute. Then, cautiously, the nearest of them reached out and took it. He examined it carefully, then showed it to the others. There were muttered words and the little stick passed from hand to hand. The man turned to Bailey again—and pushed back his hood, revealing a sunburnt face and an expression that was sardonic but not menacing.

Charles slumped in relief. He couldn't do more than

listen as Bailey talked to them in the guttural Paratin dialect. After the talk the natives melted off into the darkness again, all but the tall man who was apparently their leader. Bailey immediately started to pack up their gear.

"Come on," he said, moving swiftly about the camp, rolling up the blankets, scattering the fire. "They were out on a raid and stumbled across our fire. I managed to persuade them that we had urgent business with their boss. We're riding right away."

"What's the hurry? Surely we could have waited until morning."

Bailey shook his head. "No, there's something wrong somewhere. They won't say much but it seems there's been a stepping up of resistance around here lately and the revolt isn't going too well. They won't even mention the Mudi and I can't find out why. We'll just have to see for ourselves."

They travelled all that night. It was a terrifying experience, riding blind through the impenetrable darkness, seeing only the shadowy shape of the rider in front, hearing only the occasional clink of pebble on pebble or the creak of harness. As it grew light they could see that the terrain about them had changed. Wind-sculptured sand gave way to ruggedly broken ground, split and fissured like the airless landscape of the moon. The huge cats with their hooded riders padded without sound across this dead terrain like ghosts moving through a dormant hell. Just as the sun rose completely they entered a narrow defile that twisted through the rocks. Looking up, Charles saw an occasional hint of movement on the cliffs above. The place was well guarded. Apparently this was the lair of the Mudi and his gang of cut-throats. No wonder the radio trace had been muffled.

The defile wound deep into the mountains, growing narrower at each turn. Soon they were riding in Indian file, the mounts' shaggy flanks often scraping the rock. By now the mouth of the canyon was a ragged thread of blue half a mile above them. After half an hour the defile widened, spreading out into a gently shelving valley sur-

rounded on all sides by sheer cliffs. It was an ideal hideout and the raiders had made good use of it. A forest of skin tents had been pitched along the rim of the area so as to take advantage of what shade there was. The shaggy animal skins made ideal cover, blending easily into the sandy brown stone so that from above the camp would look like a piece of rough ground tumbled with big boulders. Considering the perfunctory examination that the Hegemony aircraft could give the place it was not surprising that the camp had remained undiscovered so long.

Charles dug his knees into the mount's sides and urged it up to where Bailey was talking with the native. He seemed worried. He heard Bailey repeat the same question three times to be met each time by the same apparently unsatisfactory answer.

"What's the trouble?"

Bailey frowned. "Damned if I know. Every time I ask about the Mudi, he veers off. I get the impression . . . well, we'll see soon enough. I managed to persuade him that we should see the boss, but he wasn't too happy about it. Come on."

The native led them through the camp. There was no doubting which tent belonged to the leader. Larger than the others it stood slightly apart from the rest. The flap was closed. It appeared to be deserted. All three dismounted, and the native, rather nervously it seemed, called out something unintelligible. There was no answer. He called again. A crowd was gathering. The faces of them all, even the children, were solemn and apprehensive. Charles swallowed on a dry throat. He did not like the feeling of the place at all.

Inside the tent there was a stirring of movement and the flap was pushed aside. A tall man stepped out dressed in the long brown robes of the others. But where they moved with animal quickness this man seemed hardly able to stand. He swayed, clutching the tent rope for support. The hand that held the rope was trembling violently and his face was racked by a nervous twitch that knotted one side into a contorted mask every few seconds. The eyes,

grey and hard, focused with an almost visible effort on the two men standing before the tent. He snarled. Turning to his followers he pointed to Graves and Bailey with a trembling hand.

"Kill them!" he screamed.

Out of the corner of his eye Charles saw his companion react with astonishing speed. Before the natives had time to reach for their weapons he had shouted the compulsory over-ride code. For a moment the robot stood irresolute, then slumped to the ground. Even in unconsciousness the limbs continued to twitch.

"Get it inside," Bailey hissed.

Moving as quickly as he dared Charles dragged the robot into the tent. It was gloomy inside but by the soft yellow light that filtered through the cloth he could see that the place was empty. Behind him, beyond the flap, Bailey was shouting at the natives; he was too busy to translate what was being said. With a knife he found at the robot's belt he slashed through the clothing. Below the loose outer robe he found only a few light undergarments. All were riddled with holes; neatly punched holes, some of them burned black at the edges. Bullets!

When at last he had cut away the last of the clothing he knew what to expect. The robot's body was punctured in a dozen places. One of the main pressure clasps had jammed open and through the fissure he could see machinery scarred and twisted. Pulling back the hood he found a pellet had forced its way right through the forehead, ploughing into the delicate sponges of the brain. The robot was a complete write-off—because nobody on advanced ultra-scientific earth had dreamed that a primitive planet out at the end of the galaxy would be so hard-pressed as to fall back on impulse pistols. Or maybe they were even gunpowder weapons. Who could tell? The only sure thing was that the bullets had not been affected by the inbuilt magnetic deflector which would neutralise any charge from a normal nerve gun. Dumbly they had ploughed in through the field and torn the robot to bits.

There was a movement behind him and the flap swung back. He reached for his gun but it was only Bailey.

"What's going on out there?"

"I've convinced them that the Mudi is sick and that we're doctors. That should hold them for a while. How soon can we . . ."

He stepped forward and looked down at the robot.

"My God! What happened to it?"

"Bullets. Nobody taught it to duck."

Bailey was incredulous. "Bullets? In this day and age?"

He examined the body briefly then stood up.

"A wreck. It needs a new brain at least. That ruins things, doesn't it?"

"Can't we call down the capsule and get a spare from the ship?"

"I suppose so." He frowned. "The important thing is to make sure the natives don't get suspicious. They're getting ready for a raid in a few hours. If the Mudi isn't ready to lead them, we're dead."

"One of us will have to stay here while the other goes for a replacement."

Bailey nodded. "It'll have to be me that goes. You don't know the language well enough to get past the guards. Think you can handle things here?"

Charles smiled wryly. "You mean I have a choice?"

The irony was lost on Bailey. "You'd better go out in front and divert their attention while I slip out through the back. With luck, nobody will check with the guards until afterwards."

They shook hands selfconsciously and Graves pushed out through the tent flap. Outside he walked around a little, glancing at the sky and the sun in what he hoped was a purposeful manner. The natives seemed to be fooled. When he entered the tent again, Bailey was gone.

For the next two hours he sat uncomfortably on a pile of cushions, looking at the collapsed body of the robot. It was amusing, in a way, that simple little pellets of lead propelled by an electrical discharge could have smashed this, the greatest achievement of earth's science. It proved things, typified things, symbolised more weaknesses and ironies than Charles could think of at one time. Most of

all it proved the ridiculousness of Bailey's faith in the robots. They too were fallible. Charles could not find it in himself to be entirely unhappy about this despite the situation he was in.

The light had been dimming for some time before he realised that it was getting late. Where was Bailey? Quietly he walked to the tent flap and peered through a crack. There was a crowd outside. Even through the canvas he could hear their muttering. All the men were dressed in loose desert robes and most of them carried guns and swords at their belt. In the background he could see a group of riding beasts saddled and ready. He considered the situation as objectively as he could. Bailey might be back at any time. If so, the best thing he could do was wait. On the other hand, if Bailey had been held up, the situation might deteriorate if let go too long. No matter how he deliberated the problems seemed insoluble. So when he stepped out and confronted the tribesmen it was more or less on impulse.

There was a stir in the crowd as he came out. One of the chiefs stepped forward and bowed. To Charles the gesture seemed less obsequious than those tendered before.

"Where is our lord, the Mudi?" the native asked without preamble.

It took a few moments for Charles to compose a reply in the native tongue.

"The Mudi is ill and must have rest and treatment. My friend and I will nurse him."

The native received this without comment.

"We ride soon," he said eventually. "Our leader will ride with us."

"Your leader is ill," Graves said firmly.

"I will talk with him," the man said. He stepped forward.

"No! No, he is ill."

The face inside the hood was shadowed but the menace in his tone was unmistakable.

"Ill or not, I will see him."

Charles stepped back towards the tent. "Wait—I will speak with him."

Inside he paced desperately up and down the tent. No matter which way he turned there seemed no way out—except one. He looked down at the dead face of the robot. Not an unusual one. It should not be too hard to duplicate. A few minor changes to his own features should do it. As quickly as he dared he remodelled his face until it was a reasonable facsimile of the robot's. From the rack he took the Mudi's robes and slipped into them. They fitted well enough. Picking up the rifle he took one last look at the body. The complex machinery gleamed in the dying light. It was a marvel of technology, a magnificent feat of ingenuity. But more than a man?

He pushed aside the tent flap.

There was one way to find out.

What do you think?

This issue sees yet another innovation in the policy of NEW WORLDS SF—the publishing of short articles about new developments in science. We are interested in knowing what you think of them and would welcome your comments. Is there anything else you particularly like or dislike in NEW WORLDS SF? If so, why don't you sit down and write us a letter saying why?

All correspondence should be addressed to The Editor, NEW WORLDS SF, 17 Lake House, Scovell Road, London, S.E.1.

"Let's talk about God," he said . . .

WHEN THE SKIES FALL

John Hamilton

"IBSEN, CHECKOV, STRINBERG, BRECHT . . ." Dumas reeled off the names like an adding machine.

"Now lookee here," broke in Dixey spinning a golden coin high in the air. "Who cares, anyway?"

They heard music.

Jerusalem the golden, with milk and honey blessed.

The words were wafted into the smoke-filled room, the dim chamber: the smoke was suffocating a number of small flies that had lingered among the cool shadows of the far corner, and the tenement building was silently rotting, decaying away slowly and unobtrusively as the long days ticked by, until one day it would fall with a clatter and a cloud of dust.

Dumas stood up and opened the window to let the day in and the smoke out.

They heard the music again.

Dumas put a thin finger to his furrowed brow and thought, his dark eyes following the parallel lines of the dusty floorboards, searching for imperfections. "Let's talk about God," he said and Dixey nodded.

At this moment a third wise man stumbled through the door and coughed at the atmosphere. "Gentlemen," he said, "looking at this room, if I didn't know you were intellectuals, I'd say you were bums."

Dixey, ignoring the entrant, asserted: "God is the apotheosis of man's imagination, the highest of the mountains of fancy," and sighed softly at his own words.

The tall newcomer crumpled himself into a seat and disagreed: "Another worthless product of the age of cynicism," he said and grimaced.

Dumas walked from the open window to his left, taking perhaps six short strides. The tap was turned anti-clockwise and hot water flushed over the breakfast things. He

watched the steam rise and evaporate before his face. He solemnly addressed the sink: "I believe the major purpose of the Bible is to inform the world, including us, of the day the world will end in order that we may all be ready and prepared for it, for the demise—no less—of the Universe. But over the ages people have chosen to ignore those passages that really matter and therefore the divine teleology has . . ." His words were drowned in the noisy argument that had arisen between Dixey the heretic and the other man.

The stranger was vociferously asserting the reality of God and was testing out his opponent by going successively through all the classic arguments for His existence—the ontological, the first cause, the Descartean and so on. But Dixey, alert to the flaws, rejected each one with the vigour of a buccaneer felling dead undergrowth. And so the debate continued around the eternal question. It seemed it would go on for ever, but in a moment both fell suddenly silent as a cat will stop in his tracks and go to sleep at the flick of a tail.

From the sink the slow ponderous voice of Dumas continued: ". . . and anyone with any sense who chooses to read between the sacred lines can learn the date of Armageddon to a year, to a day even." He paused, rising to the significance of his theme. "Do you realise, can you conceive of the irony, that the most important information of all time lies in a book which rests untouched in most people's homes, a book which even the professional clerics don't really know anything about." He chuckled darkly over the secret which he alone held, the Secret of all secrets. He turned away from the sink and back to the other two: Dixey was wrinkling a pile of coins through his thin fingers and appeared to be thinking, the stranger was humming an unknown tune under his breath and looking blank.

Dixey caught Dumas' amused glance, detecting a slight glint of irony, sunk the handful of coins deep in his pocket and informed the man at the sink that his imagination equalled only his ignorance and then turned his eyes down to a minute examination of his fingers, noting any point at

which the nails did not appear to form a uniformly curved edge.

Outside the room and below it the singers were chanting something quiet and blue.

Thin clock hands jumped minutes, the sun fell through a portion of a degree, the shadow on the sun-dial shifted unnoticed, and the old house creaked nearer its doom. Through the open window eddies of dust rose and quivered in the afternoon sunshine, the cries of playing children were carried on the breeze as a babble of noise, and rows of sentinel trees swayed gently and whispered summer secrets to the air. Scudding blanket clouds traversed the blue-grey canvas of the sky like wind-swept sails on a limitless ocean.

Back in the room, Dixey drew out a cigarette, threw the crumpled packet into a corner, doused the match by a sharp movement of the wrist and began to study the blue spirals of rising smoke. Dumas had left the sink and was now standing in the middle of the room head bowed and fingers carefully opening the first pages of a small book which seemed to be a diary. His eyes followed as he flicked through the leaves and finally reached the place he was looking for: 'Sunday, August 21st.' That was next week tomorrow—no, next week to the very day! The pale whiteness of the page was inscribed with a large letter 'A'; the point of the pencil had evidently been pressed heavily.

The third man looked over his shoulder and after a while spoke: "So you yourself worked it all out to the very day, eh?"

Dumas made a modest throwaway gesture with his hand: "Well I sort of approximated, you know. I'd worked on it some time, but didn't feel like committing myself—until this morning that is. Genesis chapter two provides a useful clue and then Saint Luke, towards the end, gives . . ."

The other man interrupted his sentence with some urgency: "Look, I may well be a fool for taking you at all seriously, but I've just had a rather odd thought. If, perchance, this were all true, what would be the effect of

someone, or both of us say, learning the Secret, the key to the Universe of space and time—surely, the knowledge of—eh—Armageddon might . . ." He left his words pregnant in the air.

Dumas didn't reply.

One studied the near distance intently, the other gazed down at his feet, both thinking over the capital 'A' he had entered in the diary that morning, both standing in meditative silence in the centre of the room.

Dixey, still sitting to their left at the side of the room, had not been listening and was the first to hear an odd sound: over and above the mellow singing from downstairs sweet rippling chords from some musical instrument could be discerned—it took little reflection to recognise it was a harp.

