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J. G. BALLARD

THE ASSASSINATION WEAPON

A BRILLIANT NEW STORY

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Contents

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THE IMAGE AND THE ACTUALITY

LIKE A GOOD scientist, the concern of the serious writer is, as much as anything, to separate the truth as he sees it from the untruth, the accurate observation from the false supposition. He can do this in a comic novel just as well as in a straight one. His choice of approach must be dictated by his particular temperament and what is most suitable to his theme. His success is often quite hard to judge at the time of his work's publication and it is probably fair to say that the more accurate he is, the more he is liable to be attacked. Most people are only able to see what was truth in retrospect, when the object of an author's theme is seen from the detachment of a future time ; most people are unable to detach themselves from the particular mood of their times and are inclined to favour the writer who supports certain general preconceptions. The more abstract the writer's theme, the more likely he is to be misunderstood by his contemporaries, whether they admire him for other qualities or not.

The business of trying to separate what is generally assumed to be true from what is actually true, to separate the image from the actuality, is difficult. It requires almost total intellectual and emotional detachment of vision in the writer ; it needs discipline in both the form and style of his fiction if he is to bring off the job of helping the reader take a fresh, cool look at the over-familiar attitudes and ideals of his age.

Since H. G. Wells, good science fiction has made it its business to question our assumptions about every aspect of ourselves. In this it has shared a great deal with the very best fiction of all kinds. It has, since the days when John

W. Cambell began editing ASTOUNDING at any rate, been the only form of popular fiction that has attempted to analyse man and society rather than (as with most thrillers, westerns, historicals, etc.) support his preconceptions about himself.

How much sf has failed to succeed in this object because it has borrowed too much from those other popular forms is another question, and one which we've discussed elsewhere ; but the fact remains that it has tried, and has been trying until the present day when it has been able to rid itself of its various accretions and produce, at its best, fiction which owes little to the conventions of either the popular adventure tale or the good social novel, while leaving itself scope of approach to be constantly fresh and varied. It has become an eminently suitable form for the serious writer not primarily interested in the observation of character and manners, but in the larger, more abstract issues concerning human behaviour.

In his latest story, *The Assassination Weapon,* J. G. Ballard questions the validity of various popular images and modern myths which remain as solid and alive as when they were first given concrete form in the shape of the three assassinated men who continue to represent so much the atmosphere of their times. Ballard does not ask *who* killed them, but *what* killed them—what combination of ideas and events created them and then destroyed them? You will find some answers in the section headed *'But isn't Kennedy already dead?'* All the images that fill the mind of modern man are seen through the eyes of a fictional spiritual descendant of Etherly—the landscape of a nuclear explosion, flyovers. advertising hoardings, oil derricks, radio telescopes, and wrecked and abandoned machines. Ballard's fusion of fact and fantasy succeeds in creating a kind of reality far removed from the 'reality' of the events reported and analysed in the popular press and elsewhere, but in our view he comes up with a far more real view of these events than has hitherto been published.

Michael Moorcock

J. G. BALLARD

THE ASSASSINATION WEAPON

AN ATTEMPT to conceive the 'false' deaths of J. F. Kennedy, Lee Harvey Oswald and Malcolm X in terms of the notional character of a psychotic patient in the Belmont Asylum, assumed to have died by his own hand in the rôle of a former H-bomber pilot.

Thoracic Drop. The spinal landscape, revealed at the level of T-12, is that of the porous rock-towers of Teneriffe, and of the native of the Canaries, Oscar Dominguez, who created the technique of decalcomania and so exposed the first spinal landscape. The clinker-like rock-towers, suspended above the silent swamp, create an impression of

profound anguish. The inhospitability of this mineral world, with its inorganic growths, is relieved only by the balloons flying in the clear sky. They are painted with names: Jackie, Lee Harvey, Malcolm. In the mirror of this swamp there are no reflections. Here, time makes no concessions.

Autogeddon. Waking: the concrete embankment of a motorway extension. Roadworks, cars drumming two hundred yards below. In the sunlight the seams between the sections are illuminated like the sutures of an exposed skull. A young woman stands ten feet away from him, watching with unsure eyes. The hyoid bone in her throat flutters as if discharging some subvocal rosary. She points to her car, parked off the verge beside a grader, and then beckons to him. *Kline, Coma, Xero.* He remembered the aloof, cerebral Kline and their long discussions on this terminal concrete beach. Under a different sun. This girl is not Coma. "My car." She speaks, the sounds as dissociated as the recording in a doll. "I can give you a lift. I saw you reach the island. It's like trying to cross the Styx." He sits up, searching for his Air Force cap. All he can say is: "Jackie Kennedy."

Googolplex. Dr. Lancaster studied the walls of the empty room. The mandalas, scored in the white plaster with a nail file, radiated like suns towards the window. He peered at the objects on the tray offered to him by the nurse. "So, these are the treasures he has left us—an entry from Oswald's Historic Diary, a much-thumbed reproduction of Magritte's Annunciation, and the mass numbers of the first twelve radioactive nuclides. What are we supposed to do with them?" Nurse Nagamatzu gazed at him with cool eyes. "Permutate them, doctor?" Lancaster lit a cigarette, ignoring the explicit insolence. This elegant bitch, like all women she intruded her sexuality at the most inopportune moments. One day. . . . He said: "Perhaps. We might find Mrs. Kennedy there. Or her husband. The Warren Commission has reopened its hearing, you know. Apparently it's not satisfied. Quite unprecedented." Permutate them? The theoretical number of nucleotide patterns in DNA was a mere 10 to the power of 120,000. What number was vast

enough to contain all the possibilities of those three objects?

Jackie Kennedy, your eyelids deflagrate. The serene face of the President's widow, painted on clapboard 400 feet high, moves across the rooftops, disappearing into the haze on the outskirts of the city. There are hundreds of the signs, revealing Jackie in countless familiar postures. Next week there may be an SS officer, Beethoven, Christopher Columbus or Fidel Castro. The fragments of these signs litter the suburban streets for weeks afterwards. Bonfires of Jackie's face burn among the reservoirs of Staines and Shepperton. With luck he got a job on one of the municipal disposal teams, warms his hands at a brazier of enigmatic eyes. At night he sleeps beneath an unlit bonfire of breasts.

Xero. Of the three figures who were to accompany him, the strangest was Xero. For most of the time Kline and Coma would remain near him, sitting a few feet away on the embankment of the deserted motorway, following in another car when he drove out to the radio-observatory, pausing behind him as he visited the atrocity exhibition. Coma was too shy, but now and then he would manage to talk to Kline, although he never remembered what they said to each other. By contrast, Xero was an archangel, a figure of galvanic energy and uncertainty. Moving across the abandoned landscape near the flyover, the very perspectives of the air seemed to invert behind him. At times, when Xero approached the forlorn group sitting on the embankment, his shadows formed bizarre patterns on the concrete, transcripts of cryptic formulae and insoluble dreams. These ideograms, like the hieroglyphs of a race of blind seers, remained on the grey concrete after Xero had gone, the detritus of this terrifying psychic totem.

Questions, always questions. Karen Novotny watched him move around the apartment, dismantling the mirrors in the hall and bathroom. He stacked them on the table between the settees in the lounge. This strange man, and his obsessions with time, Jackie Kennedy, Oswald and Eniwetok. Who was he? Where had he come from? In the three days since she had found him on the motorway she had discovered only that he was a former H-bomber pilot,

for some reason carrying World War III in his head. "What are you trying to build?" she asked. He assembled the mirrors into a box-like structure. He glanced up at her, face hidden by the peak of his Air Force cap. "A trap." She stood beside him as he knelt on the floor. "For what? Time?" He placed a hand between her knees and gripped her right thigh, handhold of reality. "For your womb, Karen. You've caught a star there." But he was thinking of Coma, waiting with Kline in the espresso bar, while Xero roamed the street in his white Pontiac. In Coma's eyes runes glowed.

The Impossible Room. In the dim light he lay on the floor of the room. A perfect cube, its walls and ceiling were formed by what seemed to be a series of cinema screens. Projected on to them in close-up was the face of Nurse Nagamatzu, her mouth, three feet across, moving silently as she spoke in slow motion. Like a cloud, the giant head moved up the wall behind him, then passed across the ceiling and down the opposite corner. Later the inclined, pensive face of Dr. Lancaster appeared, rising up from the floor until it filled three walls and the ceiling, a slow mouthing monster.

Beach Fatigue. After climbing the concrete incline, he reached the top of the embankment. The flat, endless terrain stretched away on all sides, a few oil derricks in the distance marking the horizon. Among the spilled sand and burst cement bags lay old tyres and beer bottles, Guam in 1947. He wandered away from here, straddling roadworks and irrigation ditches, towards a rusting quonset near the incline of the disused flyover. Here, in this terminal hut, he began to piece together some sort of existence. Inside the hut he found a set of psychological tests, out of curiosity ran them on himself. Although he had no means of checking them, his answers seemed to establish an identity. He went off to forage, and came back to the hut with some documents and a coke bottle.

Pontiac Starchief. Two hundred yards from the hut a wheel-less Pontiac sits in the sand. The presence of this car baffles him. Often he spends hours sitting in it, trying

out the front and back seats. All sorts of rubbish is lying in the sand: a typewriter with half the keys missing (he picks out fragmentary sentences, sometimes these seem to mean something), a smashed neurosurgical unit (he pockets a handful of leucotomes, useful for self-defence). Then he cuts his foot on the coke bottle, and spends several feverish days in the hut. Luckily he finds an incomplete isolation drill for trainee astronauts, half of an 80-hour sequence.

Coma: the million-year girl. Coma's arrival coincides with his recovery from the bout of fever. She never enters the hut, but they team up in a left-handed way. To begin with she wants to spend all her time writing poems on the damaged typewriter. Later, when not writing the poems, she wanders away to an old solar energy device and loses herself in the maze of mirrors. Shortly afterwards Kline appears, and sits at a chair and table in the sand twenty yards from the hut. Xero, meanwhile, is moving among the oil derricks half a mile away, assembling immense cinemascope signs that carry the reclining images of Oswald, Jackie Kennedy, and Malcolm X.

Pre-Uterine Claims. "The author," Dr. Lancaster wrote, "has found that the patient forms a distinctive type of object relation based on a perpetual and irresistible desire to merge with the object in an undifferentiated mass. Although psychoanalysis cannot reach the primary archaic mechanism of 'rapprochement' it can deal with the neurotic superstructure, guiding the patient towards the choice of stable and worthwhile objects. In the case under consideration the previous career of the patient as a military pilot should be noted, and the unconscious role of thermonuclear weapons in bringing about the total fusion and non-differentiation of all matter. What the patient is reacting against is, simply, the phenomenology of the universe, the specific and independent existence of separate objects and events, however trivial and inoffensive these may seem. A spoon, for example, offends him by the mere fact of its existence in time and space. More than this, one could say that the precise, if largely random, configuration of atoms in the universe at any given moment, one never again to be repeated, seems to him to be preposterous by the virtue of

its unique identity. . .” Dr. Lancaster lowered his pen and looked down into the recreation garden. Traven was standing in the sunlight, raising and lowering his arms and legs in a private callisthenic display, which he repeated several times (presumably an attempt to render time and events meaningless by replication?).

“But isn't Kennedy already dead?” Captain Webster studied the documents laid out on Dr. Lancaster's demonstration table. These were: (1) a spectroheliogram of the sun; (2) tarmac and take-off checks for the B29 Superfortress Enola Gay; (3) electroencephalogram of Albert Einstein; (4) transverse section through a Pre-Cambrian Trilobite; (5) photograph taken at noon, August 6, 1945, of the sand-sea, Quattara Depression, Libya; (6) Max Ernst's ‘Garden Airplane Traps’. He turned to Dr. Lancaster. “You say these constitute an assassination weapon?”

“Not in the sense you mean.” Dr. Lancaster covered the exhibits with a sheet. By chance the cabinets took up the contours of a corpse. “Not in the sense you mean. This is an attempt to bring about the ‘false’ death of the President —false in the sense of coexistent or alternate. The fact that an event has taken place is no proof of its valid occurrence.” Dr. Lancaster went over to the window. Obviously he would have to begin the search singlehanded. Where to begin? No doubt Nurse Nagamatzu could be used as bait. That vamp had once worked as a taxi-dancer in the world's largest nightclub in Osaka, appropriately named ‘The Universe’.