All three listened to the rise and fall of the strings, quietly enchanted by the freshness and elegance and coolness of the air-borne notes. The singing below stopped—they too listened to the music which issued from a delicate flutter of unseen fingers. It was like the summer brook of Time rippling and playing over the stones of the centuries, washing them softly away.

Some time later the flow of music faded and Dixey coughed, almost apologetically. There followed a silence and then a strange muffled sound—as of a deck of cards falling, and the new silence was deeper than before, than ever before. It was the silence of a tomb.

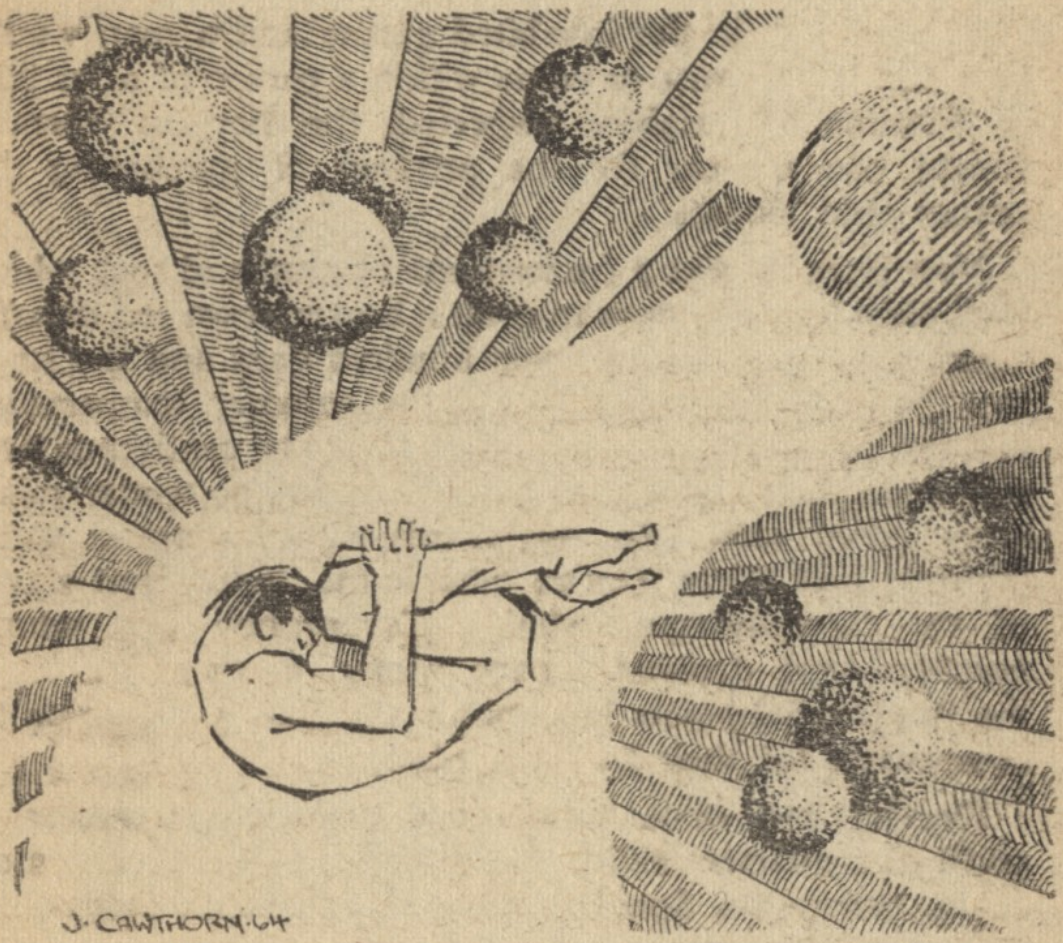
Instinctively all three were drawn slowly to the window, and all three gasped or sighed from deep within their souls. Nothing. Void. Blank. The trees, the houses, the street, the sky—the world was gone.

The scene that met their eyes was a blank domino, a painting washed clean.

Dumas' voice muttered something about being wrong.

A marvellously funny spoof on human nature, the universe—and a great many ideas that SF has held holy for far too long . . .

THE SINGULAR QUEST OF MARTIN BORG



George Collyn

IN THE BLEAKNESS of midwinter when the Terran colonists on Borg IV were dying like flies and the natives were breeding like Vegan rabbits which have a gestation period of but ten days and litters a gross strong . . . .

In the depths of the Borgian winter a certain racketeer

by name Alan Firmole awaited deportation from the planet together with two crates of lys blossoms, those two remaining unsold out of his original stock of twelve.

This, the lys flower, in the exploitation of which Firmole was deeply involved at that time, was the product of hybrid orchid and Venusian devil-lily, painstakingly cross-fertilised for three generations of horticulturists with, as end product, its unique perfume, one waft of which could send a man comatose with undiluted happiness; which state, by inducing such happiness that the inhaler omits the minor bodily cares such as eating and sleeping, is inevitably fatal. Any place else in the inhabited galaxy and a man would have too much sense to come within a parsec of a lys but, as Firmole had rightly suspected, the Borgian Terrans fought one another for the privilege of purchasing the orange-gold blooms.

Now Borg IV was a frozen hunk of mud and rock which took eight hundred days to orbit a brokendown red dwarf; where the winter lasted seven hundred days and the summer but one hundred; where the summer temperature reached an all-time high of minus twenty centigrade and no-one in their right mind would believe the winter minimum could exist. To the twenty-eight thousand three hundred and thirty Terran inhabitants, indentured slaves of the Interplanetary Mining Corporation and whose numbers were decimated each winter, to them therefore the greatest happiness imaginable was hardly adequate to compensate for their habitual misery.

Firmole had done satisfactory business, extracting a profit of a quarter million credits from easy and contented death, before the Space Agency Gendarmerie caught up with him for narcotics peddling, extortion, unlawful possession of experimental plants, gross profiteering and meddling in the internal affairs of the I.M.C. which was Agency owned.

Then there was Marti Marta, artistic dancer from the Forbidden Pleasure City of Hi-Li who, thanks to the will of the Great Minds, was subject to no man-made law, who

had never worn more than a stitch of clothing in her life and wasn't going to start now. She was at that time journeying through the known galaxy aboard the space yacht 'Yo-ho-ho' as the concubine of Walter Picksnell, the well-known biscuit manufacturer. Or, at least, she was journeying until the third terminal disper of the ion-drive emasculated as the 'Yo-ho-ho' was brushing the outer atmosphere of Borg IV, thus forcing the yacht into the inhospitable world for emergency repairs. In a moment of tantrum Marti had told Mr. Picksnell just what she thought of his yacht, his terminal dispers, his choice of planets and himself and in return Walt had slapped one of her fleshier and less attractive portions of anatomy and told her never to darken his air-lock again.

In this way it came about that she sat next to Alan Firmole in the lounge of the space port of Borg City which, for that place, was heated to the comfortable temperature of five degrees above the freezing point of water. She sat there awaiting the next available outward bound ship and sat upon the case containing her personal wardrobe of five hundred and twenty-seven jewelled G-strings but clad momentarily not æsthetically in quivering blue-with-cold goose-flesh.

These two then began to talk together, idly and in friendly fashion, as fellow-travellers and fellow-sufferers will ; she remarking on the severity of the cold, he stressing the benefits of warm clothing and she retorting that in her possession were press-clippings from 53 far-flung star-systems each proving that she had the most beautiful body in the known universe—did he suggest she should gainsay her assets by concealment merely because the flesh was temporarily weak? From that point they went on to talk of further and better things, a conversation that continued even when they were well distant from Borg IV aboard the Cape Kennedy Line's S.S. Aurora bound Tau Cetiwards. And in time, she being bored and he despairing of his liberty and she being costumed as negatively as she was, their conversation took its inevitable turn so that nine months after that Marti Marta brought forth a son.

The boy she named Martin after herself and Borg after

the planet where she had met his father. She might conceivably have called the child Firmole but by that time she had the greatest difficulty in recalling the name of the man she had met so fleetingly.

At a time when the child was nearly weaned she was offered the 'friendship' of Sebastian Scrim, the richest and least-married man in the galaxy, but naturally enough the nearness of their relationship was marred by the existence of her son. It was in order to foster this relationship that by utilising the quarter million credits Firmole had left in her safe keeping till such time as he was released from the Tau Ceti prison hulks, she purchased an uninhabited planetoid in the Tectonic Gulf, five second-hand veterinary robots converted to child-care duties and there left the infant in their care.

In all fairness to Marti Marta who had never been created to be a mother it must be stated that in due course of time she had every intention of reclaiming her child or, at the very least, of changing her instructions to the robots. By ill fortune however, she and Scrim were lost in the Ariadne disaster of '98 when five materialising space-craft tried to occupy the same portion of space at the same moment of time and young Martin Borg, who was three at that time, was left an orphan.

So Martin, sole human on his miniature world, grew up fair and strong with the unexercised potential of his father's mind and a masculine version of his mother's overwhelming beauty. And the robots, as if to compensate for the neglect of his parents, tended him well. In full obedience to their instructions they bottle-fed, bathed, talc dusted, nappy changed, nursery rhyme read to, lullaby sang to, burped and correctively spanked him. Which service they were continuing to provide when Martin was twenty-five years of age. A chubby fellow six feet tall and fourteen stone in weight who lay in his cot and gurgled at the ever-present stars.

A *tabula rasa* awaiting.

Men are dependent on others for the development of

those qualities which we regard as distinctively human. Human nature must be acquired and cannot be acquired except through social interaction.

Newcomb—Social Psychology.

Whatever one said about the inhabitants of Deneb X one had to admit that they cared passionately. It would seem that some alien influence of Deneb sol's radiation on the inhabitants of its tenth planet had over-stimulated the compassion lobes of their brains.

Deneb City was the galactic centre of two million and eighty-one charity organisations and in Haverstoon Square alone there were bodies devoted to the combat against starvation, racial prejudice, lys addiction, intolerance, injustice, anthrax, illiteracy, slavery, serfdom, thralldom, androidism and cruelty to animals, robots, children and unmarried mothers. Deneb X was the only planet in the galaxy where apathy was an indictable offence and where the words, "I don't care," carelessly uttered could bring upon a man's head lifelong and absolute ostracism.

It therefore followed that few Denebians travelled abroad because, on one hand their sensibilities suffered overmuch by exposure to too many wrongs at one time and, on the other, many planets, their patience exhausted by continual protestations at normal planetside activities, had refused all Denebians entry visas.

Thus it was that the Tectonic Gulf was developed as a pleasure area for Denebian tourism. The gulf, a great rift, a void extending from the fringe of the galactic lens and pointing at its heart, a blackness surrounded by shining reefs of multi-coloured stars, was a place of great natural beauty with the added advantage for the Denebians of being totally bereft of star systems and their attendant inhabited planets. A sterile place without human fault.

Yet not quite without for at its heart, a solitaire jewel, lay a lone white dwarf with a single planetoid in orbit around it. A planet without a name but apparently owned by one Martita Marta, dancer, now deceased.

It was because it was apparently unclaimed and notice-

ably uninhabited that Mistress Anacurna Bliz, president of the Deneb Mothers Against Neglect League, felt it would be safe to land thereon and thus brought to an end the childhood of Martin Borg.

Downland it was a world of pearl grey, of mists and sullen waters. Upland it was a realm of pink cloud-palaces and golden ladders of sunshine; the rays of sun in the swirling mist like gold wire through gathers of grey tulle. It was a world of negatives, so insubstantial that it seemed it could have no solid core but that from sphere's surface to sphere's surface one could swim or glide through its unstark central being.

It was a world made for dryads and nymphs; ethereal beings, their every move a subtle choreography. Mistress Bliz was of the immense stature and bronzed musculature of her race. She bestrode the tiny world as the colossus bridged the harbour at Rhodes. No-one could have been less suited to that place.

Yet she it was who peered into the valley's mouth and saw the plastic bubble, a private nest of nursery pinks and blues wherein Martin Borg had spent his quarter century of infancy. She it was who burst that bubble and she who painlessly deactivated the robots who sought to defend their charge (painlessly of course—she was after all secretary of the Asimovian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Positronic Brains). And she it was who, weeping piteously at the heartlessness of motherhood, scooped the smiling Borg into her massive arms and, vowing vengeance on those who had abandoned him thus, carried him back to her home in Haverstoon Square there to awaken his dormant brain.

On Deneb X they taught him to read and write, to walk and talk, to love and to hate, to dress, wash and use the lavatory. They taught him history and astrogeography, English and neo-Latin, Tibetan and Omniglot, socio-economics and trigonometry and they taught him to care. They also taught him that life is led in an open cage; for

his life on that planet was spent in the role of Poor Unfortunate. Like waifs before him who had been dragged to Deneb X as living examples of Man's inhumanity to Man, Martin found he was on permanent exhibition. Day by day he stood in the towering hallway of Haverstoon House, his head in humility bent, as the pilgrims of Deneb came with their sympathy, their sorrow and their pitying censure—angry barbs aimed at the stony heart of the mother Martin had never known. It was a public expression of infinite love but, like the Denebians who could not resist the giving of tasty titbits to the starving youngster rescued from the Titanic teuteronium mines so that she died of an over-expanded stomach, it was a love that cloyed and ultimately killed.

And in escape Martin retreated within the confines of his own mind and there found marvellous things.

Now an infant's brain is a minute thing and to learn the rudimentary arts of walking and talking it must strain every fibre of its being. This it must continue to do throughout the entire education of the emergent adult, straining all its power on mundane issues. So that as the brain achieves its physical maturity so is it mentally exhausted and for the remainder of its life is content merely to continue the processes of daily life and to let lie fallow the vast resources of its untapped potential. But the brain of Martin Borg had slept for twenty-five years and, whereas a new born child must use the total potential of its brain to learn the basic human functions, thus blunting its keenest edge, Martin found that he need devote but a fraction of his mind to the task and as that emerged into maturity he discovered that in that portion of his mind normally untouched there lay all the cerebral powers that man has yearned for since Time began. Levitation and telekinesis, telepathy, tele-hypnosis and psycho-somatic control. These were but a handful of the things that self-taught, emerged within the blonde head of Borg.

One fine summer evening in the fifth year of his education Martin Borg lay on his bed in the dying glow of Deneb sol and like an angler fishing a stream, whipping

the fly to touch the water here and there, he sent the tentacles of his consciousness through the sleeping world, tapping a planet's psychic flow, feeling the pulse of a racial mind.

And what did he find?

He found a lullaby of pity, a dull throbbing of sympathy centred on himself and he felt an entire world that was sorry for him. And the idea that anyone could feel sorry for he who had never felt sorry for himself—indeed he was a very self-satisfied young man—the idea shocked him not a little. He was so repulsed that in a psychic shout he broadcast his protest to the attendant minds.

"I don't care," he cried, "I don't want your pity. What my mother's neglect made of me is a wonderful thing. I am glad to have it so."

But people who live in altruistic societies should not shatter shibboleths. In a moment Martin felt the sympathy of a world turn to hatred. The finely tuned sensitivity of his mind reeled as waves of concentrated hate struck its delicate surface and the bed-clothes were lashed into a maelstrom as he twisted and turned to avoid the mental pulse which like a black pit of non-consciousness welled up around him.

At the height of his agony he found a new resource in the mental power that had been given him. In his pain and fear he thought longingly of his pink and gold world and his pink and blue nursery; of the unpitying care of the quintet of robots who were the only parents he knew. At that moment of longing there seemed to be a twist in the fabric of space and for a second Martin was aware of the utmost reaches of the universe and of a million suns that seared his unshielded brain, then came a second mental convulsion and he was in the quiet haven of his planetoid with the plastic dome soaring above him and the hatred of a planet's minds ebbing into infinity.

A mind free and exhausted.

In some cases this may go on to a condition of complete stupor, wherein the patient sits or lies motionless and un-

responsive, completely aware of what is going on around him but no longer able or disposed to do anything about it.
David Stafford-Clark—Psychiatry Today.

The brain of Martin Borg had slept for twenty-five years and then in five years had been expected to assimilate not only the customary developments of a human child but a wide range of powers beyond the human norm. Is it any wonder then that this last effort which flung his body across countless light years of space should cause a short circuit in his mental flow? It is amazing only that the delicate mechanism his brain had become did not burn itself out forever. As it was, the effort left his body drained of energy and his head empty of thought.

For more than a year he lay on the cot of childhood in a foetal position, toes to mouth and hands over eyes, with no movement to his body and his head without a thought.

The robots recovering from the crude shock of deactivisation were delighted to have their ward among them once again and, with that superb and enviable lack of curiosity that characterises mechanical man, resumed their task as if no interruption had taken place. For another year, as they had for twenty-five they tended to Martin Borg's bodily needs as he was unable to look to himself.

Yet at last the trauma passed and Martin Borg returned to full consciousness of his surroundings but with in his mind a sense of loss and non-identity. He had been emptied of ego and was now a vacant receptacle of abilities awaiting a persona. Yet the latent power of his brain was a hand-forged weapon, strengthened by exercise and tempered by the hard radiation of a million alien suns in that shattering moment of transfer.

At that moment it was true he remembered nothing of who or what he was, nothing of his life either in that place or on Deneb X. He was only aware that he as an organism existed and since it was inconceivable that he could exist without purpose, he believed he had been created and put in that place for some end which for the time being he was unable to comprehend.

That was the beginning of his quest.

From the edge of memory he formulated words. "Who am I?" he asked, "I know there are things I must do but I do not know what they should be. Tell me who I am and what I am."

To speak of astonishment in regard to robots is impossible. They are not built with emotion inherent in their makeup, but it is possible to disorganise their processes by action not catered for in their instructions. There was no expectation among Martin's robo-nurses that their charge should speak or do any other thing but passively accept their ministrations. As far as was possible for them the action of Martin in speaking caused them great agitation and sent them into a consternated group.

Number One robot who as first-constructed felt called upon to act as their spokesman said, "You are a human being and our master."

"Yes," said Martin, "I am human, that I remember. Also I remember that I was here once before but I went far from this place. Then I returned. But for what purpose and for what reason was I ever here at all? Tell me; are there no documents relating to me here, no instructions that would tell me what it was I was to do when I was ready for the commission?"

The robots conferred again but remembered no documents and no instructions. But Number Three remembered that there was one thing which might help. In the corner that was the robots' very own there existed a photograph left by Marti Marta, partly so that the robots would know her again but partly so that Martin would always have something of beauty to behold, his mother believing there to be no finer sight in the galaxy than her unveiled charms.

"There is only this, Master," said Number Three, holding it for inspection. Martin took it reverently in his hands. Yes, he thought, this is what a human looks like, for while he did not remember his mother he was vaguely conscious of the looks of Mistress Bliz, normally clothed though she was. Yet one glance at himself told him that this form of being was not physically what he was himself and because

he believed there was some predestined end to his life which he could fulfil only by self-development, he thought that, just as his mind had developed its own potential so too then must his body. Therefore, since the photograph was the only criterion of human characteristics he possessed and since it bore features that were his features and looks that were his looks he came to the belief that this was the model towards which he should himself aspire. And since no-one had ever told him it was impossible he began to draw upon the resources of his mind to mould his body to fit the image.

He thought of lean thighs, white and clear-cut and felt their configuration as it would be and it was so. He thought of breasts swelling apple-round and sensed their touch and it was so. He formulated hair of gold in perfect fall to his shoulders and it was so. He imagined almond eyes and tulip lips, delicate curves and rounded femininity and it was so. He thought of yielding fragility and steel-tempered passion and Marti Marta reborn stood in the nursery; which sounds incredible but it was so.

As the body of Martita Marta took on its renewed shape so too did the memories of her life flood into the brain that was built to receive them. And her consciousness both of her life as a dancer and of her life as her son flowed together and merged, each strengthening the other so that she was aware of the vibrant physical power of her beauty and the latent potential of her brain.

Martita Borg as we shall call her stood among her anxious robot attendants and knew that her destiny was not here on this isolated planetoid but elsewhere in the vastness of space. She sifted through the memories of a hundred worlds. Of Terra, decadent and impotent in her decline. Of Deneb X and rejected that planet in haste for the horror it had wreaked in her mind. And she lighted upon Hi Li City where her mother had been born and trained and once more in a convulsion under the stimulus of nostalgia, but this time without the brain-stunning trauma, her body traversed the gulf in one mental bound to stand in the heart of Hi Li City in the heart of the Forbidden Belt of Worlds.

And the robots having seen what had happened to their charge and feeling themselves to blame, pulled sockets to commit mass self-immolation for having offended against the First Law of Robotics.

Orlando had become a woman there is no denying it. But in every other respect Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity . . . It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman.

Virginia Woolf—Orlando

Martita Borg spent twenty years in Hi Li City and in that time she had many lovers and from nibbling at their subconscious thoughts, unshielded in moments of passion, she learnt many secret things.

For five years she was a dancer like her mother, a mime artist, adept of the five hundred Postures of Meaning and her naked and supple limbs traced intricate and erotic patterns for the delectation of the Great Minds.

Then for five years she was a jewelled one, her entire body, save the sexual and erogenous zones, gold-painted and encrusted with gems and precious stones, her body veined with sapphires and turquoise, arms outlined in garnets and opals, thighs of milk white pearl and blood-red rubies and a face diamond masked and emerald framed. An exquisite gem; finest product of the jeweller's and goldsmith's art; an expensive toy for the treasures of the galaxy.

Then for five years she learnt the two hundred positions of statuary, holding each one without bodily movement, neither eye-blink nor involuntary twitch, for twenty-four hours at one time. In this guise she graced the homes of the rich and famous, a living statue to be admired and eye- and hand-caressed.

Then for five years she was wrapped in costly furs and smuggled by night into the bedrooms of the great—financiers and merchant princes; prime ministers and

presidents; kings and emperors; magicians and priests. And in a silent pillow-talk her mind tendril-like, seeking out, found many secrets of state.

And when the twenty years were up she was not a day older than the thirty one years she had had when she entered the Forbidden Belt of Worlds. For in the Pleasure Worlds the universal law of time-flow are suspended so that a girl's charms may rest unaltered, and of commercial value, for a thousand years. A man can visit Hi Li City and find when he returns to the normal universe that, after a year spent in pleasure, little more than a week has passed in the lives of his contemporaries. For those who can afford it and to whom the invisible barrier; which makes the Belt forbidden to those not desired by the Great Minds; does not exist, the Pleasure Cities are a portal to unbearable pleasure and, while not to immortality, certainly to infinitely extended life.

For the Forbidden Belt of Worlds are the necklace of jewels across the star-milky chart of the Lens, created by the Great Minds of Ilgadin to give pleasure to those chosen by them from the humanoid races of Man. There was Ilgadin and Cerdigawn, Eli and Tracmyr, Tawt and Ewyas, Modren and Manob but fairest of all was Hi Li a planet that was a single city that was a single palace that had a single purpose—to excite and satiate every sensual need ever felt by Man.

It was in a golden palace of soaring domes and minarets, of secret orchard gardens and interlocking courts, of broad-treaded staircases and marble passageways that Marti spent the five years of her apprenticeship as a befurred one and each day twenty handmaidens washed and brushed, combed and massaged to restore the fabric and the beauty of her body so that every evening she went once again virginal to her lovers' tryst.

In ermine she went to President Tamuni and in the drawn out quiet hours of the night that might have lasted a hundred years on that world of subjective time, she learnt of the dying power of the Space Agency of Terra which since the days when it had imprisoned Alan Firmole and controlled the inhabited worlds of the galaxy, had so

slipped that its writ now ran hardly further than the orbit of Pluto.

In chinchilla she went to Chief Warlock Ygythyryn of Ysbaden and from him stole the secrets of the Great Minds, the greatest psychic powers existant till the mind of Martin Borg had flowered into maturity; telepathic voyeurs who created the Pleasure Worlds, forbidden to all men save those of their choice, selected so that in the ecstasy of pleasure their emotions might feed the mental hungers of the Minds.

And in mink she went to King Gustav XIII of Tau Ceti. From his worried thoughts she took a new name—that of Vaspar IV, Emperor of the Thousand Suns—a man of blood and without mercy, conqueror of a quarter of the known galaxy, a conquistador it was beyond the might of any power to stop. A man who bathed every day in a pool prepared from the blood of his enemies; a man who each night demanded a different girl should be sent to him every hour upon the hour because, it was said, a woman deceived him in his youth and ever after he must take his revenge on her sex.

In that her last summer in Hi Li City, when she was in her thirty-first year of age and fifty-first of life, the twentieth and last of Borg's years as a woman, there was a battle fought in the emptiness beyond the Lens. Vaspar IV in alliance with the Brain Dragons of Andromeda challenged the Great Minds of Ilgadin to a trial of strength. In the combat that followed, a psychic torment that verged on warping the very fabric of space-time, the Great Minds were defeated and as their reparation were required to send as tribute to Vaspar ten thousand of the choicest pleasure girls from the Pleasure Belt, each of whom must be an adept in the Hundred Devices of Procreation.

For the first time in their history the Forbidden Worlds felt the tread of lesser men than planetary chiefs as booted soldiery wandered the fragile courts of Hi Li City to seize the Emperor's tribute and the fretted tracery spires of the Pleasure Palace re-echoed not to squeals of delight but

to screams of pain and fear as the girls were ignominiously taken to the waiting space ships of the Emperor's fleet. Among them, her fair and twisted limbs athwart the leather-clad ebony shoulders of a sergeant of infantry, went Marti Borg who by the power of her mind could so easily have escaped but out of curiosity chose instead to stay, to see the man whose name resounded through a million worlds.

For the first time since as a young man of twenty-five she had journeyed to Deneb X, Marti saw the vasty fields of space through the force-screens of a space ship. More, she saw the full puissance of the Emperor's arm. To fetch his tribute the Emperor had sent ten thousand ships, a ship to every girl, and to guard each girl a hundred soldiers. This was but a fraction of his fleet and but a portion of his army. And as they sailed through space the men could point to the banks and clusters of stars and all say, "Those worlds are my master's" or "Those stars belong to my lord."

The capital of his empire was on the fifth planet of Capella and it was an austere and cruel world to suit himself—a planet of blacks and greys and khakis and at the planet's heart a ferrous fortress with steel-blue turrets, defended in depth.

To this castle on this planet came Martita and the girls of Hi Li City and each was taken to a room of her own, comfortable but barren, there to await the Emperor's summons. Twelve nights Marti had to wait but on the thirteenth there came the call that the Emperor would call upon her attendance at some part of that night. Ten hags and crones waited upon her, the Emperor's cast-off mistresses, and their task it was to dress and garland, paint and perfume her for the role she must play. They assured her that from the violence of Vaspar's love-making she must surely die but that by receiving his caresses she would know the greatest honour fate could bestow upon a woman.

Before the doors of his bed-chamber they waited while the ravaged body of the preceding girl was carried from the room and then the bronze panelled doors swung back

and Marti was ushered in. The room was vast and mainly occupied by a bed so massive it might have been made for a being of superhuman proportions. Yet the figure who stood at the bed's foot, though handsomely built, was of normal stature. He beckoned for Marti to come forward and she stepped into the light where he could see her better. He looked upon her with a gaze that rapidly became astonishment and then turned to fear. He said but one word,

"You!"

and then he pitched forward on his face and would have died. Yet even as the life-force fled from his body the brain of Marti Borg leapt forth to take the body in thrall and withdrawing her mind from the feminine form that had lately been his, as from an empty husk, saw through Vaspar's eyes that same form pitch lifeless to the floor. And another newly acquired part of his mind told him that he saw not only self; mother, son and a daughter; die but a girl who long before had seduced him on board ship Tau Ceti bound.

And Vaspar IV, who had been Alan Firmole and was now Martin Borg, threw back his head and laughed.

This eleusis or advent was the most important incident in the Eleusian Mysteries which would explain the myth of Oedipus's arrival at the court of Corinth. Shepherds fostered or paid homage to many other legendary or semi-legendary infant princes such as Hypothous, Pelias, Amphion, Aegisthus, Moses, Romulus and Cyrus, all either exposed on a mountain or else consigned to the waves.

Robert Graves The Myth of Oedipus

Alan Firmole released from the prison hulks of Tau Ceti had burst forth from the nadir of the galaxy to slit the throat of Vaspar III and take that tottering Empire for his own. It was a patchwork patrimony that he made his, three planets under a shaky bureaucracy, in debt and controlled by the Space Agency of Terra. Yet with the glib tongue of his erstwhile profession and with a physical

courage and strength forged and tempered in the Tau Ceti hulks where the weakest go not to the wall but the grave; the new Emperor Vaspar had thrown off Terran control within the year and had gathered to himself a devoted band of followers each of whom was bound to his service by the cast-iron bonds of promised unlimited plunder. With these his house-carls as the nucleus of his fighting force he crashed outward from his handful of worlds in a rampage of unmitigated cruelty. A campaign that to his mind had but one end—to extirpate the memory of a girl who had stolen from him a quarter million credits and the only son and heir he had ever conceived amid an embarrassment of daughters.