Unidentified Radio-source, Cassiopeia. Karen Novotny waited as he reversed the car onto the farm track. Half a mile across the meadows she could see the steel bowls of the three radio-telescopes in the sunlight. So the attempt was to be made here? There seemed to be nothing to kill except the sky. All week they had been chasing about, sitting for hours through the conference on neuro-psychiatry, visiting art galleries, even flying in a rented Rapide across the reservoirs of Staines and Shepperton. Her eyes had ached from keeping a look-out. “They're four hundred feet high,” he told her, “the last thing you need is a pair

of binoculars." What had he been looking for—the radio-telescopes or the giant madonnas he muttered about as he lay asleep beside her at night. "Xero!" she heard him shout. With the agility of an acrobat he vaulted over the bonnet of the car, then set off at a run across the meadow. "Come on!" he shouted over his shoulder. Carrying the black Jackie Kennedy wig as carefully as she could in both hands, she hurried after him. One of the telescopes was moving, its dish turning towards them.

Madame Butterfly. Holding the wound under her left breast, Nurse Nagamatzu stepped across Webster's body and leaned against the bogie of the telescope pylon. Eighty feet above her the steel bowl had stopped revolving, and the echoes of the gun-shots reverberated among the lattice-work. Clearing her throat with an effort, she spat out the blood. The flecks of lung tissue speckled the bright ribbon of the rail. The bullet had broken two ribs, then collapsed her left lung and lodged itself below her scapula. As her eyes faded she caught a last glimpse of a white American car setting off across the tarmac apron beyond the control house, where the shells of the old bombers lay heaped together. The runways of the former airfield radiated from her in all directions. Dr. Lancaster was kneeling in the path of the car, intently building a sculpture of mirrors. She tried to pull the wig off her head, and then fell sideways across the rail.

The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even. Pausing outside the entrance to the tea-terrace, Margaret Traven noticed the tall figure of Captain Webster watching her from the sculpture room. Duchamp's glass construction, on loan from the Museum of Modern Art, reminded her of the ambiguous role she might have to play. This was chess in which every move was a counter-gambit. How could she help her husband, that tormented man, pursued by furies more implacable than the four riders, the very facts of time and space. She gave a start as Webster took her elbow. He turned to face her, looking into her eyes. "You need a drink. Let's sit down—I'll explain again why this is so important."

Venus Smiles. The dead face of the President's widow looked up at him from the track. Confused by the Japanese cast of her features, with all their reminders of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, he stared at the bowl of the telescope, searching through the steel lattice for the time-music of the quasars. Twenty yards away Dr. Lancaster was watching him in the sunlight, the sculpture beside him reflecting a dozen fragments of his head and arms. Kline and Coma were moving away along the railway track.

Einstein. "The notion that this great Swiss mathematician is a pornographer may strike you as something of a bad joke," Dr. Lancaster remarked to Webster. "However, you must understand that for Traven science is the ultimate pornography, analytic activity whose main aim is to isolate objects or events from their contexts in time and space. This obsession with the specific activity of quantified functions is what science shares with pornography. How different from Lautreamont, who brought together the sewing machine and the umbrella on the operating table, identifying the pudenda of the carpet with the woof of the cadaver." Dr. Lancaster turned to Webster with a laugh. "One looks forward to the day when the General Theory of Relativity and the Principia will outsell the Kama Sutra in back-street bookshops."

Rune-filled Eyes. Now, in this concluding phase, the presence of his watching trinity, Coma, Kline and Xero, became ever closer. All three were more preoccupied than he remembered them. Kline seemed to avoid his eyes, turning one shoulder as he passed the café where Kline sat with Coma, evidently waiting for something. Only Coma, with her rune-filled eyes, watched him with any sympathy. It was as if they all sensed that something was missing. He remembered the documents he had found near the terminal hut.

In a Technical Sense. Webster's hand hesitated on Karen Novotny's zip. He listened to the last bars of the Mahler symphony playing from the radiogram extension in the warm bedroom. "The bomber crashed on landing," he explained. "Four members of the crew were killed. He was alive when they got him out, but at one point in the

operating theatre his heart and vital functions failed. In a technical sense he was dead for about two minutes. Now, all this time later, it looks as if something is missing, something that vanished during the short period of his death. Perhaps his soul, the capacity to achieve a state of grace. Lancaster would call it the ability to accept the phenomenology of the universe, or the fact of your own consciousness. This is Traven's hell. You can see he's trying to build bridges between things—this Kennedy business, for example. He wants to kill Kennedy again, but in a way that makes sense."

The Water World. Margaret Traven moved through the darkness along the causeways between the reservoirs. Half a mile away the edge of the embankment formed a raised horizon, enclosing this world of tanks, water and pumping gear with an almost claustrophobic silence. The varying levels of water in the tanks seemed to let an extra dimension into the damp air. A hundred yards away, across two parallel settling beds, she saw her husband moving rapidly along one of the white-painted catwalks. He disappeared down a stairway. What was he looking for? Was this watery world the site where he hoped to be reborn, in this quantified womb with its dozens of amniotic levels?

An Existential Yes. They were moving away from him. After his return to the terminal hut he noticed that Kline, Coma and Xero no longer approached him. Their fading figures, a quarter of a mile from the hut, wandered to and fro, half-hidden from him by the hollows and earthworks. The cinemascope hoardings of Jackie, Oswald and Malcolm X were beginning to break up in the wind. One morning he woke to find that they had gone.

The Terminal Zone. He lay on the sand with the rusty bicycle wheel. Now and then he would cover some of the spokes with sand, neutralising the radial geometry. The rim interested him. Hidden behind a dune, the hut no longer seemed a part of his world. The sky remained constant, the warm air touching the shreds of test papers sticking up from the sand. He continued to examine the wheel. Nothing happened.

JOHN BAXTER

SKIRMISH

IT WAS QUIET now, with the deathly silence that comes only to a battlefield when it is left to the dead. Throughout the sector, space was littered with ruined ships, all that remained of the task force sent against Corona. Some still turned lazily, revolving from the last echoes of the explosion that had wrecked them. Others retained the ugly blossom of a frozen blast on their hulls. There was death everywhere. Not even the cold of space could cleanse these ruins of its signs.

Near the space-forts, strung like a necklace of barbed beads around Corona, the menace was intensified. Jutting cannon still surveyed all possible approaches and, although the rock was scarred and pitted with direct hits, deep inside the Kriks were as alert as ever. It was as if the attack had never taken place and thousands of men had died in vain.

Close up to one of the forts, almost under its inquisitive guns, a ship swung in orbit around one of the converted asteroids. The fort was small, but the ship, a Terran fleet frigate, was smaller and the feeble gravity of the fort held it in precarious bondage. Soon it would drift away, but for the moment victor and vanquished were locked together. The ship was a wreck. From prow to stern the hull was split wide open. The metal had peeled back like flesh from a vast wound throwing the compartments open to space. Papers, bedding, personal possessions had spilled out and now hung suspended in crazy positions. Here and there a body floated, part of the debris. The Frigate *Cockade* was a total wreck. But inside there was still life.

Derek Barnes wound the last half-turn of bandage around the injured man's leg and pinned it inexpertly. A

rough job, but at least it would save him from bleeding to death. He snapped his fingers for the medic.

"Give me a spray, will you?"

The man plugged a capsule of protophine into a hypo and handed it to him.

"Only a few left," he commented.

Derek grimaced. "Can't be helped. The shock's bad enough without making them stand the pain." He bent closer to the man huddled in the bunk. In the gloom it was almost impossible to find a vein.

"Can you give me some more light, please?"

"Sorry," the orderly said. "No main power at all. We have to get by with these battery torches and they aren't too healthy at the moment. Ought to be recharged."

Derek injected the drug and stood up, his muscles protesting. He had been crouched in the tiny sick-bay for hours, ever since the firing stopped. The doctor had been killed early in the action so Derek had drawn on his meagre knowledge of first-aid to deal with the wounded. He looked around at his "patients" but it was too dark to see clearly. Most of them were no more than muffled bundles cocooned in bandages. But for the occasional moan they could have been taken for dead men awaiting burial.

"You might as well be, poor beggars," he muttered under his breath.

"Eh?" The medic looked up.

"Doesn't matter, mate. What's the next move?"

"All the officers are supposed to huddle with the chief when they can but I don't know whether that applies to you or not."

Derek groped in the breast pocket of his jacket and pulled out an embroidered scrap of cloth. He displayed the gold pips to the medic.

"I may be only a mining engineer but according to this I'm an accredited officer of the fleet—lieutenant, 2nd, for what it's worth. So I'd better go and huddle."

The medic straightened up from his work and said over his shoulder "I wouldn't hurry. There isn't much in the way of discipline at the moment."

Derek smiled. That was an understatement. Abandoned by the retreating task force; completely disabled; more

than two thirds of the crew dead, including the captain, first mate and doctor; not so much as a light blaster still in action. It wasn't surprising that the ship was no model of efficiency. He thought about obeying his weary body and taking a nap but he knew that once he stopped working the shock would catch up with him. Pausing only to douse his face with water he struggled along the corridor to the captain's day cabin, one of the few rooms still intact. Most of the gravity plates were out and he had to "swim" across some places, but finally he pushed open the cabin door. It seemed pointless to knock and the two men already in the room didn't seem very ready to make an issue of it. Derek found a vacant chair and collapsed heavily into it.

"Well, what's the picture?" he asked.

Watson had been second mate of *Cockade* for years. Derek had never had much respect for him and looking at him now he felt what little he did have ebbing away. Sitting stiffly behind the captain's desk in his impeccably tailored uniform Watson seemed to personify everything that Derek hated in the navy. The rigidity, the depersonalisation, the blind obedience that was at once the service's greatest strength and its worst drawback. The little man in the uniform summed it all up. He was a tribute to his training, but it did not take a trained observer to see the fear hovering around the eyes and the corners of the mouth. Watson was scared. He said nothing, but sat still, staring at the wall. Ignoring him, Derek turned to the other man.

"Well, chief?"

McIntosh, the chief engineer, rubbed a hand wearily through his thinning hair and ticked off the items from a paper in front of him.

"We're more than ninety per cent disabled. Nine compartments have air, the remaining forty-one are blown. The whole port side is full of space. Armament control is wrecked and most of the crews are gone. Even if we could get a gun to bear we couldn't fire it. Unless there are others alive forrard we've lost better than seventy per cent of the crew, and another ten per cent is laid up."

"How many men, altogether?" Derek asked.

"Alive, you mean? Twenty-seven."

"I'm surprised we've got that many."

"It's a miracle," McIntosh conceded. "That torpedo tore along our hull from stem to stern. It opened every compartment on the port side and then went on without exploding. If it had gone off anywhere within a mile of our tail section we would have been dead for sure. As it was, the engine room was left intact as well as the main access corridor on the starboard side and most of the bays from the waist back."

"I suppose we were lucky," Derek said.

"Oh yes, very lucky," Watson broke in. "No power, no guns, hardly any crew, and that damn great monster out there just waiting to pot us."

"I nearly forgot about the fort," Derek said. "Is there any way we can see it?"

McIntosh fingered the control panel on the desk. "One of the eyes to port is still working," he said. "You can see part of it anyway."

On the wall a screen flickered and on to it floated the fort. It was an impossibly swollen moon dwarfing them with its vast bulk. All over its surface gun emplacements bristled, launching pits pointed black eyes, radar turrets squatted expectantly. Inside, they knew the asteroid was honeycombed with arms dumps, control rooms, living quarters. Half a mile down, at its heart, the Kriks could live for years, controlling the guns remotely and thumbing their noses at the earth fleet. Derek knew asteroids. He had worked for the navy five years now as a civilian adviser on fortifications like this. Nothing but an atom bomb could wreck it, and to use such a weapon here at close range would be fatal to the ship that launched it.

McIntosh expressed the opinions of them all. "Cunning beggars," he said. "They knew we had to come in at this angle to strike the main cities and they planted these beauties right across our path. Either we knock them out or we give up and go home." He grinned. "It's a good joke on you, eh Barnes?"

"Joke?"

"Well, they only put you with us to study these things from close quarters, didn't they?"

" 'To examine, evaluate and if at all possible to formulate a method of reducing such fortifications' " Derek quoted wryly. "Yes, I suppose you're right. This is as good a way as any to work on the problem. But speaking of going home, what chance do we have in that direction?"