In forty years with the aid of the Brain Dragons of Andromeda—alien metaphysical monsters from beyond the Home Lens—he spread his grasp through the length and breadth of the known galaxy, crushing the reeling Agency and taking into direct subjugation five thousand star systems with their attendant planets, twenty-five thousand in number. And for every world under his direct control there were five who, independent in name, owed vows of fealty and tribute in cash to the Emperor.

This eminence of power he used to pursue his blood-feud against the female of the species. One thousand eight hundred and twenty-five women died each year from his attentions and more would have done so but that in the twelfth year of his career of rape there appeared the image of a being who so consumed his memory and was yet so untouched by age that his heart stopped at the sight. So would have perished the body of the most powerful man ever to live had not his son captured his persona, memory and body in their dying spasm and reunited father, mother and son in one brain and body.

Vaspar IV+ watched without passion as the lifeless body of Marti Borg was dragged from the room. If his attendants felt any surprise that the woman had died so soon and without apparent interference they did not dare to show it. Death they expected and death there was.

Vaspar Borg flexed the muscles of his newly acquired

body and, in delight at once more being masculine and in reaction against twenty years in reception of the advances of a succession of men, decided there was no reason why the entertainment should not continue. So he rang the bell for the next victim to be brought and for the rest of the night played with his late colleagues of Hi Li City.

Yet the pastime palled and of much greater interest was the wielding of imperial authority.

It delighted Vaspar Borg to meddle in the affairs of the worlds under his control. To watch the minds of administrators squirm and inwardly rebel as they received the orders they knew they dared not disobey; to order here a planet the recipient of innumerable benefits and there a planet destroyed and cleansed with nuclear fire; to play god with the lives and affairs of the myriad denizens under his sway. To order, condemn, forgive, donate, frown upon, smile upon, rant against, praise, make tremble, that was his pleasure.

His favourite sport it was to transmit telepathically multiple psychic replicas of himself, pseudo-Vaspars to dismay a planet by miraculously unannounced arrivals and inspections.

It was a game worthy of his talents only for a while. In time it also palled and Vaspar who was Marti who was Martin Borg began to reflect once more on the unknown nemesis only he knew was to be his to fulfil.

Once he had thought it sufficient to be an instrument of pleasure. Marti Borg had been in many ways the woman to surpass all women, the greatest adept in the arts of seduction, a woman who could excite the innermost sensual fantasies of men by the light touch of a specially overgrown fingernail.

Then he thought he had found the ultimate destiny in the political control of the galaxy, uniting the boundless powers of his brain and the inherited administrative and military genius of his father.

Yet something told him that the cerebral power that was his brain, which could negate the universal laws of nature and could triumph over the physical structure of matter;

this brain was not given him for him to play at adult party games of statecraft. He began to seek around for some gesture that would for ever mark the galaxy as to his having lived a short time therein.

Idly he began to sift through the three memories that made up his personality and from two sources he received an overwhelming impression, that of extreme cold; of revulsion from a barren and useless speck of rock that called itself Borg IV. It was a planet that now lay in his domain, an unregarded and virtually unwanted piece of real estate and in his mind grew the germ of an idea—a cosmic joke. As yet he did not see it as the ultimate aim of his being but in it he saw a useful exercise to try out the scope of his powers—to practice for the day when he would know what it was he had to do. He would try to warm up that epitome of cold and as an epitaph to his parents give it tropical heat. If he could transform the everyday objects around him; if he could tamper with and permanently alter the atomic structure of his own self then he saw no reason why he could not alter in some fractional way the structure of a very minor sun.

Once more but on this occasion as a normal event perfected over the years and not as a palsied convulsion, he prepared to fling his body through the continuum of space. From the memories he had from his parents he visualised and held a picture of the desired planet. Then the moebius strip revolved and he was there.

Ther alle harmes been passed of this present lyf; ther as the body of man that whilom was foul and derk; is more clear than the sonne; ther the body that whilom was syk, freyle and fieble is immortal and so strong and so hale that ther may be nothyng impeyren it.

Chaucer The Parson's Tale

If the planetoid of Martin Borg's infancy was insubstantial, the planet of his conception was diametrically opposite. A slate grey sky lowered over the black and white of snowfields and exposed granite. Overhead the

faintest reddish glow in the grey murk betokened the existence of Borg sol.

Vaspar stood thigh deep in snow. It was somewhat cold and damp, but his metabolic control boosted his body heat to the extent that the snow melted ten yards around.

He sent out the first probing fingers of his mind.

He concentrated his thoughts upon Borg sol and instead of that dull-red orb saw the molecules and electrons describing their paths in the emptiness. Then he lashed at the sun's structure with his mind, fragmenting atoms, whirling electrons faster so that as a charred stick when blown upon comes slowly bursting back to flame, so slowly did Borg sol begin to brighten, to glow cherry-red, then orange and so through the spectrum through yellow to burning blue-white. The clouds fled, the snows melted and evaporated to fall as rain, evaporated and fell again and again in a decreasing cycle until all moisture was gone and the surface of Borg IV baked, an arid desert beneath the searing sun.

And in his success, unknowing, Martin Borg stumbled into conflict with a mind as beyond his understanding as is the brain of a man beyond the comprehension of a flea. Or should we call It a mind? It was rather the sum total of energies which keep the universe in being: It was an awareness of gravities and orbits and solar stresses: It was, to repeat in human terms, the equivalent of a Cosmic Mind. It was a Mind which mostly slept uncaring in the comfort of Its own well-being, concerned only that what should be, should be.

So the activity of Martin Borg, in interfering with the status of Borg sol became a rude awakening. For while It objected little on the whole to human activity which was minute in its effect and ephemeral in its influence; this particular interference struck at the very reason of Its being. While the everyday happenings of the inhabited worlds were like a rash of small pimples which could be disregarded with impunity, the change in the nature of Borg sol was a cancer in the cosmic corpus.

As idly as a horse flicking its tail at a bothersome fly the Mind corrected the error and restored Borg sol to impotent

rubescence. Once again Martin Borg whipped up the atomic structure into fiery life. Then, harder yet, the Mind clamped down to restore the status quo and yet once more Martin Borg intensified his effort. And so the tussle began, swinging the temperature of Borg sol back and forth between livid heat and frigid cold.

It was a battle that the Cosmic Guardian would inevitably have won. But it would take It a long time and the conflict was repetitious and thus boring. It found it more expedient to evade the battle by more subtle means. Since It was not restricted by the temporal dimension of the here and now as was Martin, the Mind chose to allow Martin his hot Borg sol, restoring the balance of the universe by the comparable cooling of a distant hot star, but denying Martin his triumph by effecting the change in the past. Surveying the field of Time of which It was aware It chose that second which coincided with the creation of Borg sol and a certain hot sun which, since it has never been discovered by Man, we shall call X for the sake of this dissertation. Having done so It transposed their functions so that sol X became and is a red dwarf and, having served its purpose, disappears from our view.

Borg sol however prospered in white-hot intensity and its planets—in particular its fourth—flourished under its rays. Many millenia after, its discoverer, Lieutenant-Commander Borgheim, was justifiably pleased with his discovery and received a more than adequate Settlement Award from the Space Agency of Terra for the colonial rights. And a very happy colony was Borg IV. So content with their climatic paradise were the colonists that a certain dope peddlar by name Alan Firmole was totally unable to dispose of his wares on the planet. Discouraged by his failure and enervated by the climate Firmole offered little more than token resistance to his arrest by the Borgian Police.

An old legend said that the rays of Borg sol had a beneficial effect on the human character and certainly it was a reformed Alan Firmole who was released after a year's term of imprisonment in Borg City Prison. Shortly after his release he met an ex-dancer called Marti Marta

who had so liked the planet that she had left the protection of one Walter Picksnell, in whose entourage she had been travelling, in order to settle down at last on this friendly world.

These two reformed characters met then and liked one another. And liking one another and having a mutual desire to settle down they were eventually married. The fruit of this union was a son whom they called Martin after his mother. He was a fine and handsome boy whom they loved dearly and whom they reared with every care.

That was fifty two years ago but Martin Firmole lives on Borg IV still, as you can see if you call in at the offices of the Franscetti Freight Co. Outwardly he seems a happy, intelligent man but his wife could tell you that there are times when he is almost neurotically moody. You see, for the past twenty-five years he has been getting the recurring thought that there was something he was intending to do, but for the life of him he can't remember what it was.

JAMES COLVIN

THE LAST TWO men alive came out of the Lapp tent they had just raided for provisions.

"She's been here before us," said Nilsson. "It looks like she got the best of what there was."

Hallner shrugged. He had eaten so little for so long that food no longer held any great importance for him.

He looked about him. Lapp *kata* wigwams of wood and hides were spread around the immediate area of dry ground. Valuable skins had been left out to cure, reindeer horns to bleach, the doors unfastened so that anyone might enter the deserted homes.

Hallner rather regretted the passing of the Lapps. They had had no part in the catastrophe, no interest in wars or violence or competition. Yet they had been herded to the shelters with everyone else. And, like everyone else, they had perished either by direct bombing, radiation poisoning or asphyxiation.

He and Nilsson had been in a forgotten meteorological station close to the Norwegian border. When they finally repaired their radio, the worst was over. Fall-out had by this time finished off the tribesmen in Indonesian jungles,

the workers in remote districts of China, the hill-billies in the Rockies, the crofters in Scotland. Only freak weather conditions, which had been part of their reason for visiting the station earlier in the year, had so far prevented the lethal rain from falling in this area of Swedish Lappland.

They had known themselves, perhaps instinctively, to be the last two human-beings alive, until Nilsson found the girl's tracks coming from the south and heading north. Who she was, how she'd escaped, they couldn't guess, but they had changed their direction from north-east to north and began to follow. Two days later they had found the Lapp camp.

Now they stared ahead of them at the range of ancient mountains. It was three a.m., but the sun still hung a bloody spread on the horizon, for it was summer—the six-week summer of the Arctic when the sun never fully set, when the snows of the mountains melted and ran down to form the rivers, lakes and marshes of the lowlands where only the occasional Lapp camp, or the muddy scar of a broad reindeer path, told of the presence of the few men who lived here during the winter months.

Suddenly, as he looked away from the range, the camp aroused some emotion akin to pity in Hallner's mind. He remembered the despair of the dying man who had told them, on his radio, what had happened to the world.

Nilsson had entered another hut and came out shaking a packet of raisins. "Just what we need," he said.

"Good," said Hallner, and he sighed inaudibly. The clean, orderly nature of the little primitive village was spoiled for him by the sight he had witnessed earlier at the stream which ran through the camp. There had been simple drinking cups of clay or bone side by side with an aluminium dish and an empty Chase and Sanborne coffee jar, a cheap plastic plate and a broken toy car.

"Shall we go?" Nilsson said, and began to make his way out of the camp.

Not without certain trepidation, Hallner followed behind his friend who marched towards the mountains without looking back or even from side to side.

Nilsson had a goal and, rather than sit down, brood and

die when the inescapable finally happened, Hallner was prepared to go along with him on this quest for the girl.

And, he admitted, there was a faint chance that if the winds continued to favour them, they might have a chance of life. In which case there was a logical reason for Nilsson's obsessional tracking of the woman.

His friend was impatient of his wish to walk slowly and savour the atmosphere of the country which seemed so detached and removed, uninvolved with him, disdainful. That there were things which had no emotional relationship with him, had given him a slight surprise at first, and even now he walked the marshy ground with a feeling of abusing privacy, of destroying the sanctity of a place where there was so little hint of humanity; where men had been rare and had not been numerous or frequent enough visitors to have left the aura of their passing behind them.

So it was with a certain shock that he later observed the print of small rubber soles on the flat mud near a river.

"She's still ahead of us," said Nilsson, pleased at this sign, "and not so very far ahead. Little more than a day. We're catching up."

Suddenly, he realised that he was displeased by the presence of the bootprints, almost resentful of Nilsson's recognition of their being there when, alone, he might have ignored them. He reflected that Nilsson's complete acceptance of the sex of the boots' wearer was entirely founded on his own wishes.

The river poured down towards the flat lake on their left, clear, bright melted snow from the mountains. Brown, sun-dried rocks stood out of it, irregularly spaced, irregularly contoured, affording them a means of crossing the swift waters.

There were many such rivers, running down the slopes of the foothills like silver veins to fill the lakes and spread them further over the marshland. There were hills on the plateau where trees crowded together, fir and silver birch, like survivors of a flood jostling for a place on the high

ground. There were ridges which sometimes hid sight of the tall mountains in front of them, green with grass and reeds, studded with gorse.

He had never been so far into mountain country before and this range was one of the oldest in the world; there were no sharp peaks as in the Alps. These were worn and solid and they had lived through eons of change and metamorphosis to have earned their right to solitude, to permanency.

Snow still spattered their sides like galaxies against the grey-green moss and rock. Snow fields softened their lines.

Nilsson was already crossing the river, jumping nimbly from rock to rock, his film-star's profile sometimes silhouetted against the clear, sharp sky, the pack on his back like Christian's load in the Pilgrim's Progress. Hallner smiled to himself. Only indirectly was Nilsson heading for salvation.

Now he followed.

He balanced himself in his flat, leather-soled boots and sprang from the first rock to the second, righted his balance again and sprang to the next. The river boiled around the rocks, rushing towards the lake, to lose itself in the larger waters. He jumped again, slipped and was up to his knees in the ice-cold torrent. He raised his small knapsack over his head and, careless now, did not bother to clamber back to the rocks, but pushed on, waist-deep, through the freezing river. He came gasping to the bank and was helped to dry land by Nilsson who shook his head and laughed.

"You're hopeless!"

"It's all right," he said, "the sun will dry me out soon."

But both had walked a considerable distance and both were tiring. The sun had now risen, round and hazy red in the pale, cold sky, but it was still difficult to gauge the passage of the hours. This, also, added to the detached air of timelessness which the mountains and the plateaux possessed. There was no night—only a slight alteration in the quality of the day. And although the heat was ninety degrees fahrenheit, the sky still looked cold, for it took more than the brief six weeks of summer to change the character of this wintery Jotunheim.

He thought of Jotunheim, the Land of Giants, and understood the better the myths of his ancestors with their accent on man's impermanency—the mortality of their very gods, their bleak worship of the forces of nature. Only here could he appreciate that the life span of the world itself might be infinite, but the life span of its denizens was necessarily subject to inevitable metamorphosis and eventual death. And, as he thought, his impression of the country changed so that instead of the feeling of invading sanctified ground, he felt as if a privilege had been granted him and he had been allowed, for a few moments of his short life, to experience eternity.

The mountains themselves might crumble in time, the planet cease to exist, but that it would be reincarnated he was certain. And this gave him humility and hope for his own life and, for the first time, he began to think that he might have a purpose in continuing to live, after all.

He did not dwell on the idea, since there was no need to.

They came with relief to a dry place where they lighted a fire and cooked the last of their bacon in their strong metal frying pan. They ate their food and cleaned the pan with ashes from the fire, and he took it down to the nearest river and rinsed it, stooping to drink a little, not too much, since he had learned from his mistake earlier, for the water could be like a drug so that one craved to drink more and more until exhausted.

He realised, vaguely, that they had to keep as fit as possible. For one of them to come to harm could mean danger for them both. But the thought meant little. There was no sense of danger here.

He slept and, before he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep, he had a peculiar impression of being at once vast and tiny. His eyes closed, his body relaxed, he felt so big that the atoms of his body, in relation to the universe, hardly had existence, that the universe had become an unobservable electron, present but unseen. And yet, intratemporally, he had the impression that he was as small as an electron so that he existed in a gulf, a vacuum containing no matter whatsoever.

A mystic, perhaps, would have taken this for some holy experience, but he could do no more than accept it, feeling no need to interpret it. Then he slept.

Next morning, Nilsson showed him a map he had found in the village.

"That's where she's going," he said, pointing at a mountain in the distance. "It's the highest in this section and the second highest in the entire range. Wonder why she'd want to climb a mountain?"

Hallner shook his head.

Nilsson frowned. "You're in a funny mood. Think you won't have a chance with the girl?" When Hallner didn't answer, Nilsson said impatiently, "Maybe she's got some idea that she's safer on top of a mountain. With luck, we'll find out soon. Ready to go?"

Hallner nodded.

They moved on in silence.

The range was discernibly closer, now, and Hallner could look at individual mountains. Although looming over the others, the one they headed for looked squat, solid, somehow older than the rest, even.

For a while they were forced to concentrate on the ground immediately in front of them, for it had become little more than thick mud which oozed over their boots and threatened to pull them down, to join, perhaps, the remains of prehistoric saurians which lay many feet below.

Nilsson said little and Hallner was glad that no demands were made on him.

It was as if the edge of the world lay beyond the last ragged pile of mountains, or as if they had left Earth and were in a concave saucer surrounded by mountains, containing only the trees and the lakes, marshes and hills.

He had the feeling that this place was so inviolable, so invulnerable, miles from the habitation of men so that for the first time he fully realised that men had ceased to exist along with their artifacts. It was as if they had never really existed at all or that their spell of dominance had appeared and disappeared in practically the same moment of time.

But now, for the first time since he had heard the hysteri-

cal voice on the radio, he felt some stirring of his old feeling return as he stared at the great mountain, heavy and huge against the ice-blue sky. But it was transformed. Ambition had become the summit, reward the silence, the peace that waited at the peak. Curiosity was the desire to discover the cause of a freakish colouring half-way up the mountain and fear did not exist for in these enigmatic mountains there was no uncertainty. A vast, wall-less womb with the infinite sky curving above and the richly-coloured scenery, blues, whites, browns and greens, surrounding them, complete, cutting them off from even the sight of the ruined outside world.

It was a snow-splashed paradise where well-fed wolves left the carcasses of their prey to lap at the pure water of the rivers. A wilderness replete with life, with lemming, reindeer, wolverine, wolf and even bear, with lakes swarming with fresh-water herring and the air a silent gulf above them to set off the smack of a hawk's wing. Night could not fall and so the potential dangers of savage wild-life, which could not be felt in the vastness of a world where there was room for everything, could never be realised.

Occasionally, they would discover a slain reindeer, bones dull and white, its hide tattered and perishing, and they would feel no horror, no emotion at all, for although its obvious killer, the wolverine, was a cruel beast, destroying often for the sake of destroying, the wolverine was not aware of its crime and therefore it was no crime at all.

Everything here was self-sufficient, moulded by fate, by circumstance, but since it did not analyse, since it accepted itself and its conditions without question, it was therefore more complete than the men who walked and stumbled across its uncompromising terrain.

At length they came to the sloping, grass-covered roots of the mountain and he trembled with emotion to see it rising so high above him, the grass fading, parting to reveal the tumbled rock and the rock vanishing higher up beneath banks of snow.

"She will have taken the easiest face," Nilsson decided, looking at the map he had found in the camp. "It will mean crossing two snow-fields."

They rested on the last of the grass. And he looked down over the country through which they had passed, unable to talk or describe his feelings. It possessed no horizon, for mountains were on all sides and within the mountains he saw rivers and lakes, tree-covered hills, all of which had taken on fresh, brighter colourings, the lakes reflecting the red of the sun and the blue of the sky and giving them subtly different qualities.

He was glad they were taking the easiest face for he felt no need, here, to test or to temper himself.

For a while he felt complete with the country, ready to climb upwards because he would rather do so and because the view from the peak would also be different, add, perhaps to the fullness of his experience.

He realised, as they got up, that this was not what Nilsson was feeling. Hallner had almost forgotten about the girl.

They began to climb. It was tiring, but not difficult for initially the slope was gradual, less than forty-five degrees. They came to the first snow field which was slightly below them, climbed downwards carefully, but with relief.

Nilsson had taken a stick from the Lapp camp. He took a step forward, pressing the stick into the snow ahead of him, took another step, pressed the stick down again.

Hallner followed, treading cautiously in his friend's footsteps, little pieces of frozen snow falling into his boots. He knew that Nilsson was trying to judge the snow field's thickness. Below it a deep river coursed and he thought he heard its musical rushing beneath his feet. He noted, also, that his feet now felt frozen and uncomfortable.

Very slowly they crossed the snow-field and at length, after a long time, they were safely across and sat down to rest for a while, preparing for the steeper climb ahead.

Nilsson eased his pack off his shoulders and leaned against it, staring back at the field.

"No tracks," he mused. "Perhaps she crossed further down."

"Perhaps she didn't come here after all." Hallner spoke with effort. He was not really interested.

"Don't be a fool." Nilsson rose and hefted his pack onto his back again.

They climbed over the sharp rocks separating the two snow-fields and once again underwent the danger of crossing the second field.

Hallner sat down to rest again, but Nilsson climbed on. After a few moments, Hallner followed and saw that Nilsson had stopped and was frowning at the folded map in his hand.

When he reached Nilsson he saw that the mountain now curved upwards around a deep, wide indentation. Across this, a similar curve went up towards the summit. It looked a decidedly easier climb than the one which faced them.

Nilsson swore.

"The damned map's misled us—or else the position of the fields has altered. We've climbed the wrong face."

"Should we go back down again?" Hallner asked uninterestedly.

"No—there's not much difference—we'd have still lost a lot of time."

Where the two curves joined, there was a ridge high above them which would take them across to the face which they should have climbed. This was getting close to the peak, so that, in fact, there would be no advantage even when they reached the other side.

"No wonder we missed her tracks," Nilsson said pettishly. "She'll be at the summit by now."

"How do you know she climbed this mountain?" Hallner wondered why he had not considered this earlier.

Nilsson waved the map. "You don't think Lapps need these? No—*she* left it behind."

"Oh . . ." Hallner stared down at the raw, tumbling rocks which formed an almost sheer drop beneath his feet.

"No more resting," Nilsson said. "We've got a lot of time to make up."

He followed behind Nilsson who foolishly expended his energy in swift, savage ascents and was showing obvious signs of exhaustion before they ever reached the ridge.

Unperturbed by the changed situation, Hallner climbed

after him, slowly and steadily. The ascent was taking longer, was more difficult and he, also, was tired, but he possessed no sense of despair.

Panting, Nilsson waited for him on a rock close to the ridge, which formed a narrow strip of jumbled rocks slanting upwards towards the peak. On one side of it was an almost sheer drop going down more than a hundred feet, and on the other the rocky sides sloped steeply down to be submerged in a dazzling expanse of faintly creaking ice—a glacier.

"I'm going to have to leave you behind if you don't move faster," Nilsson panted.

Hallner put his head slightly on one side and peered up the mountain. Silently, he pointed.

"God! Everything's against us, today," Nilsson kicked at a loose piece of rock and sent it out into space. It curved and plummeted down, but they could not see or hear it fall.

The mist, which Hallner had noted, came rolling swiftly towards them, obscuring the other peaks, boiling in across the range.

"Will it affect us?" Hallner asked.

"It's sure to!"

"How long will it stay?"

"A few minutes or several hours, it's impossible to tell. If we stay where we are we could very well freeze to death. If we go on there's a chance of reaching the summit and getting above it. Willing to risk it?"

This last remark was a sneering challenge.

"Why yes, of course," Hallner said.

Now that the fact had been mentioned, he noted for the first time that he was cold. But the coldness was not uncomfortable.

They had no ropes, no climbing equipment of any kind, and even his boots were flat-soled city boots. As the mist poured in, its grey, shifting mass limiting vision almost utterly at times, they climbed on, keeping together by shouts.

Once, he could hardly see at all, reached a rock, felt about it with his boot, put his weight on the rock, slipped,

clung to the rock and felt both feet go sliding free in space just as the mist parted momentarily to show him the creaking glacier far below him. And something else—a black, spread-out shadow blemishing the pure expanse of ice.

He scrabbled at the rock with his toes, trying to swing himself back to the main part of the ridge, got an insecure toe-hold and flung himself sideways to the comparative safety of the narrow causeway. He breathed quickly and shallowly and shook with reaction. Then he arose and continued on up the slanting ridge.

A while later, when the main thickness of the mist had rolled past and now lay above the glacier, he saw that they had crossed the ridge and were on the other side without his having realised it.

He could now see Nilsson climbing with obvious difficulty towards what he had called the 'false summit'. The real summit could not be seen, was hidden by the other, but there was now only another hundred feet to climb.

They rested on the false summit, unable to see much that was below them for, although the mist was thinner, it was thick enough to hide most of the surrounding mountains. Sometimes it would part so that they could see fragments of mountains, patches of distant lakes, but little else.

Hallner looked at Nilsson. The other man's handsome face had taken on a set, obstinate look. One hand was bleeding badly.

"Are you all right?" Hallner nodded his head towards the bleeding hand.

"Yes!"

Hallner lost interest since it was evident he could not help Nilsson in his present mood.

He noted that the mist had penetrated his thin jacket and his whole body was damp and chilled. His own hands were torn and grazed and his body was bruised, aching, but he was still not discomforted. He allowed Nilsson to start off first and then forced himself on the last stage of the climb.

By the time he reached the snowless summit, the air was

bright, the mist had disappeared and the sun shone in the clear sky.

He flung himself down close to Nilsson who was again peering at his map.

He lay panting, sprawled awkwardly on the rock and stared out over the world.

There was nothing to say. The scene itself, although magnificent, was not what stopped him from talking, stopped his mind from reasoning, as if time had come to a standstill, as if the passage of the planet through space had been halted. He existed, like a monument, petrified, unreasoning, absorbing. He drank in eternity.

Why hadn't the dead human race realised this? It was only necessary to exist, not to be trying constantly to prove you existed when the fact was plain.

Plain to him, he realised, because he had climbed a mountain. This knowledge was his reward. He had not received any ability to think with greater clarity, or a vision to reveal the secret of the universe, or an experience of ecstacy. He had been given, by himself, by his own action, insensate peace, the infinite tranquillity of *existing*.

Nilsson's harsh, disappointed tones invaded this peace.

"I could have sworn she would climb up here. Maybe she did. Maybe we were too late and she's gone back down again?"

Hallner remembered the mark he had seen on the glacier. Now he knew what it had been.

"I saw something back on the ridge," he said. "On the glacier. A human figure, I think."

"What? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know."

"Was she alive? Think of the importance of this—if she is alive we can start the human race all over again. What's the matter with you, Hallner? Have you gone crazy with shock or something? *Was she alive*!"

"Perhaps—I don't know."

"You don't—" Nilsson snarled in disbelief and began scrabbling back the way he had come.

"You heartless bastard! Supposing she's hurt—injured!"

Hallner watched Nilsson go cursing and stumbling,

sometimes falling, on his over-rapid descent of the mountain. He saw him rip off his pack and fling it aside, nearly staggering over the ridge as he began to climb down it.

Hallner thought dispassionately that Nilsson would kill himself if he continued so heedlessly.

Then he returned his gaze to the distant lakes and trees below him.

He lay on the peak of the mountain, sharing its existence. He was immobile, he did not even blink as he took in the view. It seemed that he was part of the rock, part of the mountain itself.

A little later there came an aching yell which died away into the silence. But Hallner did not hear it, just as the mountain did not hear it.

The last man alive peacefully waited for death.

Originally in Nocturne I as *Le Montagne*

Fact

BIOLOGICAL ELECTRICITY

ELECTRICITY GENERATED SPONTANEOUSLY by living creatures as part of their natural life processes is proving a fascinating study for scientists. The day is still far away when such biologically generated electricity can have any commercial application. But researchers already have come a long way toward understanding the intricate chemical processes through which electricity is released in living cells of humans, animals and plants, and how this electrical output might be utilised.

A scientist recently proposed jokingly that American astronauts on very long flights take along electric eels and other fish capable of discharging electricity at will. The astronauts would then have durable "batteries" that needed no charging—just feeding. Jesting apart, it is by no means impossible that a modified version of the idea may eventually come into use.

Muscle and nerve action in humans also involves electrical charges. Physicians nowadays use electrodes to pick up and record the electrical activity of the heart and brain.

In 1963, scientists of the General Electric Company's Space Sciences Laboratory at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, demonstrated the use of biological electricity in a simple, painless experiment with a laboratory rat. They implanted electrodes into the rat's abdominal cavity. A current of 155 microwatts generated by the rat's body was led from these electrodes by a thin insulated wire through the skin and used to power a radio transmitter.

The experiment may lead to the development of body-powered devices which could be implanted into humans together with tiny transmitters. Doctors could monitor the "broadcasts" to check on physical functions even when the patient was asleep.

Perhaps the most exciting and promising experiments with "bio-electricity" have been conducted with microscopic animals—bacteria. Dr. Frederic Sisler of Washington, D.C., placed a certain variety of common, harmless, bacteria in a test tube containing seawater. He fed them sugar, then inserted a pair of electrodes. A weak, but steady flow of current emerged.

With subsequent improvements by Dr. Robert I. Sarbacher of the General Scientific Corporation in Washington, this bacteria-driven "battery," or fuel cell, is now experimentally powering a small light bulb, a tiny transistor radio and a model boat.