There was a long silence. Each knew the answer but none would put it into words. Finally McIntosh spoke.

"By ourselves, none. With a tow. . . ."

"A tow!" Watson said bitterly. "Some chance! Only a fool would come back in here with that monster staring over our shoulders. We don't have a prayer."

To Derek, the room seemed suddenly smaller, more congested. The fort's presence bore down on them relentlessly, crushing out the last juices of life and hope. He turned to the view screen and watched the intricate ballet outside as wrecks and pieces of debris circled against the backdrop of coldly burning stars. On the far right hand edge of the screen a bulbous white object was edging into view. Derek strained his eyes, trying to make it out. It was like a huge balloon split open but still inflated. He turned to McIntosh.

"What's that? Down in the corner there."

The engineer looked closely at the screen, then turned it a little closer. Finally he grunted.

"Huh. A blimp. I didn't recognise it for a minute. It's one of those radar dummies they made up to try and confuse the radarscopes. You know—a big plastic sphere silvered on the inside to reflect back pulses. I don't know how effective they were. Judging by that one I wouldn't say they'd been much good. It looks like a torpedo has blown it to bits."

"Just wondered," Derek said. "It looks . . ."

He never finished the sentence. Outside in the corridor there were shouts and the sound of running feet. A second later someone pounded on the door.

"Leak," the voice shouted. "We've sprung a leak!"

The word jolted them from their seats. To a spacer a leak was the ultimate disaster. A fear of it is drummed into him so deeply that even in his sleep he would respond instantly to the alarm. There was a rush to the door even before the last echoes of the call had died. Derek was first

out. Wrenching the door open he ran to one of the crimson emergency chests bolted to the wall. It was full of various sized patches. He snatched up the largest and moved as fast as he could in the direction of the shouting. The break was forrard. He hadn't been down this far since the action and it appalled him to see how badly the ship had been battered, even though McIntosh had already told him the details. On paper, things were never real. Now he saw that the whole hull was twisted and contorted by the punishment it had taken. Debris littered the floors and in some places even the paint had been stripped from the wall by an outside explosion. Almost every second gravity plate was out and his progress became a grotesque parade of hops, floats and stumbling steps.

A little knot of men was clustered around a door leading to the central core of cabins, now open to space. One of the men had thrown a piece of scrap plastoid over the door and two others were holding it there. In the centre of the sheet a ragged depression showed that a ventilation grille had blown out into one of the evacuated compartments. Derek stripped the covering from the patch.

"Okay—let her go," he said to the men.

They lifted their hands. Instantly the depression deepened and like a greedy mouth sucked up the rest of the sheet. For a second there was a rising shriek as air rushed through after it. A gathering current drew them all forward. Then, in one quick movement, Derek plastered the patch over the hole. The scream stopped abruptly. Gratefully the men relaxed.

Watson and McIntosh were behind him now, staring as he was at the patch, the door and the bulkhead in which it was set. When eventually Watson spoke, it was to the crewmen. "That was good thinking," he said. "Better check forrard and see if any of the other doors need reinforcing."

When they were gone the three officers turned again to the bulkhead, all hoping that their suspicions had been incorrect. But it was obvious that the collapse of the door register had been only the forewarning of a worse disaster. Deprived of support the main frame of the hull was twisting. The register had been a start. Next the whole door would go, then the corridor wall would tear away from the

hull like paper. After that the *Cockade* would break up like a cheap toy.

They straggled back into the main cabin and collapsed into the same chairs they had occupied before. By now the air was becoming stuffy. Before long it would be foul, and finally unbreathable. It was as if the lifeblood of the *Cockade* was leaking away through its pores.

"It's going to break up," Derek said eventually.

Neither of the others said anything. Watson played absently with a paperweight. McIntosh stared at the viewplate and the vast overbearing bulk of the fortress. Their lassitude was irritating.

"Well, hasn't anybody got anything to say?"

Watson looked up. "What is there to say?"

"We could be thinking of some way to get out of this mess."

McIntosh hooted derisively. "Get out? You aren't half optimistic. We're not going to get out of this mess alive. Unless . . ."

Watson's eyes met his. As if some unspoken dialogue had taken place between them, both turned to look at Derek.

"Unless what?"

"Unless we . . . surrender," McIntosh said, looking away.

Derek sat upright in his chair in astonishment. "Surrender! My God, don't be a complete fool, Mac."

"But he's right, Barnes," Watson broke in. "Patriotism is all very well but . . ."

"Patriotism be damned," Derek shouted. "I'm talking about plain common sense. You know the Kriks take no prisoners. Or at least they never let prisoners live. What do you think this war's about anyway? If the Kriks hadn't slaughtered the Venus colony, we'd probably be trading with them instead of fighting them. But they're killers. They fight to win and they don't take on free boarders for the duration. If we went out there to surrender, we wouldn't have a chance."

"We haven't got a chance now," Watson said. "And let me remind you you're only a junior member of this crew, despite your pips. I still run this ship and if I decide to surrender, that's final. You hear me, Barnes?"

But Derek didn't reply. He was looking at the viewplate and the bleak starscape that surrounded him. Among the wrecked ships he could see more blimps floating, drifting eerily among the wrecks like huge jellyfish, soft and opaque. Most of them were whole but as he watched a damaged one wallowed into view. It had taken a direct hit. One whole side was shredded by the blast of a torpedo explosion and gaped at the stars with a huge ragged mouth. The sight stirred something in Derek, some memory of . . . yes, of course . . . of engineering exercises, of an expedition to Sirius only a few years ago, in *Cockade*. It was risky but it might work. He swivelled to face the other men.

"Listen," he said urgently. "We might have a chance. Do you remember Sirius, about a year, eighteen months ago? That technique we were trying?"

Watson's mouth fell open as he looked over Derek's shoulder at the viewplate. "You can't be serious," he said. "You mean, use the blimp. . . ." He threw up his hands. "It would never work."

"Why shouldn't it? The blimp can be manoeuvred and we still have torpedoes, or at least the heads."

McIntosh shook his head. "Pure fantasy. You'd never make it."

"But it's a chance."

"No more than if we surrender."

"McIntosh is right," Watson said. "As acting captain, I'm ordering the crew to abandon ship."

Derek jumped to his feet. "But you can't!"

"That's an order," Watson said.

Derek hardly knew he had drawn his sidearm. It seemed to jump into his hand and level its muzzle at the two men without any prompting from his brain. Both started.

"What do you think you're doing, Barnes? Put that . . ."

Watson never finished the sentence. The blaster beam took him squarely on the mouth with the power of an uppercut and he fell over backwards, unconscious. McIntosh was faster but Derek caught him a glancing blow as he dived towards him. He took one step towards the man trying vainly to rise and looked into his angry face.

"Sorry, Mac," he said, then fired the shot that would

put him out for at least another three hours. Then, rigidly under control, he stepped out into the corridor.

"Now remember," he said when the party had assembled at the airlock half an hour later. "The important thing about this operation is speed. Right now we're directly over a spot on the fort that's been rather badly battered. If our luck is in they won't be observing very carefully through that sector. As long as we're over it we're fairly safe."

He glanced towards the two men holding the long metal cylinder.

"Careful with that thing. Make sure it doesn't stay too long in the direct sunlight. That timefuse is tricky."

The expressions on their face showed they didn't have to be reminded. Any man who leaves the warhead of an incendiary torpedo in the direct sunlight deserves everything he gets.

Derek looked around at the little group. "Right," he said. "Good luck—we're going to need it."

As the men were moving out of the lock Derek paused a moment to look across the battlefield. Against the blazing stars the wrecks were as still and white as gravestones. Under each a hundred men lay dead. Perhaps the *Cockade* would soon join them. Swallowing his fear he released his magnetic boots and jetted towards the radar blimp that hung like a gibbous moon in the sky above them. Its torn side hung open like a gaping mouth waiting to swallow all of them. And in the background the fort glowered waiting to see the kill. At the halfway point there was the inevitable and sudden "turnover" when the blimp changed from a moon above them to a bulging plain towards whose wrinkled surface they were falling.

They dropped into the sphere like snowflakes drifting into a bowl. It was like entering another world. The gleaming interior of the sphere took their reflections and multiplied them a million times, so that it seemed the whole inside surface was crawling with tiny space-suited figures. But they had no time to admire the sight. Derek fumbled at the instrument pack at his side and started making his calculations. Even with the special pincers fitted to the

spacesuit "hands" it was almost impossible to handle a pocket computer and taking sights while wearing a helmet was, he found, impossible.

Finally he made the best guess he could and helped the others manhandle the incendiary into place. The time clock on one end was already set for five minutes. He pushed the crimson plunger on the improvised fuse as far as it would go and felt through his hand the vibration as the hidden mechanism started its slow march towards destruction. Then they turned and jetted for the *Cockade* as fast as they could.

The trip that, travelling out, had seemed so brief now lengthened into eternity. They felt like insects crawling across a vast plate, easily crushed by even the most casual blow. Fearfully they watched the fort. When they were halfway across a light flashed somewhere on the dark side of the asteroid. A few seconds later a turret began to inch slowly around to bear on them and the helpless *Cockade*. Derek stared at his watch through the transparent wrist of his suit. Only a few seconds to go. A tiny drop of sweat touched the edge of the watch glass and oozed up onto the face. He watched it, fascinated, his whole body tensed for the expected blast. The second hand inched along, hardly seeming to move. It approached the mark, reached it—passed it. And still nothing from the blimp or the fort. He glanced desperately over his shoulder to where the blimp continued to float, cold and silent. Unless it happened soon. . . .

Then the bomb went off.

First there was nothing but the slow blooming of red light inside the sphere. But it continued to grow, doubling and redoubling until the balloon burned like a red dwarf star. Still there was no end to it. From red it brightened to white, then blue as the bomb's reaction took hold. Inside, the heat roared out towards the walls and was thrown back and out through the gaping hole in the side. The blimp had become, as Derek had hoped, a huge parabolic reflector throwing the combined heat of the incendiary reaction into one concentrated beam of heat of tens of thousands of degrees.

That beam was focused on the fort.

He had used this technique on asteroids dozens of times, splitting them up so that the mining ships could get in close to the central core, but never against men. It was a terrible sight. Touching the rock of the asteroid the flame cut deep. Around the edges of the gash the stone bubbled and ran. A turret in its path glowed red and crumpled like wet paper. Burning through stone, steel and every other material the beam groped down towards the heart of the fort, probing for the soft central sections where the Kriks were hiding. There was no sound, but from the gaping slice cut out by the torch, smoke was billowing and the white frost of escaping air. A moment later there was a vibration that shook the surface of the fort like an earthquake. Then nothing. The blimp was now a dying ember of dull red, its sides crumbling after the blast of heat. But the beam from it in its few seconds of life had put a bolt right to the heart of the fort.

Feeling dizzy, Derek hurriedly switched off his power pack and drifted the last few yards to the *Cockade*. Inside the ship it was a riot of congratulations. "The most incredible . . . marvellous. . . ." Derek was embarrassed and cut through it all as soon as he could with a matter-of-fact question.

"Has anybody signalled for a tow? This tub's not going to hold together, you know."

Someone ran off to broadcast an SOS and Derek wandered towards the captain's personal cabin. The door to the day cabin was still shut, he noticed. There would be the devil to pay about his slugging of the two men but he supposed that would be hushed up. The navy would be very glad indeed to have this method of cracking the space-forts—happy enough to forget any little infringements that might have occurred. Finally he reached the captain's cabin and pushed open the door. Everything was there, just as Franklin had left it. The chess set on which he and Derek had played so often, the pictures of Mrs. Franklin and the captain's son about whom he had heard so much. Even the log book was open on the desk at the last entry. Everything neat, everything shipshape. It was the home of a man who would do everything by the book ; the symbol, in fact, of a way of thinking that would always fail under

stress. Franklin, Watson, McIntosh; none of them could have thought of the blimp idea, nor carried it out.

He walked to the desk and looked down at the log. He read the last entry. "0900 hours," it said. "Entered action against space fort sector XG7. Object—destruction." There was nothing more. Derek sat down and picked up the pen. In his neatest hand he wrote across the page "Mission accomplished."

GORDON WALTERS

NO GUARANTEE

DIG THAT CRAZY IDEA

by

Frank Webb McCaffery.