A similar fuel cell is now available inexpensively in America to schools. This pilot model, in which bacteria are nurtured with rice husks and water, was developed by C. M. Norton and Lyle D. Atkins of San Antonio, Texas, and is sold by the Bulk Distributors Corporation, Tacoma, Washington.

Meanwhile, Drs. Sisler and Sarbacher are attempting to develop stronger biological batteries to power navigational buoys, or even furnish electricity to light, heat and air-condition buildings or drive industrial machinery.

Theoretically, there is no limit on the size of output of such batteries or on their longevity. The bacteria in the

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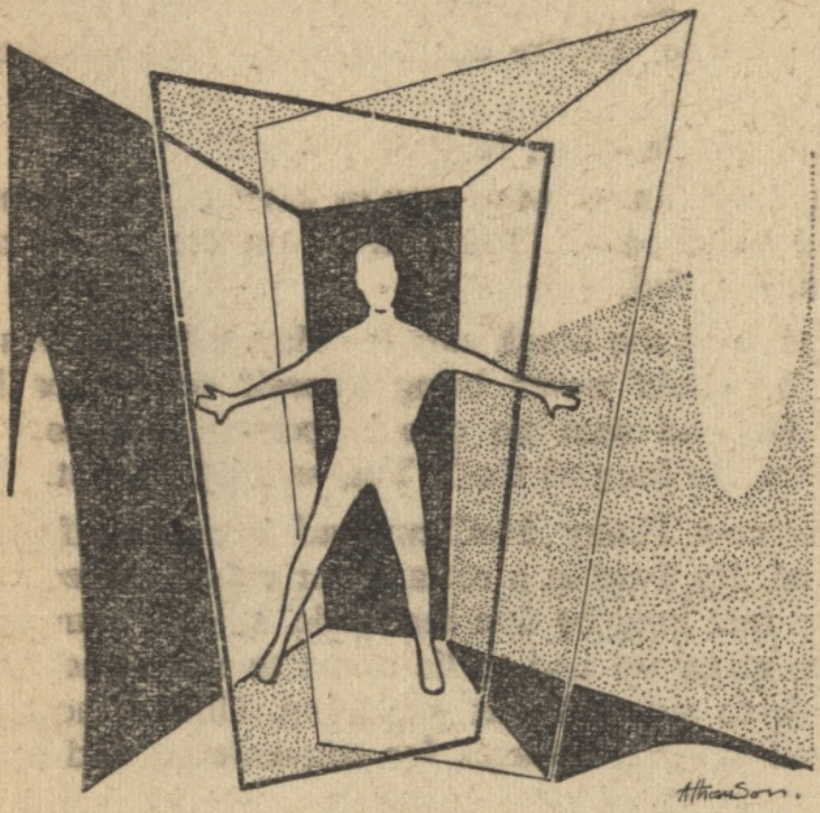
It was a kind of vicarious circle . . .

BOX



Richard Wilson

LOVE CAME TO Harry McCann for the first time in five years when he met Maria Lavery. He thought of it as a meeting although their contact was by televideophone.

Maria, an artists' agent, excited Harry as none of her models had. Possibly this was because Harry, as an artist, was no longer affected in any way except professionally by the models' commercialized beauty.

"I've got to see you, Maria," he told her one day, intoxicated anew by the flowing white gold of her hair and by the worldly-wise mind he imagined was behind the pale green eyes.

"You see me now, Mac." She gave him a slow mocking

smile, perfectly-painted crimson lips half-revealing not-quite-perfect white teeth. "We mustn't mix business and pleasure."

A wave of desire swept him. "I'm coming over," he said decisively.

Maria laughed. "Oh, no, you're not," she said. "Besides, I've just made an appointment for you with Exotic Zelda, the form divine. You're not forgetting your deadline, are you?"

"Damn the deadline. It's you I want."

"You don't know what you're saying, Mac," she told him and switched off. The colours on the screen ran together and faded.

He stared at the blank square. Maybe Maria was right. Maybe he could never bring himself to go see her in person. He had seen no one in person for—how long? Five years. As long as that? Yes, as long as that.

Up to now Harry McCann had been a self-sufficient individual. He lived in a rectangular cubicle seven feet tall by seven feet long by five feet wide. It gave him room in which to stand up and to lie down to sleep and to reach from side to side without stretching. Unlike most people who lived in such cubicles for convenience and economy in an overcrowded city, Harry had not been out of his for five of his thirty-five years.

Harry was an artist by self-definition, an illustrator by trade. Thanks to the televideophone he didn't have to leave his miniaturized apartment to discuss assignments with an editor or to have his roughs approved. And when an illustration was finished, he fed it into the fax at his right elbow and it was delivered almost instantly, colour-perfect.

The cheques, and they were big ones, that paid for his work were delivered with the rest of his mail by the pneumatic tube which also brought him his food, mostly precooked meals from the U-Order in the same building. A disposall, which swung into the wall when not needed, took away all kinds of waste in a highly sanitary manner.

When Harry wanted a glimpse of the outside world he turned a switch that connected his screen with one of the

two scanners at the top of the apartment house. One panned leisurely around the horizon, looking at the city and the countryside beyond. The other was focused on a mountain peak across a rivered plain and on a great slice of western sky. At night, of course, he had the stars.

When Harry was in the mood for something more active he used the Triveo-Plus, also known as the tactiloscope or dreamies. Through the magic of TP (available at extra cost) he had climbed Everest and Tupungato, breathing normally. He had explored the Antarctic and the Sahara, in 72-degree comfort. He had skin-dived, dry, off the Great Barrier Reef. He had spelunked, without anxiety, in Fingal's Cave and Aggtelek and Devil's Hole. And, on a bootleg channel (available at extortionate cost) he had lain in the arms of five hundred variegated young women. That averaged out, over five years, to two a week. Harry McCann felt that in his sex life, as in his other habits, he was a temperate man.

Harry's day had started at 10 a.m., as usual. At that hour his chronall began to play Jim Robinson's recording of *Ice Cream*. Nothing could be more conducive to a happy awakening than this fine New Orleans frolic. Braced by jazz, Harry dialled the U-Order for coffee and a Danish. (On Wednesdays, as a sop to his thickening waist, he dialled only a tall orange juice.) This done, he grasped his chair-bed by the bellows and transformed it for the day's work—legs down, back up. There was no bed-clothing to put away ; the thermostat saw that the temperature was unchanged the twenty-four hours through. Nor was there any dressing ; he slept and worked naked.

With the quartered Danish eaten and the coffee half-drunk, it was time for business. Harry pulled a loose smock over his torso, lit a DeMalig cigarette and, as its smoke climbed unhurriedly but surely to the out-duct, dialled Maria Lavery.

Their conversation frustratingly finished, he dialled Exotic Zelda and waited in irritation as she prepared to pose for him. Zelda, like certain others among his models, took liberties with decorum, emboldened or titillated by

the fact that he was safely at the end of an electronic hookup.

His screen showed her littered apartment. Two glasses and a decanter implied that she had entertained the night before. A flimsy pile of underclothing lay on the floor. He heard Zelda's shower through the open door of her bathroom.

She appeared in a moment, towelling herself with contrived carelessness, giving him glimpses of the anatomy which she would later arrange for him in a more formal pose.

Damn the woman, he thought. How much more enticing were the imagined charms of Maria Lavery, who had appeared on his screen only in cameo—head, shoulders and the beginning of a bosom.

Exotic Zelda had now frankly dropped the towel and was fingering something on her right hip. A pimple, probably, Harry thought in distaste.

"Where do you want the body?" she asked.

He swallowed a retort that came to mind and told her she could put it in a swim suit. "This is for a family magazine," he said.

"Oh," she said. "When did you get out of the titty-trade?"

Harry didn't answer that. He hated vulgarity in women. He began to sketch in background while she got into a swim suit. He didn't care to watch Zelda wriggling and poking various pieces of flesh into place under the too-tight garment.

He told her how he wanted her to stand and she posed in silence. She was a good model, if an unlovely personality. He worked fast and she was surprised when he told her they were finished.

"Send me a quick cheque, honey," she said. "The rent's due."

"Oh," he said maliciously, "you pay your own rent?"

Her expression turned ugly. "Just for that I'm charging you at the nude rate. You saw enough."

"Nobody asked for your free show," he said, disgusted.

"You'll get the standard fee. If you don't like it I'll be more than glad to discuss it with your union. They're not too happy with your sort."

"*My* sort! What do you mean by that, you—you—" Angrily she ripped off her swim suit and hurled it across the room. "—you *half-man*!"

Harry switched off her tirade, trembling. She had upset him more than he thought possible. Though he was anxious to finish the illustration he knew he'd botch it if he went on immediately.

He angled his chair-bed to horizontal and lay back. He spun the tape of his chronall to some Erik Satie. The monotonous music relaxed him, as it always did, and soon he was able to work.

By the time he had finished the job and fed it into the fax it was mid-afternoon. He felt sweaty and hot and wondered why no one had designed a really efficient humidifier, one that would automatically compensate for the tenant's activity. Unless he remembered to adjust it himself, and that was one more nuisance, it was too humid when he worked and too dry when he slept.

And now, he thought as he ran water to fill the lower half of his cubicle, it would be too humid. His electronic equipment would get damp and his tools soggy in spite of the sheet of plastisorb he raised like a tent when he bathed. There was still much that was inefficient in these so-called efficiency flats, he reflected.

Dry again and refreshed, he dialled Maria Lavery. She came into focus on the colour screen, lovely, desirable.

"Hello, Mac," she said. "Did Zelda behave herself?"

"She called me a half-man."

"Well, that's all she ever sees of you, isn't it?"

"Damn Zelda. I didn't call to talk shop."

"No? What did you call for?" Maria was in cameo again. She must be sitting at her desk. Behind her he could see a cozy living room, a couch at the far end, a cocktail table in front of it. To the side, in one wall, was a fireplace. Against the other was a player and a tape console.

"I called to see you, to talk to you," Harry said. How pleasant it would be to sit close beside her on the couch, two icy drinks on the table before them, passionate music welling out of the speaker . . . I'm crazy about you, Maria."

"Oh, sure. After half a dozen of these intimate electronic hookups? You really expect me to believe that?"

He imagined the lights dimmed in the room behind her, the drinks drunk, the music now barely audible as she put her platinum head against his shoulder, and . . .

"I've *got* to come over, Maria!" he said. "It's torture to see you there, apparently so close, yet beyond reach."

"Maybe I prefer it that way."

"That would be too cruel of you. Let me visit you and—"

"And what?" she said sharply. "Aren't you overlooking a few preliminaries? It used to be customary to ask a girl out to dinner first, before ogling her couch." She glanced over her shoulder. "Or am I too foolish and old-fashioned a girl?"

He hastened to assure her that she was neither. But he realized that his mind had vaulted completely over the preliminaries, as she called them. His mind, knowing his phobia, or its, had pictured only the desired result—the two of them close together on the couch in the dim room. Shielding him from reality, it had ignored the trauma that was sure to descend the instant he walked through his doorway. It had simply catapulted him, without overture, into the haven of the girl's apartment where, insulated by alcohol, music and romance, he would be as secure as if he were in the tight little limited world of his seven-by-seven-by-five cubicle.

But Maria's mocking question brought an eruption of complications. How indeed was he to bridge the physical gap between them without revealing his agoraphobia?

Then, surprisingly, Maria Lavery bridged it for him.

"I know your problem, Mac, and I shouldn't have joked about it," she said. Her pale green eyes seemed to be brimming with sympathy. "Of course you can't take me out to dinner. I realize that."

"But how—?"

"Oh, Mac, everybody in our crowd knows your so-called secret."

He looked down, ashamed.

She went on quickly: "I'd be delighted to have you up for dinner—I shouldn't have been so mean—but of course I realize that's impossible."

"You would?" he said, looking up quickly. "You mean that?"

"Why, certainly." But she said it uncertainly, as if she might have gone too far.

"Right now?" he asked, but there was fear in his eyes, which perhaps emboldened her to say heartily: "Of course! *Any* time."

It was plain to see now that he was terrified. Don Juan had become Caspar Milquetoast. Her intuition having told her this, Maria, feeling completely safe, teased him maliciously:

"Come up right now, Mac. This afternoon. Do you like Martinis?"

Harry McCann, looking miserable, said: "Thanks, Maria, you've been an angel. I—I'll think about it." He switched off quickly.

But within minutes, without her cool gaze to witness his anguish, Harry had regained his nerve. He was determined to end his five years of isolation and to call on Maria Lavery that very afternoon, by cocktail time.

The game was well worth it, if she were the candle.

First of all, his legs were weak. After half a decade of disuse they were reluctant to carry him.

This turned out to be good. Making his legs go took his mind off worse problems and he was out of his cubicle and out of his building and half a dozen blocks across town before he realized the magnitude of his achievement. Then he had that success to spur him to further efforts and he was able to carry on creditably, although he did have a tendency to avoid people's glances and to duck into doorways every so often to keep the sky and the taller buildings from falling on him.

Finally, terrors later, he reached her apartment house. Sweating, breathless, but shaking with relief, he closed the street door behind him.

It was here in the cool, mercifully confined and empty vestibule that he had his first premonition.

There was a vast number of bell-pushes and nameplates for an apartment house of this relatively small size. It took him many minutes to locate her name among the hundreds that marched up the wall on both sides of the greeter screen. He pushed her bell.

For a moment there was no response. Then there was her voice but no picture. "Who's there?"

"Me, Maria," he said triumphantly. "Mac. Mighty Harry McCann."

He waited to hear her words of praise. Instead he heard laughter which seemed to tinge on the hysterical.

Disturbed, beginning to be frightened, he said: "Push the buzzer, Maria, so I can come up."

But her laughter continued to pour into the tiny vestibule. Then the greeter screen went on and he saw her.

"Maria?" He said it as if she were no longer the one he knew. "Please let me up."

But still she laughed, and the sound was crueller now that they could see each other.

"Please let me come up, Maria," he said desperately. Already the outer world was reaching for him with its collapsing buildings and suffocating sky. "You *promised*."

"I promised something I couldn't deliver." The laughter was gone now except for an occasional hiccuppy chuckle.

"What do you mean?" he asked, holding on to sanity with his eyes, no longer wanting the woman but desperately needing the sanctuary he saw beyond her on the greeter screen—the dimly-lit living room with the couch against the far wall, the cocktail table in front of it and the fireplace and music library flanking them.

"You must know," she said, "that I live in a box no bigger than yours and that I haven't been out, or had company, in more than three years."

"Oh, Maria," Harry said down in the suffocating vestibule, his legs starting to quiver. "Oh, no."