Written for the Leicester Literary Longhairs

27 July 1967.

YOU NEVER THOUGHT this paper would ever appear, did you? Look at the date it was written. At least six months after I promised I'd produce the first of our little monographs. And I'll bet you were all pretty sure it would stay locked up in my mind until the cows come home and the sun goes nova.

Tradition, for a start, is against anything like the Leicester Literary Longhairs starting a successful publishing circle. And it did die—damned nearly.

In fact, it was revived just ten minutes ago, when I saw that the moon-landing was going to be broadcast tonight on the good old steam radio. I tossed a sheet of paper into the typewriter so fast it nearly caught fire. It certainly fired my imagination. I can't be such a cynical character as my reputation makes out if the first moon landing can inspire me to do something I'd hoped I'd forgotten all about months ago.

I've got one complaint, though. You gave me a very harmless subject. Inevitable, I suppose. I can see your minds working now, as you decided who to give the first assignment to.

"Old Frank McC. He's the celebrity of the group. The one who earns money, at any rate. Have to give him the honour of doing the first paper. But remember what we decided. The author is given a free reign. There's no editor. And we are letting him loose on a typewriter AND a printing press. You know how controversial his views on some

subjects are! As publishers, we'd find ourselves in court before we could say 'But it's LITERATURE!' We'll have to give him something quite innocuous to write about. Something with social significance strained right out of it. But what?"

"We *could* get him to write a story for us?"

"You kidding? We do, at least, want this circle to have some literary value in its productions. His stories have none of that in them."

"He could write about how he gets his crazy ideas. He's good at that sort of thing, and he couldn't put his feet into anything whilst describing how he got the idea for 'Flame-Plants of Mercury'. The only significance he'd dig out of that theme is cosmic significance. . . ."

I don't guarantee a damned thing.

I don't know what will spew forth from the old typewriter unless it's a stream of consciousness. On the mantelpiece, between a model of a rocket presented to me by a group of American writers and an empty beer bottle which looks a lot nearer the real thing, is a radio. Not one of your new-fangled miracles of Western Science constructed in Japan, but a real old vintage piece. Its cats' whiskers are twitching as they strive to pick up Radio Luxemburg. But they won't struggle for long. In a minute or two, I'll be switching over to the B.B.C., who are relaying the moon landing direct from whatever obscure crater the *Frontier* 67 flops down in.

I can tell you this much—I'll certainly be writing about the moon landing. It won't be a word by word transcription, though. Two fingers can't keep up with two lips. This is mankind's first moon landing unless some mad scientist managed it back in the middle ages before Newton spoilt everything with his Law of Gravity. With the instincts of the true opportunist, I'm going to use this history-making event as the background to my paper of literary significance. Sometime during the transmission, something will happen which will give me the germ of an idea for a story.

I don't know what it'll be. It might be something the pilot says. Walter Quincey O'Brien. Might even be a cough, or the sound of him scratching his ear. Or scratching another part of his anatomy. Or munching a vitamin pill.

But it won't matter what. Inspiration will come. It always does, from the most unexpected quarters. Even the hind-quarters, maybe.

Hullo, it's starting. Roger Lancelyn is talking to us, now. He's the B.B.C. man who usually covers historic occasions like this—with pretentious obscurity. He's a middle-aged fellow who's full of flowery phrases, yet he's as composed as a mill-pond in the doldrums as he radiates an air of enchantment with the cosmic significance of Britain's contributions to the project. (Messrs. Dad's got the contract for O'Brien's baked breakfast beans.)

Ah, now Lancelyn's shut up, and his faithful listeners are being serenaded by the full orchestration of solar static. A cosmic crackle to make your ears think they'd got connected to the teeth of a chattering chimpanzee. In a minute or two, O'Brien will be adding his cosmic cackle to the confusion.

But supposing that something has gone wrong. *'GONE WRONG'* in capitalised italics. Suppose, for some reason, that O'Brien can't get through to Earth. Communication goes dead. His Deep South accent isn't able to bridge a quarter of a million miles. There's nothing wrong with his equipment, mind. The cause is *alien,* of significance beyond the bounds of space, time and man's mind. . . .

It happens as the *Frontier 67* gets close to the surface of the moon. The ship has already done a couple of orbits round the moon, to get its breath back, so to speak. It is now making an approach for a landing in Tycho. O'Brien, sitting in his deceleration hammock, is letting the automatic controls do all the work. He hasn't got a choice—he hasn't any windows and can't see anything outside the ship. He has to twiddle his thumbs—and the action catalyses a certain twiddling of his mind. He starts holding forth poetically on the aesthetic values of being the first American to set foot on Lunar soil.

He continues for a couple of minutes before he realises that he's lost his audience. Nobody on Earth can hear him —and that's a hell of a position for a garrulous Irishman to be in! Worse, he can't hear his mates back at Cape Carnival applauding him.

This is desperate. What does he do?

That's exactly it. What *would* he do? Would he go insane? Would he offer calm little prayers to his Maker—or his Sponsor? Would he call on the Little People to help him?

Or does he sit there, with full confidence in his friends on Earth, and wait for the shock of landing like the calm, well-adjusted All-American Astronaut he is?

I haven't the faintest idea, so let's go back to Lancelyn. . . .

He's in a flap! That's the only way to describe it! Something's happened. O'Brien started sending his good-will message, but before he'd negotiated more than a pair of platitudes, the transmission stopped. Just like that, with the spaceship no more than five miles above Tycho. They've been going mad at Cape Carnival trying to contact him. But, so far, they've had no luck.

The ship hasn't crashed, however. They tracked it down to a perfect landing—it touched ground a couple of miles in from the rim of the crater.

I can't help laughing. All their carefully rehearsed speeches about man's frontiers are finished with. All we're getting now is a series of disjointed messages as different people try to get in touch with O'Brien. I wouldn't be surprised if some African witch-doctor somewhere in the heart of the jungle isn't beating out a message on a tom-tom.

Anyway, they've finally got around to cutting out all that live stuff, and Lancelyn's with us once more, using that very serious voice of his. The one with the Sense of Urgency.

Back to the story. Yes, I might as well continue with the train of thought I started, now that O'Brien has so kindly authenticated my background for me.

The biggest question, of course, is "What is causing the communications breakdown?" The *simple* answer is, of course, a mechanical failure, and that's probably what has happened. But they'd have duplicated circuits installed, and for them all to go out of action would be inconceivable. Certainly, the intelligent readers of the end result of the space epic wouldn't swallow that one. That reintro-

duces my alien influence. Suppose there's some weird radiation eddy pervading that particular part of the moon. Nice, convenient term, 'radiation eddy'. Covers a multitude of sins—and a multitude of phenomena. In this one, radio signals get swallowed, chewed up and converted into meaningless background noises. It's feasible. After all, what do we really *know* about space until we go there and find out?

But supposing. . . .

Supposing signal digestion is only a by-product of this alien phenomenon. Suppose it has other, more sinister effects?

What effects?

O'Brien is, save for the lights on his instrumental panels, in darkness. They said in the papers that he preferred dim lighting. I wonder why. He is suspended naked in foam-plastic. Quite the nature boy, this astronaut. He will be conscious, above all else, of himself. Every single part of his body will come under his painstaking scrutiny every moment of the trip. He has been trained to be aware of himself, for he is now more than a human being. He is that most rarefied, highly-advanced form of life, the test-animal. The guinea-pig. Instruments are recording his pulse, respiration, temperature and a host of other physiological data. But the most important records of all can only be measured by himself—his symptoms. How he feels. That's the official reason for his wearing his birthday suit, leaving his spacesuit hanging up on the hook—figuratively speaking, at least.

The symptoms of weariness after the dreadful forces of deceleration have left him. The strange feeling of buoyancy which one gets in the lunar gravity—one-sixth of Earth's—have replaced them. His foam cushioning will have a different consistency. It will make him feel that he is in a truly alien place. And he will feel a small, hesitant yearning for home, even as he stops trying to make his radio work, and tried to find, with a sharp flick of fear, what it is that is making him feel so—*wrong*.

They still haven't contacted O'Brien. Very little information beyond that simple fact is being given out. Security,

I suppose. Lancelyn is still on the air, and now he's filling us all in some of Walter Quincey O'Brien's background. He was, of course, a hero in the Korean War. He is officially credited with seven MiG's—a record which makes Richtofen's fifty-odd British aircraft in World War I look like showing off. "He's married, of course, with two or three children. . . ."

I assure you, it is Lancelyn who is uncertain of the exact number, not O'Brien!

And now, he's giving us all the details of what O'Brien did a couple of days before take-off. Unfortunately, he's stopping short of *those* intimate details. The most important pre-blastoff event appears to be this: the filling of one of his molars dropped out and he was in two minds whether to report the fact or not. If he did report it, the trip would be postponed until they gave him a new one and were satisfied that it had taken properly. So, he kept it quite heroically, and only told them about it when he was outside Earth's atmosphere.

I *feel* for him—I lost mine this morning.

It wasn't troubling him, though, and he said that exploring the hole with the tip of his tongue kept him from getting bored with the trip, which is an excellent illustration of his philosophical capacity. He reckons to have explored every single serration and spike of that black abyss. . . .

Hey, this is just what I want!

You want to know where I get my crazy ideas? Well, I just got this idea from that cavity in O'Brien's molar.

Because, you see, O'Brien doesn't always use his tongue to feel that hole. It gets sore, so he sometimes puts the forefinger of his right hand there and gives the tooth a wiggle. It's slightly loose. And that forefinger's vaguely reassuring. The hole no longer resembles a gaping pit leading to the Abyss of Hades. It feels a lot smaller. Curious fact, but it's true. Try it, sometime.

O'Brien's strange sensations are getting stronger. Something is very definitely wrong. Something. . . .

He realises, with a shock, that it is his tooth. The hole is getting larger and larger, as his forefinger explores it. More than that, his finger feels extraordinarily sensitive. A faint, but definite tingling sensation is beginning to wash

over it, over his whole body, like the first waves of an incoming tide splashing a rock. His whole body is becoming vibrantly *alive* in a way it has never done before.

He is deathly afraid, even though the sensations are pleasant.

Then, abruptly, stark terror descends on him.

For all the lights in his cabin go out, save for three dull spots on the instrument panel, the size of boils on a man's neck. He is now completely cut off. There is only the sound of his breathing as he lies in his pressure foaming.

He lies still and waits, for that is all he can do. Waits as the tingling increases steadily.

I'll have to wait, too—for more inspiration!

And here it comes! Lancelyn is on the air again. He's saying. . . .

God, I must be a prophet. Cape Carnival's monitors have just established that every light in O'Brien's cabin has gone out. It's utterly dark in there.

That's the second coincidence tonight. However, coincidences are always happening. Life is one big coincidence, when you come to think about it. But I can't help wondering if, somehow, I was *told* what had happened on board *Frontier 67*. Impossible, of course. And that's one of the things you have to watch out for in writing—not to get so involved in the yarn you're spinning that you start believing it. If I started to do that, the next thing that would happen is that my lights go out and my skin would begin to tingle, tingle, tingle. . . .

Boo!

Made you jump, eh?

To get back to the main theme. . . . O'Brien is in darkness, but everything else seems to be quite normal in the ship. The temperature is nice and balmy, and the air purifiers are chugging away merrily. O'Brien is still able to carry out his duties—he was trained to work by touch as well as with sight. But he finds that the impressions he gets of his surroundings are becoming rather curious. They seem to be taking on a new dimension. He finds it more and more difficult to interpret the information he receives

through his tactile organs—his nerve endings. The tingling is upsetting his judgement, too.

He feels for the cavity in his tooth again, the cavity which was the first harbinger of doom. His tongue tells him a lie. It tells him that the cavity is still the same size. But the fingertip assures him that that cavity has grown larger—it must be a quarter of an inch across—as big as the molar itself. The molar has grown, too.

He realizes that that is the crux of the matter. He does not have a growing tooth, of course. Instead, his forefinger is growing smaller, making the tooth seem larger. Soon, it would grow so small that it would be able to sink into the cavity. And the rest of his body, too, would be shrinking. It was all tingling.

He starts exploring his surroundings to confirm this. He touches places where there were small gaps—the gaps feel wider. Larger. Everything he touches seems to confirm that he is growing smaller.