"Yes. I'm a half-woman, the way you were a half-man until this afternoon. I get my own dreamies on the tactiloscope. I'm not sure I could cope with the realies, such as a real nice guy named Harry McCann."

He couldn't believe it until Maria thrust her hand behind her. Though it seemed to have touched nothing, it became clear that she rapped on a wall hanging of some kind, causing her cozy "living room" to ripple like the painted backdrop it was.

Harry fled, quaking through the hostile streets, back to his own box.

BIOLOGICAL ELECTRICITY

Continued from page 102

present experimental batteries require only a gram of sugar to deliver two volts of electricity for two months. Because bacteria can feed on almost any organic substance, including most kinds of waste, some amazing and even bizarre possibilities can be envisioned.

Cities could use their rubbish dumps to fuel their generating stations. Industrial plants could clean polluted streams and use current from the extracted contamination to run their machines. A ship could cross the ocean driven by electricity generated by bacteria and waste scooped up from the sea. Suitable bacteria and wastes are abundant in most oceans and on land, even in regions where resources for conventionally generated electricity may be scarce.

The U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration is also sponsoring research in this field because light and compact biological power sources would be useful in spacecraft where weight and dimensions of equipment are severely limited.

For astronauts on journeys of months or even years to distant planets, biological batteries might solve a dual problem: they could serve as a waste disposal system while providing power indefinitely for equipment and instruments.

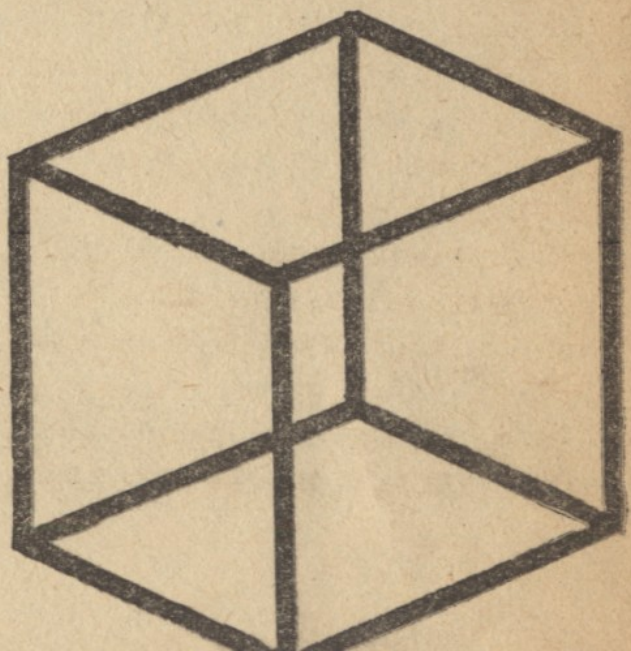
Can spacemen live with their illusions?

THOSE OF US who walk the earth at the bottom of a sea of dust, vapours and gases have few sensory illusions. If *homo sapiens* ever had any troublesome illusions he must have adjusted to them early in his considerable history.

On the other hand, those others of us who are venturing into space—to construct orbital stations and to land on the moon—very likely will be plagued by illusions. There will be no hazy atmosphere for softening images and enhancing depth perception. What they will see will be brilliant sunlit objects, against the deep black of the cosmos, in deceptive shifting perspectives.

By way of illustration take one of the few illusory curiosities remaining to the highly adjusted earthling. This is a simple two-dimensional drawing known as the Necker cube. As the viewer stares at the picture it seems to change its depth orientation. The front becomes the rear, and the rear the front. Then it seems to shift back to its original position. It continually reverses its orientation, and apparently it is not possible to stabilize the figure in either position.

The Necker cube has recently become more than a curiosity to space psychologists, because it may be among



For some idea of the visual illusions awaiting space travellers hold this Necker cube at arms length and stare at it. You will find that the front seems to become the back, and then reverses and becomes the front again.

the shapes of sections that will be used when manned orbital stations are actually constructed in space. Of course, the stations will be three-dimensional. But this should serve only to compound the problem of illusions.

Imagine a space station, a large tubular frame in the shape of a cube, standing out brightly against a velvet-black sky. As the astronaut approaches, the station seems to change from cube to diamond to various other regular and irregular shapes. One of the cube's sides actually is nearest to the astronaut. But which side? It may be difficult to know, what with shapes and orientations continually seeming to change.

The skeletonized cube is not the only shape that produces such visual illusions. The torus station, which is shaped like a car tyre, and which is a popular choice of space architects, will also appear sliced, broken into pieces, or elliptical, depending on its illumination and the angle at which it is seen.

How do psychologists know that astronauts will be faced with the problem of illusions? The U.S. Air Force, which is interested in the construction of space stations, has been collaborating on studies of the phenomenon with British psychologist Richard Langton Gregory of the University of Cambridge.

Dr. Gregory and his co-workers have approached the problem with a small electric railway in a pitch-black room hung with heavy, dark draperies. Wire shapes coated with luminous paint are suspended from the ceiling, and then a test subject is seated in the tiny rail car. When the lights are turned off, the subject sees nothing but a shape glowing in the utter blackness.

The railway has a track 70 feet long. The subject is rolled toward, passed, and around the glowing object. The depth reversals and changing shapes are disconcerting to him, at the very least.

"We should expect these illusions to be experienced when astronauts are assembling parts of space stations in orbit," says Dr. Gregory. "They will add their quota of difficulty to the task."

Can these difficulties be overcome? Dr. Gregory sees nothing untidy in the suggestion that the builders of the

space stations release dust around their structures. Such a miniature dusty atmosphere would diffuse sunlight and create a hazy halo around the station. As it does on earth, the haze would soften shadows and increase the reliability of depth perception.

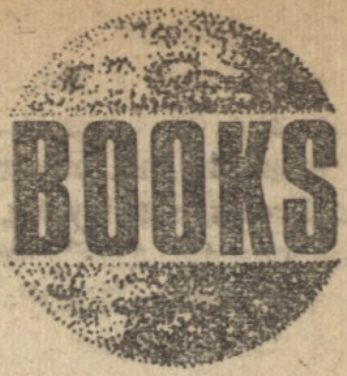
Visual unfamiliarity with the moon could also prove hazardous. On earth we are accustomed to sunlight coming from the sky and casting shadows below objects. We do not confuse an elevation with a depression. Dr. Gregory uses a small model of the moon to show what an astronaut might see upon approaching the lunar body.

The Cambridge scientist shines a light obliquely across the model, just as the sun shines on the moon during all of its phases except full and new. By altering the angle at which the light strikes the model, Dr. Gregory can make the surface appear pocked with craters or pimpled with mountains. When light shines perpendicularly on the model, thus simulating a full moon and throwing no shadows, the surface seems flat and featureless.

Because shadows, which may be mistaken for solid features, are eliminated at full moon, it may be that this is the best time for the manned lunar landings. Landing on the moon at any time will be a risky undertaking, at least until mountains, craters and other topographical features are well known to the voyagers. May space travellers learn to live with the sensory illusions they find in their worlds!

Science Horizons

THE COSMIC SATIRIST



MARY MCCARTHY HAS said of Burroughs and *The Naked Lunch.* "This must be the first space novel, the first serious piece of science fiction—the others are entertainment . . . In him, as in Swift, there is a kind of soured Utopianism". Although this suggests that she is not all that familiar with modern SF, she has a good point and Burroughs's genius of course towers over the talents of the majority of our SF writers. Even those who object to his subject matter and literary innovations must admit that his ability to handle the English language is greater than any of his contemporaries.

Not since Joyce has there been a writer of such power and richness, and never before has there been purely imaginative writing of such wildness and intelligence. Burroughs is a satirist—his most obvious talents lie in this direction. More savage and puritanical than Swift or Eliot, more sweeping in his attacks, he is a cosmic satirist, taking a rise not only out of the human race but also out of Time and Space. He lets no-one and nothing—physical or metaphysical—off lightly. Although often compared with Rabelais, he is much closer to Swift in that he lacks the magnanimity of Rabelais—there is no gentle fun in *The Naked Lunch.* If Swift wrote the first SF tale, then Burroughs has produced the ultimate one—choosing a wider selection of targets, dealing with them with a fierceness of attack, an intensity of vision, a mastery of language that inspires horror at a picture of life which is at once distorted and more truthful than anything else in literature.

The book covers such a wide range of subjects and ideas that it can be interpreted on dozens of different levels.

J. G. Ballard sees Burroughs as fashioning from "our dreams and nightmares the first authentic mythology of the age of Cape Canaveral, Hiroshima and Belsen. His novels are the terminal documents of the mid-20th century, scabrous, scarifying, a progress report from an inmate in the cosmic madhouse" (NEW WORLDS 142). On the other hand Irving Wardle (OBSERVER, 22 November 64) thinks that "the essence of the book is in its record of the addict's life—the daily pursuit of dope, the voluptuously savoured moment of the fix, and the apocalyptic fantasies it releases for which Burroughs draws on a large medical vocabulary as a brilliant extension of emotional language". Anthony Burgess does not agree—"Burroughs is demonstrating that his difficult subject can only be expressed through the static (that is neither didactic nor pornographic) shaping of the artistic imagination" (THE GUARDIAN, 20 November 64)—and so on and so on. Those who admire Burroughs cannot always agree on *why* they like him—he has so much to offer that *The Naked Lunch* can be read many times before all its levels and implications become clear. This is partially its appeal for me—to know that I can enjoy it once, begin it again immediately I have finished it and find more to enjoy.

The reader who likes a book with a "beginning, a middle and an end" need not be in the least alarmed by *The Naked Lunch*. I am much more inclined towards the conventional novel myself. I certainly do not welcome novelty for novelty's sake, nor obscenity for obscenity's sake—I find most of the fiction produced under the label of "beat" and "avant-garde" boring and pretentious, disguising bad, undisciplined writing under a superficial cloak of equally bad and undisciplined "experimental" styles. Just as the Buck Rogers brigade of SF writers bring SF into disrepute, so do these so-called experimental writers bring the handful of genuine innovators into disrepute. The simple fact with Burroughs is that he can *write*. He can write better than anybody else at work today. He has an ear for dialogue, an eye for reality, an ability to conjure up phantasmagoric visions that immediately capture the imagination, a powerful, uncompromising style that rips

away our comforting delusions and displays the warts and the sores that can fester in the human mind. Not a pleasant vision at first, yet we are soon captured by Burroughs's deadpan style which aids us to look upon the horrors without revulsion, and take, instead, a cool, objective look at perversion in all its states and forms—mental, physical and spiritual.

Burroughs's Black Utopias are more horrifying, more relevant and more convincing than any that have appeared to date in SF. His State of Interzone, dominated by the coolly grotesque figure of Doctor "Cancer is my first love" Benway makes the worlds of Huxley or Orwell seem like paradise in comparison. Its nearest equivalent is the world of *Limbo* 90.

> Dr. Benway had been called in as advisor to the Freeland Republic, a place given over to free love and continual bathing. The citizens are well adjusted, cooperative, honest, tolerant and above all clean. But the invoking of Benway indicates all is not well behind that hygienic façade: Benway is a manipulator and coordinator of symbol systems, an expert on all phases of interrogation, brainwashing and control. I have not seen Benway since his precipitate departure from Annexia, where his assignment had been T.D.—Total Demoralisation. Benway's first act was to abolish concentration camps, mass arrest and, except under certain limited and special circumstance, the use of torture.
> "I deplore brutality," he said. "It's not efficient. On the other hand, prolonged mistreatment, short of physical violence, gives rise, when skilfully applied, to anxiety and a feeling of special guilt. A few rules or rather guiding principles are to be borne in mind. The subject must not realise that the mistreatment is a deliberate attack of an anti-human enemy on his personal identity. He must be made to feel that he deserves *any* treatment he receives because there is something (never specified) horribly wrong with him. The naked need of the control addicts must be decently covered by an arbitrary and intricate bureaucracy so that the subject cannot contact his enemy direct."

Annexia is somewhat like the world of *The Trial*—though Burroughs tends to be rather more explicit and specific than ever Kafka was.

Interzone is not only a State, it is a state of time and mind:

> Panorama of the City of Interzone. Opening bars of East St. Louis Toodleoo . . . at times loud and clear then faint and intermittent like music down a windy street . . . The room seems to shake and vibrate with motion. The blood and substance of many races, Negro, Polynesian, Mountain Mongol, Desert Nomad, Polyglot Near East, Indian—races as yet unconceived and unborn, combinations not yet realized pass through your body. Migrations, incredible journeys through deserts and jungles and mountains (stasis and death in closed mountain valleys where plants grow out of genitals, vast crustaceans hatch inside and break the shell of body) across the Pacific in outrigger canoe to Easter Island. The Composite City where all human potentials are spread out in a vast silent market.
> Minarets, palms, mountains, jungle . . . A sluggish river jumping with vicious fish, vast weed-grown parks where boys lie in the grass, play cryptic games. Not a locked door in the City. Anyone comes into your room at any time. The Chief of Police is a Chinese who picks his teeth and listens to denunciations presented by a lunatic. Every now and then the Chinese takes the tooth-pick out of his mouth and looks at the end of it. Hipsters with smooth copper-coloured faces lounge in doorways twisting shrunken heads on gold chains, their faces blank with an insect's unseeing calm . . . High mountain flutes, jazz and bebop, one-stringed Mongol instruments, gypsy xylophones, African drums, Arab bagpipes . . . The City is visited by epidemics of violence, and the untended dead are eaten by vultures in the streets. Albinos blink in the sun . . . People eaten by unknown diseases watch the passerby with evil, knowing eyes.

Other inhabitants of Interzone are "servers of fragmentary warrants taken down in hebephrenic shorthand charging unspeakable mutilations of the spirit, bureaucrats of spectral departments, officials of unconstituted police states . . ." etc. etc. These descriptions of Interzone are amongst the most powerful in the book.

Benway's side-kick is Dr. Schafer "The Lobotomy Kid"—

> SCHAFER: "I tell you I can't escape a feeling . . . well, of *evil* about this."

BENWAY: "Balderdash, my boy . . . We're scientists . . . Pure scientists. Disinterested research and damned be him who cries, 'Hold, *too much*!' Such people are no better than party poops."

In *The Naked Lunch* we have left forever the mythological worlds of Winston Churchill, Mickey Mouse and Ernest Hemingway, have gone past the worlds of the Beatles and James Bond, and have entered the world of the present, seen an indication of Things to Come for, whereas most SF is speculation, *The Naked Lunch* is visionary—and this contributes to its fascination. Anyone attracted to SF by its more serious elements will find *The Naked Lunch* rewarding. The novel costs 42s. and is published by John Calder.