He cries a little at this point. Then his hard American training brings him back to his senses. His thoughts, now, are for those back on Earth who would follow him. They have to be warned of the danger. And, even though he knows his radio isn't working, he cries aloud into the microphone. His voice echoes weirdly around the tiny cabin. But a tiny part of his mind is now telling him that shrinking is not all of the horror. There is the illogical to be considered, on top of the incredible. If his *body* is shrinking, what is happening to his tongue? For the tongue is not shrinking. It is, like the tooth, remaining the same size. And it would grow larger and larger in comparison with his body, until. . . .

Hysteria touches him like a cold, sharp hand. His thoughts swing along a path which leads to insanity. . . .

Suppose his whole head is remaining its normal size? Suppose he is evolving into the superman so popular with science fiction writers—*homo superior*? The spindly intellectual with the gigantic, globular brain? . . .

I guess a couple of screams will set the mood nicely at this point.

Nicely. The story's coming along very nicely, isn't it. Becoming quite a fantastic affair—and what did I start with? Nothing more than a simple breakdown in communication and a lost filling. . . .

Breakdown of the radio? Or a transfer to another waveband. The telepathic waveband? Suppose there's some poor fellow on Earth receiving mental impulses in his dreams, is living through the same horror as O'Brien. . . .

No, no. That's complicating the story too much. Mustn't do that.

Lancelyn's still got no news of the real O'Brien. But there's certainly no need to worry about him. He is supposed to remain on the moon for five hours, after which time the *Frontier 67* will return automatically to Earth. In another half hour or so, O'Brien is due to climb into his space suit and take man's first country stroll across the moon. The ship landed in the shadow of the crater's wall, but the light reflected from the illuminated part of Tycho will furnish him with more than enough light to see where he is going.

Enough of the factual stuff. By the time you read this, *Frontier 67* will be history. The story's the important thing—and it's coming along like a house on fire. There's something to be said for this method of plotting. The actual pounding of the keys of the typewriter seems to set the old imagination free. I've never known one of my stories to develop as smoothly as this. I'll have to try it more often.

Poor old O'Brien—the fictitious one—will be in a hell of a state by now. His senses are mostly out of action. It's completely dark. He can hear nothing but his breathing and the assorted murmurings of the ship's electronics. There is nothing to smell or taste. There is only the sense of touch—and that tells him that he is still growing smaller. The tingling is becoming almost unbearable. It's as though he is suffering from 'pins and needles', all over his body.

Idea!

This idea occurs to O'Brien. Suppose that is exactly what *is* happening to him. As well as growing smaller, he is becoming repossessed of something which, up to now, has always been dormant in the human body. Something which

is brought to life by the curious conditions in Tycho's crater.

He files the idea away, and remembers his duties. In a few minutes, he must put on his space suit and leave the ship. Too bad he didn't have a dog to take with him, he jokes. His mind has now cleared. The panic has been conquered.

He undoes his straps. . . .

The universe, which he had forced into a semblance of logic, goes haywire again. His orientation is immediately lost. Like a blind man whose only guide is touch and who is suddenly dumped in an unfamiliar setting, he is lost. He is lost in space—and in size. He realizes that he must have grown very much smaller than he realized he had while lying strapped in his hammock. . . .

Strapped. If he had been getting smaller, his straps would have loosened. They hadn't. Damn. I'll have to think up an explanation for that anomaly, or the whole story will be wrecked. Of course, they're self-tightening. Damned clever, these Americans. But I won't be able to make this crack in the final version of the story. It's a horror story, there's no getting away from it, and a facetious remark is right out of phase.

The cabin is so much larger than it was, subjectively speaking, that he might as well be in a different world. He realizes he would never be able to find his way about, much less locate the space suit.

It would be no use if he could, though. It wouldn't fit him.

He begins to sob again, wishing the lights would come on, or that somebody would speak to him.

What a nightmare! Had he really arrived on the moon? Or was all this a dream experience during the blackout of the blast off? Or would he wake up to find himself in a testing chamber with his colleagues all laughing at his discomfort?

Lancelyn is saying: "We can now bring you a statement from the Officer in Charge of Ground Operations at Cape Kennedy. Come in, Colonel Hansen."

"Walter Quincey O'Brien has not left the *Frontier 67* as scheduled."

Isn't it pitiful? You'll have to take my word it, but the tone in that colonel's voice displays disappointment in the disruption of his careful schedule, not concern for the poor fellow undergoing an experience no man has ever suffered before.

It makes you sick. Man conquered his last frontier when he dived an old World War II Spitfire from eight miles up and broke through the sound barrier by accident. Sure, there've been a whole lot of new frontiers explored since then—but man's been a passenger every time. Machines have been doing the actual exploring. And if man can't match up to being a machine, he has to lie by the wayside watching them all flow past. Well he had better wake up. Out there is a man, Walter Quincey O'Brien, who's crossing a whole new scad of untrodden frontiers. Something in the Tycho Crater is making him smaller and smaller and a whole bunch of clicking computors won't be able to do a damned thing for him. It's something for man—*and man alone*. The *Frontier 67* isn't getting smaller. Just Walter Quincey O'Brien.

Whew!

I've been writing at a terrific speed. My whole body seems to be alive to the stream of consciousness pouring itself into my typewriter keys.

I'd better slow down before they start melting. Before I have myself believing my own story. Like I was up there.

Nothing else is happening over the radio, so I'll ease back to it, keeping it in its proper perspective this time. The fictional O'Brien is a pigmy lost in a world of giant things. To retain the last vestiges of sanity, he is exploring any object he can to try and identify it. So far, he has failed. But at last, his hand touches a smooth, circular disc surrounded by a slightly raised rim. It had the dimmest of green lights perched above it—a light which signifies that the electron gradient across two highly vital points is still within its prescribed limits. The dial beneath measures the exact gradient. He can read its ghostly, luminous hands,

but very faintly. Whoever made the instrument skimped the radium.

It doesn't matter, now. The main thing is that he has identified an object—an object whose true dimensions he knows. It is three inches in diameter. He places his tingling hand across it, and by the sense of touch tries to estimate its apparent size. His senses whirl for a moment. The tingling is always worse when he touches something; he almost cries out with the pain, but is afraid to in case the cry becomes a scream of hysteria.

When his nerves have steadied, his brain is aware of two contradictory facts. The first is that his tactile organs—his nerve endings—have told him that the dial is about nine inches across. Therefore his hand has shrunk to a third of its former size. The other fact. . . .

The other fact should have been comforting, but in combination with the first, it brings a fresh gushet of terror and distills it into thick, fiery drops.

His forefinger, from the tip to the joint with the palm of his hand *just* spans the dial. It *should* have only spanned a third of the distance across the glass. His forefinger—it was its usual size! Yet, the dial still felt as though it was nine inches across.

He is unable to control himself any longer. Images flash in front of his mind's eye, which stares, out of focus, at a few faint smudges of light.

And a new horror has been creeping up on him, unawares. This is the dreadful conviction that he is not alone—and that, as well as being in *Frontier 67* he is sharing a room with something on a planet with the gravity of Earth, not the moon. Earth itself?

There is a curious sensation of communication, of strange new paths open to consciousness. A stream of consciousness which is flowing from the Moon to the Earth, and carrying with it many strange things which have never before bridged the gap. Things which have been thrust across the intervening space by the power in the spaceship. Power which has been diverted from the ship's lighting to act as a carrier.

And what are these things that are carried? There are telepathic impulses—and there are other things. Mysterious

forces which have been working on O'Brien's body are now travelling across space to Earth, to affect similarly every inhabitant on Earth. To make every man grow smaller. To make his skin tingle.

And the longer the ship stays on the moon, the longer those inimical forces have to act upon the defenceless Earth. If it stays there its full five hours, then every man on Earth will become affected as O'Brien has, in that dreadful crater of Tycho. . . .

STOP!

Stop reading this. Rip that last page out. I can't allow it to stay. Fascinating though this development has been, it'll have to be cut out. I'm over-complicating the story—and have fallen into one of the biggest traps to be found in plotting. One story—one idea. It ruins everything if you pile every idea you get into one story—unless you're writing an opus like *Flight Into Yesterday*. This is only a short story—didn't I make that clear? I should have.

So, attractive as all this is—and I got so worked up as I was writing it that I find I'm sweating—I'll have to drop it. Or note it down for future reference. Yes, I'll do that.

It's just as well I broke off here, too. Lancelyn is saying that in view of O'Brien's not acting as scheduled, they are going to bring *Frontier 67* home early. Noble of them. In fact, they're raising her from the surface now.

And this is *wonderful!*

For I've just hit on the perfect ending for my story—the ending which I was scrabbling for when the communications idea interrupted things. . . .

During O'Brien's sojourn on the moon, with its one-sixth, alien gravity, he has been shuttling between madness and a terror-laden sanity. But now as the rocket lifts itself off the surface with a body-cracking snarl, he drops all the way into that awful pit of night where the universe is composed of animals whining. Of creatures called dogs which are now bigger than he is, and of cats which lurk in the cavities of molars. And birds which have grown as large as pterodactyls, but which fit into his jacket pocket.

It is a great tribute to the selection of astronauts that O'Brien has taken so long to go insane. Any ordinary person

would have gone mad within seconds of feeling that dreadful cavity. . . .

He gibbers—a perfectly adjusted madman.

End of story.

There you are. That's a science fiction story, from beginning to end—and I'm glad I started this project, a couple of hours ago. It has been a marvellous experience for me. For the first time in my life, as I bashed out the above synopsis, I felt I was almost living it. In fact, I could feel that crazy tingling starting in my own flesh as I knocked out those last few paragraphs.

The only thing to do now is to furnish an explanation for the fictional O'Brien's experiences. Personally, I think it would be better left without an explanation. But if I was submitting this to an editor instead of publishing it myself, I'd have to put one in. Since the story wouldn't be complete without an explanation, I'd better rustle one up quickly.

I can still feel that tingling I imagined. All over my body. Must be a form of mental exhilaration. But you know what it reminds me of? Nerve endings gone to sleep and waking up again. *Or nerve endings in the process of synthesis.*

That will be the explanation of the story. The mysterious Lunar forces synthesised nerve endings in O'Brien's body. If his nerve endings doubled in number, tactile sensations, uncorrected by other senses, would give an impression of an object—or a hole in an object—of twice its real size. The tongue normally has a higher concentration of nerve ending than a finger tip—and therefore a cavity in a tooth seems larger when touched by the tongue than it does when touched by a finger.

I wonder what the effect on the human race would be if its nerve endings were suddenly multiplied? Supermen? Madmen? Something transcending life? Or death?

Or would he change at all? Would he just stay man, with simply a more sensitive skin?

There, of course, lie the real potentialities of this theme. There is a possible novel, here. A novel which would begin

when O'Brien returns to Earth, gibberingly mad and with his whole skin afire. . . .

But I feel I've come to the end of my inventive line. I can't think of any developments of the theme along these lines. It's almost as though the explanation was out of phase with the whole story, that it was contrived—which it was—and that there is another, correct explanation. That the correct explanation is that O'Brien, in spite of the inconsistencies in that explanation, has really started to shrink in size. . . .

I still feel instinctively that. . . .

They've contacted *Frontier 67* again! It's out of that field of radio-destruction around Tycho. They're getting the first message back from her now. The first reactions of the first man on the moon. . . .

It's gibberish. Animal mewlings. He's gone mad. . . .

The tingling hasn't gone. . . .

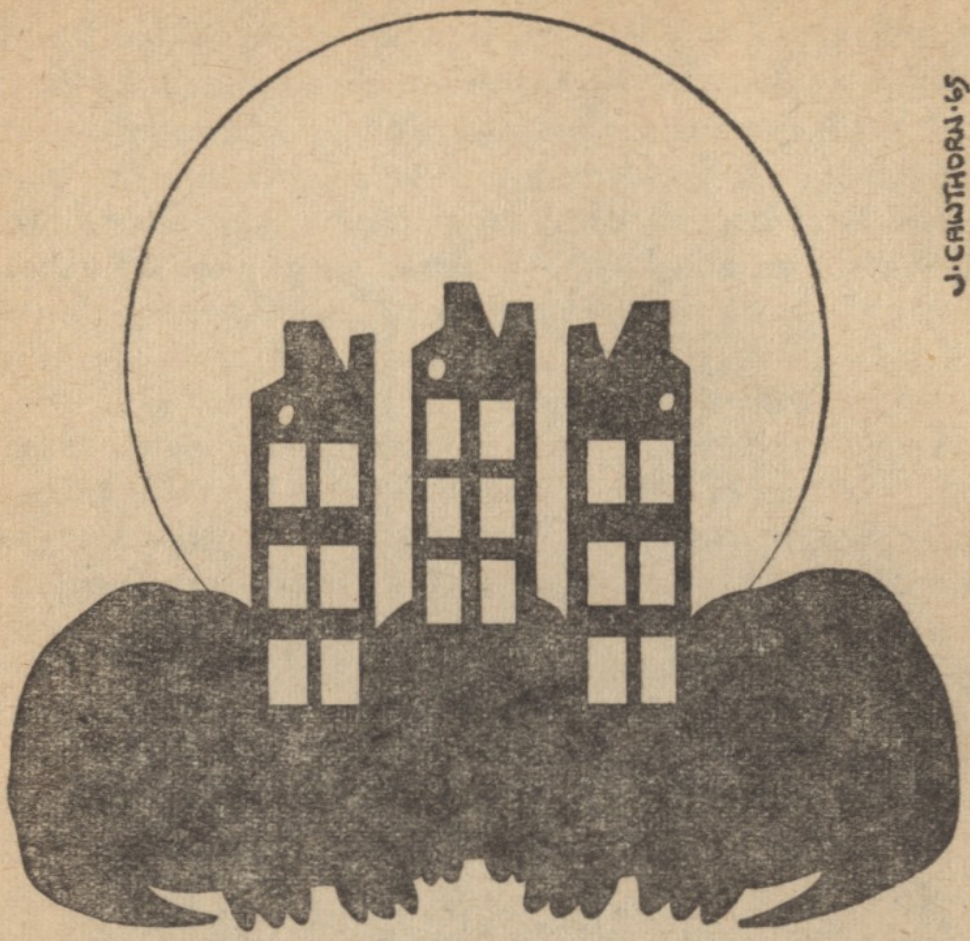
There's a sentence—up there—that I didn't quite finish. . . .

I still feel instinctively that it would be better if—there was no explanation. It makes a better horror story that way. . . .

My forefinger is touching the hole in my tooth now. . . .

Oh, God, let my explanation be true!

But I *know* it's the only bit of invention in the whole thing. . . .



HOUSE OF DUST

norman brown

THE TRIBE WAS MOVING. Its people were leaving the valley which had been the proving ground for so much recent misery and approaching the plateau above. Behind them they left the sea, flat, silent, unruffled, and unmenacing; empty, except for the smallest plankton on which life depended. Before them the desert was equally calm, stretching again as far as the eye could see, and farther, as far as the thousand mile minds of the lonely race could project, and much farther than any could visualize. Ahead,

high in the sky, made clearly visible by the weak red sun, were the outriders, the scouts, the privileged of the race, who searched the seas for the plankton and who watched the circular borders of the Earth for the winds and storms that had so recently become an enemy.

It was not long before they discovered that they had moved in vain, that the duststorms which were the reason for their departure were not a feature of the valley alone. Already, in the short time after they had left, the change in the sun was manifest. Partially hidden by the thin mists which inhabited the coastal edges, the sun had appeared to retain its former pallidness, but now, as the tribe approached the higher, clearer plains, it was obvious that the red shade was darkening. Each day's change might have been unnoticeable, but after five months the accumulated effect was stunning ; to some, frightening.

But they did not have time to speculate on this fear. The outriders swooped down with warnings of an imminent storm, and the tribe closed up for protection. The water gourds were placed in the centre of a circle, surrounded by the few flimsy weapons and other possessions with the people on the outside and only the tents as a shield.

Screams shattered the former peace of the morning as the storm arrived. This was not a new phenomenon within the confines of the tribe, but no onlooker can become indifferent to a child's screams, however often they may be repeated.

Selton Pryir was not an exception. He himself had no children, no specific person to comfort, so the mental agony of those of all the rest of the tribe was his. Among the images they projected were those he had seen many times before—vague, without sense or direction, and presenting only the most transitory connection with everyday life—but this time they seemed overwhelming. They were mirror shapes of a changeling world, with their infiltrant undertones of a primeval resonance.

He himself was not free from these miasmal visions. Often he had heard, not with his ears he was sure, but with his mind, strange rumblings and tearings, as if the sea was swamping the bottomless recesses of his intellect. Pri-

mordial wailings from the depths of the past impressed themselves on his senses, sometimes from the sufferings of the children, sometimes from he knew not where; perhaps from that very past which was arising from the newly created duststorms that ravaged the atmosphere to rampage through the tribe.

But his dreams, he knew, were not as bad as the children's, the nightmarish ramblings which penetrated his brain whenever he projected himself into their minds. Some of those around him now were writhing on the ground in apoplexy, deranged noises echoing from their lips. Selton tried to enter their dreams, but withdrew, baffled. He had found only a discordant cacophony of mental noise, from which frightening symbols emerged now and then, enhancing the likeness to a chimeral conception.

It proved that the Elder had been wrong. The storms had started three months after the tribe reached the valley and he had assumed, logically, that they were purely local phenomena, which, by their alien repugnance, exerted an undue influence on the young children. The others had agreed, believing that a move over the mountains would restore normalcy but Selton, who was the first, and so far the only adult to experience the haunting hallucinations, could never accept this. He knew that the logic could not be assailed, but his brother Klar's theory that the sun was warming after centuries of quiescence, causing the winds and storms to sweep the world, and awakening race memories and instincts in the minds of the children slipped past his reason to subjugate his emotions directly. He knew the legends of the coldness and dust which had swept the world many centuries ago, but until the storms returned, he had thought them to be no more than legends.

Now his views were being revised. The myths were assuming the visage of solid fact and Klar's theory was firmly fixed in his subconscious; he felt it to be the only explanation of the terror which the children emitted, and which was visible around him now.

He tried again to calm those near him, but again he had to retreat. A few of the minds were utterly blank, their owners receding into a womb-like catalepsy. This had been

the worst so far, but he had a certain premonition that it was not the worst to come.

He was right.

For weeks the tribe struggled across the plain, which was rapidly becoming a plain no longer. The land, formerly uniformly flat, was taking on undulating and unpredictable shapes. Here and there, instead of the eternally still, often treacherous sand, strange patches of hardness appeared, which a man could only uproot with great difficulty. But the substance had a wonderfully firm and fertile touch to the soft, kneading fingers of the people. The dust-storms were more infrequent, being replaced with violent tempests, wherein water was poured from the sky like a fantastic gourd washing the people with the sea. What had once been nothing was now a land of rivulets and rivers of water from the great floods of the skies. And all the time the temperature increased.

During this period the tribe underwent a transformation. Gone were the pale, soft skins, the short, squat legs, the hairless eyelids and the shiny heads. Hair was sprouting from the browning bodies of the survivors.

But of those there were few.

Selton had many talks with the Elder. The adults were by now almost permanently plagued by restless nights, and not a few, Selton included, were finding that their powers of teleportation and telepathy were diminishing. The children, the first to be affected by the nightmares, seemed also to be the first to recover, until it was discovered that they could receive no more than stray wisps of thought from the others. The fact that they would not develop their teleportive faculties was also concealed until one of the girls, who should by now have been able to fly short distances, tried to cross a wide ravine, and was killed instantly in the fall to the bottom.

"What do you think of Klar's theory now?" the Elder asked, after a particularly terrifying night.

"It should be extended," Selton answered. "We're regressing, not merely remembering racial experiences. Can't you see that we're nearing the time of the old

legends? That the sun is becoming hotter, and we are evolving, or devolving, to meet the changes brought about? My dreams seem symptomatic."

"Then tell me about them."

"You don't need that. I know you listen in every night. And your own should tell you how they are."

"But I want you to explain them to me. Perhaps that way I can gain a greater insight with your conscious impressions as a basis. Did you know," he went on softly, "that you are the only person who is able to visualize and recall these dreams in detail on awakening?"

"No." Selton stared into the rising landscape of the distance. Lately it was trying, somehow, to call him to it. "Haven't you asked the older children? Surely they are able to verbalize their nightmares? Children seem to have a more profound capacity for that than adults."

"Yes, I spoke to them, but it was useless. Their dreams consisted of nothing which could help the tribe. You are the only one who experiences an actual living memory of the past. If it is the past. Perhaps the young ones, being closer to the evolutionary transitions of the womb, feel directly and symbolically the racial memories of man without actually living them, as you apparently do. What do you see in those dreams? Is it the same every night, or do you follow different paths, different patterns?"

"Mostly they are different, but one usually recurs more than all the others. I can't describe the feeling it gives me when I go back—for I am sure that it is backwards into time that I retreat." Selton's eyes became indrawn, searching.

"Immense jungles, it seems, with long overhanging fronds of light pushing their way down through the great metallic structures to the people walking on the paths below. Monsters, great animals, square, flat, metal-beasts tearing between the long rows of people, swallowing up any who are incautious enough to step into their way. Other animals, too, with slender necks and short squat bodies plucking at the huge artifacts. And everywhere light. Everywhere bouncing from the great cliffs into the eyes of the people, creating a dissonant cacophony of streaming distraction. Each person is blinded for a moment as he stares around

him at the square crystals reflecting, embedded in the tall buildings."

"And then, everything fades and I stand next on a wide ribbon stretching away to the distance where, it seems, the jungle stands. It is strange, yet . . . I recognize these things, but on awakening, the meaning is lost."

"Next the sun appears suddenly. Red, yes, but not our pallid red. Rather an instantaneous sunball etched against the night blackness. Then I am blind, and nothing comes for a long time. When my vision clears, a ragged hemisphere appears, pushing against the clouds, with a thin stalk attaching it to the ground. Beside it, the horizon is flat. After that I sleep—in the dream—for a long while. When I wake up—still in the dream—flat dust is everywhere, and more is falling from the sky. I wander around, but the dream eventually fades, and I awake truly."

"When I awake, nothing is clear. Nothing affects me so strongly as that dream. But there is a longing, as if somewhere in this age I could find the outlet I seek."

For days the tribe continued. One night Selton became lost, wandering into the blackness with his lone thoughts. There was the most terrible storm of all that night. The dust whipped up garish folk-figures on the air, and the tearing, driving water pulled the ground from under his feet at each step he took. Try as he might, he could make no headway, for it was as if the whole of the past was rising to prevent his movement. Tearing squeals ran past him constantly, causing him to dodge instinctively as each approached; and the great roaring screams overhead at irregular intervals made him duck needlessly at their coming. Calls, as from the throats of a billion people, cried discordantly against the clamour of the swift-ranging storm. Massive shapes appeared for an instant as if to pinpoint his terror, but vanished as instantly when he tried to reach them.

But finally, the sky cleared. Then came the most cataclysmic vision of all.

Apparently the level of the ground in front of him had sunk a thousand feet during the night, for portrayed

against the rising, yellowing sun was a glittering hemisphere of pure light. As it shimmered, pearls of tantalizing sight glistened for a moment from within, then went, caught up in another, and yet another diffusion of the very essence of sunshine on Earth.

As Selton walked towards it, he realized that it was much more distant than he had first thought. Indeed, he needed all day to reach it, and when he did, the sun was being replaced by the constantly ephemeral colours.

He walked along, looking for an entrance to what he knew must lie beyond. It took him two more days to confirm that he was following a circle, and not a straight wall built into the desert.

He stopped when he found the cave set in the cliff which the hemisphere overhung. It was twice his height, yet it was dwarfed a hundred times by the image above.

He went in, and discovered a plaque fixed in one wall. Many years ago, man would have recognized it as a notice, but to a people who cannot and need not write, written communication is meaningless.

So Selton did not recognize it, nor the heavy red switch by its side. But his dreams had affected more than his waking thoughts, for he knew exactly what to do. Grasping it firmly with one hand he pulled down sharply with intense effort, and saw the switch slowly leaving the wall and moving towards the ground. When he had succeeded completely, he returned to the outside.

The force field had disappeared and in its place, cut stark against the morning air, were the outlines of something he had been seeking ever since the first apparitions had come to him.