James Colvin

SILVER COLLECTIONS

IF NOT EXACTLY gold, two recent SF collections contain plenty of silver. *The Worlds of Science Fiction* (Gollancz, 21s.) is edited by Robert P. Mills who has gone to a number of top SF writers and asked them to select the story they think is their best and write a short introduction to the story. The authors show good taste and the stories they have selected are, in the main, among their best. Only Alfred Bester would not contribute. His argument was that in his opinion he hadn't written anything worth selecting—so instead he contributes an interesting article about his craft. Represented here are Howard Fast, Blish, Collier, Walter M. Miller, Bradbury, Heinlein, George P. Elliott, Knight, Sturgeon, Anderson, Davidson, Van Doren, Boucher, Cassill and Asimov.

The second collection is *Introducing SF*, edited by Brian W. Aldiss (Faber, 18s)—intended as an introduction to the field for those not familiar with SF.

Aldiss has chosen well. The stories are all excellent—Budrys, Clarke, Tenn, Brown, Aldiss, Asimov, Schuyler

Miller, Sellings, Page, Miller, Bixby and Ballard. Some of them will be of course familiar to many readers but I found the overall collection a good one and was pleased to see so many of my favourite stories assembled in one volume. I found the labelling of the stories ("Alien Artifacts", "Celestial Paradox", "Alien Worlds" etc.) a bit off-putting, as with the glossary and bibliography at the back. I think that if I were new to SF, these tags would tend to confirm any prejudices I might have. Harry Harrison's "Son of Deathworld" is out from Gollancz (15s.)—titled *The Ethical Engineer* it will not disappoint the thousands of readers who bought and enjoyed *Death-World*. From Herbert Jenkins comes a pacey SF thriller, *The Paper Dolls* by L. P. Davies (15s.) about four strange boys with ESP powers. In spite of some unconvincing dialogue and strained writing, the story moves very well indeed and if you enjoy a good, complex and mysterious plot, you'll enjoy *The Paper Dolls*. Corgi's edition of Galouye's *The Last Leap* ("and other stories of the super-mind") is worth getting—though the stories (all about ESP) tend to be a bit repetitive in places. John Lymington's *The Sleep Eaters* (also from Corgi, 3/6) is no better, no worse than his usual novels. I find him dull. Corgi have also brought out a new series of "classic" horror stories—*Jekyll and Hyde* and *Frankenstein* are the first pair. The Everyman version of *Frankenstein* is better produced but, at 3/6, a shilling dearer.

J. C.

DID ELRIC DIE IN VAIN?

STORMBRINGER IS A magic sword, a great, evil blade with a life of its own. It sucks souls like a vampire sucks his victims' blood. It is the real hero-villain of Michael Moorcock's strange new novel set in a blood-soaked and bewitched world, anti-time and anti-history, in which nightmare armies battle, statues scream and heroines can be turned into big white worms at the drop of a warlock's hat.

Mr. Moorcock stirs up this hell-brew with an inventive-

ness that leaves one gasping. His is the territory that has always been dear to a certain kind of English writer, the genuine exotic, who exists to remind us that we're really a most exotic race.

I'm thinking of people like Mervyn Peak and, in the last few years, Jane Gaskell. *Stormbringer* (Herbert Jenkins, 12/6d.) has, for me, the same kind of offbeat integrity and complete involvement with a dream-world that impressed me in *The Serpent*, Miss Gaskell's novel about Atlantis.

Mr. Moorcock's Bright Empire of Melniboné existed "ten thousand years before history was recorded—or ten thousand years after history had ceased to be chronicled, reckon it how you will". It is far from easy to describe, but it is a kind of primitive myth-land with touches of Victorian Gothick, Wagnerian darkness and even undertones of the Book of Revelations.

The plot is about the battle between the Forces of Law and Chaos for nothing less than the future of the universe. The characters have a kind of human form, but we're told they are less than men, ghostly epic-types who live only to intrigue and slaughter to settle the shape and quality of the world of real men which is to follow them.

So *Stormbringer* is an exciting fantasy about the eternal struggle of Good and Evil. The forces of Order are led by Elric, the last ruler of Melniboné, a red-eyed albino who has little real physical strength, but draws it from the soul-sucking sword. With Stormbringer in his hand, he is ten feet tall and a match for any Theocrat called Jagreen Lern, his warrior-priests and the Lords of Hell. Without the sword, he couldn't take on a reasonably skilled light-weight.

Elric is an excellent character, pretty well-rounded and convincing for a myth-figure. He could have been the familiar strong, but lilywhite hero. Mr. Moorcock doesn't make him any such thing.

Elric and Stormbringer—between whom there's a skilfully-established love-hate relationship; neither can do without the other—take the field in a world ruled by chance, destiny, sorcery, all the supernatural forces that

strangle men's free will. The atmosphere is chilly and oppressive and that's, perhaps, my only quibble at Mr. Moorcock's fascinating novel.

I don't ask for sweetness and light from science fiction, fantasy and its associated literatures, but I wish more young writers like Michael Moorcock would show us characters who are real masters of their fate and not just dancing on a cosmic puppet-master's strings.

But I wouldn't have missed *Stormbringer* for anything. The excitement and blood-letting never lets up, from the moment Jagreen Lern kidnaps Elric's wife and Elric and his buddies set hot-foot across the Sighing Desert and the Pale Sea to dish the villains of Pan Tang.

Elric himself is no goody-goody, his crimson eyes burning with hate as phantom horsemen bear down on him. "He was capable of cruelty and malevolent sorcery, had little pity, but could love and hate more violently than ever his ancestors." He'll lop a man's head off for sheer expediency and ask questions afterwards.

But slowly he emerges as a lone goodish man in a landscape that drips with blood and hate. And Mr. Moorcock's landscapes are compelling.

There are dark battlefields where bloody men come screaming out of the night, black-cowled midnight horrors with fixed grins, ghastly wailing winged women running amok with their wings clipped, doom-laden seas where black, rat-infested warships fill the air with fireballs.

Elric fights an army of vampire trees with his vampire sword as they try to tear him apart using branches like superhuman fingers. He takes a journey in time to fight that dead hero of another age, Roland, to get his magic horn.

Is there too much blood? I said the weird inventiveness of it all leaves one gasping. Does it tend to drain one dry? Is there a danger of Mr. Moorcock's work becoming a parody of itself as this kind of literature often does? On the strength of this one book, he avoids it by a hairsbreadth and I can recommend *Stormbringer*. In a tight corner I think I would rather have Elric's sword than Arthur's Excalibur for all its malevolent habit of doing

what it likes and standing there, alive, sinister and smiling when nearly every other character has had his chips in some way.

Most of all, I feel that Mr. Moorcock's battle between good and evil is a sad story. If it did happen in some early world of supernatural twilight, a lot of men died in vain.

Elric fought for a decent world of the future, one that he would never enjoy. What did we get? Buchenwald, the atom bomb and brainwashing. Perhaps Mr. Moorcock's world has something? Could the sorcerers have done much worse than that?

Alan Forrest

HARDLY SF

1986 AND ACROSS the Soviet frontier steps Martino, one of America's top weapon-scientists released by his Communist captors after four months. But as he approaches, the reception committee sees that he is only part flesh and blood. His face and his whole left arm are brilliantly engineered metal. Behind the smooth metal ovoid still lies Martino's brain—or does it? In fact, is the man Martino at all? Who decided to automate the scientist, and why? And did he tell them the secret of the new weapon he is working on? Physical tests can prove nothing about the man's identity. The only way to discover if the man is a planted spy is to release him, build up a complicated psychological picture of Martino and watch him, twenty four hours a day, for ever, until he steps out of character. Here it is that Algis Budrys (*Who?* Penguin, 3/6d.) breaks down under the intellectual strain of first analysing his man and then putting his present behaviour against the pattern. Nevertheless as a thrill-a-minute thriller the book is suspenseful to the very end. Disappointingly, the mystery is never resolved. But the remaining mystery to my mind is still how Penguin justified publishing this psychological spy story under an sf label.

Hilary Bailey

All correspondence to
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NEW WORLDS SF,
17, Lake House,
Scovell Road,
London, S.E.1.

Experiments

Dear Sir,

I agree that experimental ideas are needed, although I believe only as part of the SF scene. The conflict between easily understandable writing and the necessity for dynamic development in literature will probably never be resolved (perhaps happily). Again, it isn't only SF writers who are exploring new conventions, though so far this seems to have been the major field for 'research', so, as has been suggested, a separate magazine for any intelligent and literate new styles, if at all possible, may be the answer. But whilst they are in an intermediate stage perhaps the best method is one magazine, as you say, which presents both old and new contrasted in an effort to stir most existing authors and readers from their apparent complacency. As an incidental, and though I'm not completely won over, I wasn't particularly interested in the dynamic development of literature myself until I read Ballard's review of *Dead Fingers Talk*. and then the book itself; both stirred me from a placid acceptance of the general run of SF.

C. J. Marriner, 3B Underhill Road, Dulwich, S.E.22

Dear Sir,

Much has been written in the past about the lack of a mature style in writers of SF, and the point made that better written SF would lose no existing fans and could well gain many who find SF crude when compared to their normal mainstream diet. With all this I have no quarrel, in fact I was firmly convinced I would welcome such a change. Until about a year ago, or thereabouts. Up till

then, although there were several very craftsmanlike writers, Clarke and Asimov prominent amongst them, none had the flair that was cried out for so loudly. None, that is, save Ray Bradbury. His flair, surely, none can deny. His *Silver Locusts* ranks for me as one of the finest works of SF ever, the only book I have re-read immediately after finishing it the first time, just for the sheer joy of it. Unfortunately he pointed the way of things to come for the world of SF as clearly as he did for the world as a whole. *Fahrenheit 451* shows us the way next—the first half being mere verbiage (beautifully written, but no more than a soufflé to a starving man), all the plot being in the last half. In short the appearance of a short story plot expanded into a novel by weaving poetry around it. *Golden Apples of the Sun* completes my picture—was ever a more plotless, pointless piece of fiction ever written? This was one of the half dozen, at most, books that I have bought and been unable to struggle through to the finish (were these books written in that order by the way, or is there hope of more good stuff from Bradbury?).

Now to come up to date we have J. G. Ballard on the same slippery slope. This I regret almost most of all, many of his past works being excellent. With each successive story he is plunging at the moment, except that *Equinox* and *The Drowned World* are almost identical. The editor, who, as far as I know, first rose to prominence in the fantasy field, for a time seemed to be graduating to SF, but now seems to be following Bradbury and Ballard, that is if *Goodbye Miranda* is anything to judge by.

Basically the fault seems to be that there is a trend for authors to attempt to appeal to the emotions directly with word pictures—a job for the poets in my opinion—rather than writing a story and letting the story do its work on the emotions or the intellect. Go back to the old days, the blood-curdling days of THE VARGO STATTEN MAGAZINE etc. What do you find? Clean-cut stories, painted with broad, crudely aimed strokes of the pen, but *stories*! Write stuff like that, only better, to suit a more adult readership—throw in a good percentage of more serious stuff (the first half of Blish's *A Case of Conscience* is the sort of thing I

mean) and I'll buy monthlies filled with that, faster than you can print them!

Peter J. D. Matthews, 101 West Hendford, Yeovil, Somerset

We agree, and have always agreed, that there is a place for the good, intelligent action story in SF and we should never miss the chance of publishing any we receive. But, it seems, the trend away from this kind of writing involves the authors—old and new—as well as the readers. Certainly this is true of this country. The more popular British SF writers such as Wyndham, Christopher, Aldiss and Ballard, have appealed perhaps because *they have placed the accent on character and so on, rather than on the action element. It has often occurred to us that if it had not been for the necessity of selling to what was essentially a pulp-magazine field the work of Asimov, Clarke and others might have been that much better. We also endorse your view that SF could currently do with a few more good, straightforward craftsmen, as well as writers of the more thoughtful kind.*

More Mackin

Dear Sir,

I would like to write a few words about the magazine. I think on the whole it is very good with a good layout and style. I was glad to hear that the sales are going up; that is certainly a good sign, and of course I was glad to see the price come down. The stories are on the whole interesting if not exactly world-shakers, however they are the sort of stories that sell a magazine. I was glad to see some of the old authors back, especially Ballard, and I am glad to see that your stories are of the same high standard. I hope that you can get Philip E. High to write some more shorts as I thought that his standard of writing was quite high and his stories never dull or boring, with twists that were quite unexpected—which is something.

Also I hope to see Edward Mackin with some more Hek Belov stories, it was those which sold me on the idea of SCIENCE FANTASY in the first place, but I only ever read the last one and a couple of others from borrowed magazines.

John R. Orr, 16 Kings Road, Emsworth, Hants.

Belov began his career in AUTHENTIC, *survived to ride again in* SCIENCE FANTASY, *popped up in the first edition of* New Writings in SF, *and will soon make a fresh debut in* NEW WORLDS—*there's a long Belov story coming up. One has to admire the old fraud's capacity for survival! We're also hoping to get a Philip E. High story shortly. At the moment we hear that High is concentrating on novels for the U.S. market.*

Change of Image?

Dear Sir,

Congratulations on an excellent and highly enjoyable issue (NW145). The magazine now exudes an air of colourful enthusiasm—a point to which even the most cynical of my colleagues at University gave their assent—and it harbours a rich seedbed (if I may mix my metaphors) of ideas which deserve it a wider popularity. One feels the letter you published which pointed to Sociology (my subject) and Psychology as the up-and-coming sciences in terms of approach to reality rather than the substantive content—in which, of course, they lag—hit on an important point. I for one have always despised stories which felt obliged to throw slick indigestable chunks of physics and chemistry at the reader. Perhaps we can hope for a change of image—I hope so.

John H. Barnsley, 83 Muston Road, Filey, East Yorks.

NEXT MONTH

Due to our turn-over from bi-monthly to monthly, story-ratings for NEW WORLDS 146 are not yet available. The most important story next month will be J. G. Ballard's eerily evocative picture of a world where wastes pumped into the sea have caused the rain to stop—and water becomes the Earth's most precious commodity, so much so that a water-thief is the most despicable of criminals. Read *Dune Limbo* in NEW WORLDS 148. Stories in hand by Aldiss, Baxter, Brunner, Collyn, Mackin, Tilley, Tubb and more. Out at the same time next month.

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MEETINGS

LONDON SF readers and writers meet on 1st Thursday of every month at The Globe, Hatton Garden (behind Gamages). Informal, all welcome.

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