The landscape had been trying to swallow him up, but always he had resisted, as if he knew without realizing it consciously that he could never become part of it. Forever was that strange yearning telling him that the new Earth was more natural than the old, commanding him to give himself up to it, saying that he should submerge his identity in the rolling hills and rivers which had replaced the featureless dustbowls of yesterweek. But always he had

resisted. Always he had thought, through the dreams, through the racial imprints on his neural patterns, that the hills were a wonderful attraction, but nothing more, and that his destiny, and that of his race, lay elsewhere. Now he had found it. Now he could satisfy the longings for . . . something he knew not what, but the longings which he was sure every member of his tribe must feel after the terrible months of regression and return to the past.

He decided to enter the city, but first he turned to the North to take one last look at the outside. Far away, almost on the horizon, were his tribesmen, seemingly lost in their first sight of the entrancement. Their thoughts, and their expressions, were unreadable, but he knew that they must feel the same way as he.

Then, not waiting for them, he turned once more to the South and marched, into the concrete and steel jungle from which his race had emerged.

He was coming home.

JAMES COLVIN
THE RUINS

MALDOON PICKED HIS way over the ruins, his sombre face speckled with gleaming drops of sweat as if he had covered it with jewels.

The ruins went away from him in all directions beneath the blue and glowing sky, spikes of masonry, jumbled concrete, pools of ash, so that the whole bleak landscape took on the aspect of sea-carved rocks at low tide. The sun shone and the ruins lay peacefully beneath ; pale shadows having nothing ominous or mysterious about them. Maldoon felt safe in the ruins.

He took off his jacket and sat on a slab of concrete from which protruded rusted wires, curling back on themselves like a sculpture depicting space and time. In fact the ruins were that—a mighty sculpture, a monument created by the random and ambivalent machinations of mankind—a

monument to time and space and to the sacrifices men had made to understand it. Maldoon realized his thoughts were rambling. He lit a cigarette and drank some water from his flask.

He had been travelling over the ruins for a long time, searching for signs of life but finding nothing. He was regretting the notion that had sent him into the ruins. There were no signs of the previous explorers who had not returned; no mark scratched on stone, no note, no shred of cloth, no skeleton. The ruins were barren.

Maldoon stood up, putting his flask away and dropping his cigarette into a crevice. He stared ahead of him at the jagged horizon, turned his body round. The strange thing was that his view to the horizon was never interrupted. No crumpled building or collapsing wall ever blocked his vision. The horizon was on all sides, giving him the peculiar sensation of standing in the centre of a huge disc which drifted in an infinity of blue sky.

He frowned. The sun was directly overhead and he had no idea which direction he had come from. Now that he considered it, he couldn't remember the sun changing its position or, for that matter, night ever falling. Hadn't the light always been so? Yet he thought he had been travelling for several days.

Slowly he began to make his way across the ruins again, stumbling sometimes, half-falling, jumping from slab of masonry to pile of broken bricks, leaning against the shattered wall of a house with one hand as he inched his way around the ash-pools which he mistrusted, though there was no cause for his weariness as he remembered.

At length, something close to panic began to fill him and he wished very strongly that he had not come to the ruins, wished that he was back amongst people again, amidst orderly streets of neat houses and solid, well-filled shops. He looked about him hopefully and, as if his wish had been answered by some magical spirit, he saw on the horizon a line of tall, complete-looking buildings which might possibly be part of a town.

His speed increased; his progress was no longer such hard-going.

And, he noted, laughing at himself for his earlier fancies,

the sun was beginning to set. With luck he could make the town before night.

He began to leap from point to point, but he had misjudged his distance from the town and night came while he was still about a mile away. But he was heartened further by the sight of the lights shining out of the buildings. Perhaps this was even the town he had left? One town was much like another, seen from the distance. With the lights to guide him he was soon at the town's outskirts. Here the streets were deserted, though illuminated by splendid lamps, and he guessed that the inhabitants had gone to bed.

Getting closer to the city-centre, he heard traffic noises and saw cars moving through the streets, people on the boulevards, cafés open for business.

He ignored the notion that there was something incomplete about the city. He was tired and was seeing things in a peculiar perspective. Also the hot sun of the day might well have given him sunstroke.

The city was new to him, though familiar enough in its general layout. It was, like most cities he knew, planned around a central square with the main streets radiating from the square like the spokes from a wheel, with an outer circle of suburbs.

Maldoon entered a café and ordered a meal. The proprietor was an old man with a gnomish face and a deferential manner. He put the plate of food before Maldoon, averting his eyes. Maldoon began to eat.

Presently a girl came into the café, glanced around at the few available seats and chose one opposite Maldoon. "Is this seat taken?" she asked him.

He waved his fork and shook his head, his mouth too full for speech.

She smiled and sat down daintily. She picked up the menu and studied it, giving her order to the proprietor who received it with a little bow and hurried back to the kitchen.

"It's a beautiful night for the time of the year," Maldoon said, "isn't it?"

"Ah, yes. . . ." She appeared to be confused.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I hope you don't think I'm. . . ."

"No, no."

"I have just come in from the ruins," he told her. "I was doing a bit of exploring. They stretch for miles and miles. Sometimes I think they must cover the planet. Does anyone know?"

She laughed. "You look tired—hadn't you better get some sleep?"

"I'm a stranger here. Can you recommend an hotel?"

"Not really. Being a resident, as it were, I don't know much about the hotels. There's one up the road, though, that looks all right."

"I'll try that, then."

Her meal was brought for her. She thanked the proprietor with a quick smile. He saw that she had ordered the same meal.

He let her eat without interruption. Now that he was seated, his body felt numb with tiredness. He looked forward to a good night's sleep.

The girl got up. She looked at him with curiosity. "I'd better show you where that hotel is." She smiled sympathetically.

"Oh, thanks." He got up and left the café with her. As they walked along the street he thought of something. Shouldn't he have paid for his meal? He couldn't remember. But the owner of the café wouldn't have let him walk out like that, anyway, so it must be all right.

He walked along beside the girl, his shoulders feeling as if they were carrying a tremendous weight, his muscles aching and his legs weak.

How had he managed to cross such a huge area of the ruins? Surely he hadn't walked all that way? What way? How much way? Where way?

"Are you sure you can make it?" said the girl distinctly, her lips close to his ear. She spoke as if repeating herself.

"Yes."

"Well come on, it's not much further."

He followed her, but now he was crawling. He heard a voice that was not his own crying: "Can somebody give me a hand?"

He lay on the uneven surface of the ruins and the sun

was directly over his head. He turned and saw the horizon in the far distance, he turned his eyes in the other direction and there, too were ruins stretching to the horizon. He felt like a huge giant, spreadeagled and crucified on the ruins. As he pushed himself into a sitting position, his body seemed to diminish until he was normal size again.

Normal size? What was normal size? What yardstick had he with which to measure the ruins? They were of all sizes, all shapes. Yet not one of them, however high, blocked his view of the horizon.

He had lost his jacket and his cigarettes. He stood up unsteadily and stared around him.

Was he some kind of outcast? He couldn't remember. There had to be some reason for his being here. Someone had put him here? People from the city had taken the trouble to transport him here.

Or had they? And if they had, *why* had they?

The problem did not concern him for very long. He began to move over the ruins once again, pausing sometimes to inspect a building that seemed to have been sliced down the centre, leaving its floors intact and exposed like those of a doll's house. Yet he could find no clue to answer any of the questions which drifted and dispersed in his mind.

By now, he had forgotten about the city, even; had forgotten that he had had a jacket, that he had smoked cigarettes, felt no need for either.

Later, he sat down on a pile of broken tiles and looked around him. To his left a tower leaned. Though it seemed that something had crushed it from two angles, it still stood upright. His logic told him that it should have fallen, yet the tower was frozen there. He stopped looking at it, but too late to stop the rising sensation of fear which the sight created.

He got up and walked carefully away from the tower, not looking back, and then broke into a stumbling run.

But he saw that all the buildings seemed about to fall, all the towers and houses and columns were pitched at an angle which said that they *must* fall.

Why hadn't he noticed it before? What was wrong?

With the fear, his knowledge of his identity began to re-emerge.

He remembered his name and a little of the past as far back as his visit to the city. Then he remembered his days-long journey over the ruins, beneath a sun that did not set, a sky that did not change, seeing on all sides the horizon which *should* have been obscured by the great piles of ruined architecture and yet was *not*.

He stopped, shaking with hatred of the ruins, striving to bring back a memory of *before* the ruins. but he could not.

What was this? Dream? Drug-vision? Madness? Surely there was something more than the ruins? Had the city been just an illusion?

He closed his eyes, his body tottering. In the darkness which came with the closing of his eyes, he said to himself: *Well, Maldoon do you still insist on continuing this experiment? Do you still wish to abolish identity and time and space as illusion-creating illusions?*

And he called back to himself, aloud:

"What do you mean? What do you *mean*?"

And he opened his eyes again and there were the bright ruins, sharp beneath the great, pale sun in the blue sky.

(Sun, sky, ruins + Maldoon = Maldoon − Maldoon.)

Now, slowly, he began to calm, his questions and his memories, for what they were worth, drifting apart.

He steadied himself on the ruins and walked towards a particularly large ash-pool. He stopped when he reached it. He stared down into it. He put his fingers to his lips and mused over the ash-pool.

He picked up a piece of brick and flung it down into the grey ash. When it reached the surface, the brick disappeared without disturbing the ash.

He took another brick and another and hurled them down. The same thing happened. The same thing didn't happen.

A shadow fell across him. He looked up and saw a tall building rising above him. It consisted of a huge shaft

built of glass bricks with a series of platforms going up and up until at the top there was the last platform with a dome over it. A man stood there, beckoning to him.

He ran towards the tower, found he could spring on to the first platform and from that one to the next until he reached the platform covered by the dome.

A man similar to a frog was waiting for him.

"Look down there, Maldoon," he said.

Maldoon looked out over the neat city spread below. Each block was of exactly the same dimensions, each one was square.

The man waved his reptilian hand. The light shone through it, grey as the ash.

"A country is like a woman," said the man. "Look down there. It *wants* to be subdued, wants to be bested by a strong man. I did it. I quieted the country's perturbation—and raped it!"

The frog-man looked self-satisfied.

"It's peaceful," said Maldoon.

"The most peaceful country in the system," the man-frog quipped. "The most peaceful system in the country. Who are you, Maldoon?"

"Either you or me," said Maldoon, forgetting his name.

"Jump, Maldoon," said the man similar to a frog.

Maldoon merely stood there.

"Jump!"

He began to clamber around the ash-pool.

(Sun, sky, ruins+Maldoon)=(Maldoon−Maldoon)

His name was a throb in his head, merely a throb in his head. Mal-*doon,* Mal-*doon,* Mal-*doon.*

Had it ever been his name? Perhaps not. Perhaps it had always been—mal-*doon,* mal-*doon,*—merely a throb in his head.

Yet, apart from the ruins and the light, there was nothing else to know.

He paused. Was that a memory? That, at the back there?

Out—mal-doon, mal-doon—out—mal-doon—concentrate, mal-doon.

The ruins appeared to blurr for a moment and he stared at them sharply, suspiciously. They seemed to be folding themselves around him. No, he was folding himself around them. He flowed around them, over them, through them.

Maldoon! The cry from somewhere was imperious, desperate, ironic.

Yes, he thought, *which way?*

All or nothing, Maldoon, he cried to himself, *nothing or nothing, all or all!*

Out here is in here and it is infinite. He remembered, or was told, he could not tell.

(Infinity+Maldoon)=(Infinity)

With relief, he was glad to be back. Things were right again. He paused and sat on a piece of broken concrete which sprouted spliced hawsers and which changed to a mound of soft soil with reeds growing from it. Below him was the city—roofs, chimneys, church-spires, parks, cinemas, smoke drifting. Familiar, yet not what he wanted.

He got up from the mound and began to walk down the path towards the city, still only half-aware of who he was, why he was, what he was and how he was.

"Why do I tire myself out trying," he thought. "One day I shan't be able to exert enough will to pull myself back and they'll find me up here either raving or curled up in a neat little bundle."

Yet he could not decide, still, which was true—the city below or the ruins.

"Are they both real?" he thought as he walked off the grass and on to the road leading into the city.

He sauntered along the road, passing under a railway bridge of thick girders and peeling green paint, turned a corner into a side-street which was full of the smoky smell of autumn. The houses were of red-brick and terraced with tiny gardens submerged beneath huge, overgrown hedges. Behind one of the hedges he heard children playing. He stopped and put his head round the hedge, watching them with their coloured bricks, building and pushing them down again.

When one of the children noticed him and looked up, he pulled his head back and walked on along the street.

But he was not to escape with impunity. The child cried "It's him!" and followed him along the street with its companions chorusing rhythmically: "Mad Maldoon! Mad Maldoon! Mad Maldoon—he's a loon! " and laughing at this old jest.

He pretended not to notice them.

They only followed him to the end of the street and he was grateful for this, at least. It was getting late. Dusk was falling over the houses. His footfalls echoed among the roofs, clattering hollowly from chimney pot to chimney pot.

Mad Maldoon, mad maldoon, madmaldoomaldoon-maldoon.

Heart-beats joined in, maldoon, maldoon, head-beats, maldoon, maldoon and the houses were still there but superimposed on the ruins, the echoes swimming amongst their unreal chimney-pots.

The dusk gave way to night, the night to light and slowly the houses vanished.

The bright ruins stretched away, never obscuring his view of the horizon. The blue, blue sky was above, and the sun which did not change its position.

The ash-pools, he avoided. The tumbling ruins, fixed and frozen in time and space, did not fall.

What caused the ruins?

He had completely forgotten.

There were just the ruins now, as the sky and the sun went out but the light remained. Just the sound of some unseen surf pounding at the last vestiges of his identity.

Mal-doon, mal-doon, mal-doon.

Ruins past, ruins present, ruins future.

He absorbed the ruins and they him. He and they went away forever, for now there was no horizon.

The mind could clothe the ruins, but now there was no mind.

Soon, there were no ruins.

KENNETH HARKER

COG

CHARLIE O. GRADIE clanged the airlock shut on *Sunny Jim*, and sniffed his first lungful of Taurasian atmosphere. It soured him.

Not that it wasn't okay. He just didn't care any more—about Taurasia or any other crumb of a planet he happened to doss down on. And in the past decade he'd dossed on plenty.

Was it a decade? Give or take a year. Come to think, maybe he ought to bunk here for good. It was no longer a joke, when space seemed so empty that it hemmed you in.

A pug-faced orderly stepped towards the launch-pad.

"Where's Debriefing?" Charlie grunted, thinking up somewhere to go.

"What are you off? Special Mission?"

"Don't ask me." The planes of his face were marble-blank. "I just deshipped, that's all."

"But is this your base world?" The orderly oozed patience. "Or did you book a pew?"

"I stopped by. Call it a six monthly overhaul if you need excuses. Only don't bother laying it on, 'cause I'm tired of the trek." Charlie slackened his pneumatic suit-zips. "I'm thinking of staying put."

"Another of those, eh?" the pug face nodded with Taurasian wisdom. "You'd better see Brand, the Personnel Officer."

Brand was thick-set and over-braided, topped by crinkly yellow hair like a sponge from a Rim-sun waterworld. He got his spheroid-point limbered up over his jotter. "So you want to cut your engines, eh, Gradie?"

"Yes." From the spare bucket-chair, Charlie smirked round at the pastel walls of Brand's ample office quarters

—space-psychology, he reckoned, for debarkees who'd been cooped too long in a cosmic bean-tin. Another ladleful of nothingness.

"I want to see a cognito-handler."

Brand sighed and toss his pen down. "As serious as that?"

"Don't tell me Taurasia doesn't have one? I thought most thirtieth-century planets made cognito-handling a free service."

"You've never consulted one before? Let's have a few particulars, then we'll see. What's your diplomatic status?"

"I shipped out ten years back as Captain Of Globetrotters. Since then I've spent most of the cruise in a scout bus along the Outer Spiral."

"Making how many world-stops?"

"I'd flipped through eighty-nine before I lost count."

"But you accomplished things? At the planets you called at?"

Charlie stretched his legs, digging his heels into the carpet pile. It felt like the fuzz inside his skull. "Yes and no. I never knew what I was supposed to do."

"Surely your base world assigned you a duty?" Brand's smile spread like a slow oil.

"They never said much beyond booking me out as C.O.G." Charlie reflected hard. "I dropped off here and there, and made out I was inspecting."

"For what?"

"Do I have to know? Inspectors never say what they're inspecting for. Take the debarkation medic who just looked me over—"

"This sounds a contented enough existence." Brand tilted back on his elbows. "What are you complaining about?"

"Nothing. Just I'd been goofing around for five years when I thought perhaps I wasn't meant to be a Captain Of Globetrotters. From a check-list I found on the ship, I could have been a Chronicler Of Galaxies, or a Curator Of Gadgets."

"But you weren't sure which?"

"No. How can you tell from a choice of unfulfilled ranks? Maybe I was—say, a Civil Opinions Governor ; or a Company Out-Ganger." With a pasty-fingered flourish,

Charlie lugged out his pocket-log. "Compère Of Games. You name 'em—I got 'em listed."

Brand didn't name any. His square face fell in a heavy nod. "You need the Cognito Handler."

The Cognito Handler's sanctum was a masterpiece of spaceport architecture; though from where Charlie lay soaking up the plastic-foam couch, the most he saw was the papered ceiling. It was done out kid's-nursery style in funny-face atoms, to lure people back to better-scale thinking.

"Charles O. Gradie, eh?" repeated the Cognito Handler, trying to work a wedge of *bonhomie* into his gaunt features. "How long have you had this sense of the incognito?" He wore a white coat meant to radiate concern. To Charlie it looked as inspiring as table linen after a mess banquet.

"How'm I supposed to know?" grunted Charlie. "When you feel insignificant, you can't tell when it begins."

The C.H. nodded, approving the symptom. Charlie told him what he'd told Brand.

"And it's this lack of importance that makes you want to hop off the space jaunt?"

"There's no point, is there? Whether I'm joyriding or what—it doesn't affect anything."

"Hmm." The pouches under the hollow eyes looked like two puffy bagfuls of cognito. "Now, you say you aren't sure which C.O.G. rank you represent?"

"No. That's what made me think something funny was going on." Unamused, Charlie stared up. The C.H.'s head posed like Providence against the atom-spattered ceiling.

"What type of C.O.G. did the natives at your world-stops take you as?"

"How does anyone take anyone?" Charlie couldn't recall a single world-stop any more significant than a protein pill lost down the garbage-vortex. "There isn't even danger of starving. You just hitch on to the planetary breadline."

"And you didn't find any interesting inhabitants?"

"No more interesting than the pebble-chunks that hold their feet up."

"The best way to judge them, is to go back." Wisdom softened the C.H.'s eyes. "See if they know you again."

"But I couldn't find the way, could I?"

"Surely you have records?"

"Why keep records when it doesn't matter where you've been?"

Got you there, thought Charlie, mentally knotting a choker of logic round the C.H.'s skinny neck. Far from nonplussed, the C.H. loomed closer, prompting Charlie to further outburst.

"There's no future as a C.O.G. It's no good overflowing with fraternal tolerance. The medics tried that before they doled out the pin-ball treatment."

"Ah—the pin-ball treatment," said the C.H., obviously exploring.

"Don't ask me which doss-world it was on. They tried to reacclimatize me; showed me this table with pins like planets, and the shunt-ball like an early space-capsule. Supposed to shake off depressions; domesticate space into a home from home. . . . Ten hops after, I still felt like that ball touring the damn pin-table. It sent the medics at the next stop into an even deeper huddle. Not over me. Over redesigning pin-tables. That's the trouble nowayears—there's no service." Rancour unloaded, Charlie sucked in a deep breath.

"Easy now," soothed the C.H. "Did you play pin-tables solo?"

"Oh, there were other C.O.G.'s—all hoping to see cognito handlers. But don't imagine communal therapy helped. Talk about aloofness—all banging the shunt-ball solo. . . . Take the Collector Of Grants: a man with no purpose, 'cause he didn't know what the grants were for. Or the Church Organ Grinder. Another pointless duty. Whoever heard of a church with a barrel-organ—assuming you can find a church?"

"Quite. Now I gather this despondency came after you found a list of such appointments on your ship? You not only doubted your status, but all alternatives were either meaningless or obsolete." The C.H.'s smile cracked seraphically. "I mean, it's bad enough not knowing whether

you're a Calibrator Of Gimbals, or a Camouflage Obliteration Gaffer; but when camouflage went out with ancient wars, and gimbals with the chug-engine—"

"Those were listed, yes." Charlie pricked with interest. Like I said—something funny. . . . Take the Certified Oracle Guide. Now he'd be an obvious fraud—"

"I mean," breathed the crisp words, "you were impressed. By a coincidence of inititals. You asked yourself—why is this so? . . . Why is there a linking too with the rank of Cognito Handler?

As Charlie's thoughts channelled and crystallized, he almost nodded; except that he didn't find coincidences all that profound, and his nape was deep in foam pillow. The C.H. straightened briskly, his head soaring towards the atoms, where it wagged encouragingly.

"Very good, Gradie. I think, in your small way, you're trying to enmesh with the problem. What I propose now is to flight you to a Rehabilitation Settlement—or as we call them, a COG Centre—"

"No," squawked Charlie. "You're trying to get rid of me again."

"Now, now. They're only on certain worlds, and we haven't one here. . . . This is quite normal. On Taurasia, you know, we get eight or nine to our year like yourself. We dribble most of them through to Rehabilitation." The C.H.'s face curdled with charity. "The Warden will explain everything once you're there."

The nearest COG Centre was on one of the moons of Deltos, so they booted Charlie up in *Cogitator IV*—a medium-drive hypercruiser, with viewerless hull and hospital bulkheads. "There's even a padded bunk where you can play cog-rummy," they told him. "All mod-cogs to keep the mind off space."

Acclimatization nothing, brooded Charlie on the third day out. Crushed incognito tablets sprayed down the throat twice daily after meals; personal scientific gear laid on; and a flunkey in steward's duck-suit to do the administering.

"Try your Cathoderay Oscillo Graph, Mr. Gradie," the

flunkey would chirp fruitily. "You really should, for your own good. Aren't you interested in monitoring our path through subspace?"

Charlie lounged on his bunk, head cradled back on his palms. "I don't want to know about subspace—"

"You haven't even switched on."

"—I've heard of full crew quotas being stranded in that mush." Charlie stared dully at the chrome-rubber fittings. "It's worse than Three-D yawning round you, and that's empty enough."

"You must cultivate a sense of achievement, and stop this moping." The flunkey was hot on the bunkside patter. "How about plugging in your Chemical Oxygen Generator then? You know you can actually boost the drive of the ship? . . . Add your own little contribution towards reaching Deltos."

Charlie pondered for a day, then had a go. It gave him less kick than breathing the stuff.

"That's the way." Watching a lone bubble crawl up the tube, the flunkey confided: "You'll be getting a room-mate soon."

"C.O.G.?" Charlie lay disinterested, fingers pushed into his lacklustre hair. He still hadn't moved when, at the next world-stop, a spindle-limbed man flopped a space valise on to the spare bunk.

"What status?" Charlie sounded the flunkey who was gushing around.

"Castor Oil Gargler. Booked for the same COG Centre as yourself."

Yes—you look that bit emaciated. . . . Charlie tried horizontally to eye the fellow up and down.

"I got transferred," the new boy explained. "They were trying to readjust me on a windowed-hull bus. Gave me a pair of Crown Opera Glasses, to start charting distant galaxies. It didn't work." He struggled on to the bunk. "I cracked."

"Yourself or your opera glasses?"

"I developed viewport twitch. . . . It can't be done."

"Now you should never say can't," crooned the flunkey, draping out the Gargler's kit. "Even though your effort

seems negligible—by tackling the impossible, one day you might begin to feel important—"

"I'll settle for a punctured suit," Charlie forecast, "when it's that negligible." Like plotting a subspace track on an eight-inch monitor; or punching *Cogitator IV* every ten minutes with a bubble of wind.

Glumly he watched the Gargler, thinking they might have a game of cog-rummy.

If they could be bothered to learn how to play.

The Rehabilitation Warden, or COG Boss for short, was prominently strung, with a moon face round a pair of nebulous eyes. He sat making finger-bridges with the tips of his nails.

"So—you feel you don't belong?" He spoke as though he'd said this ten times already before breakfast.

Charlie shuffled on the dais-type settle. "I suppose COGs churn through here by the shipload?" His gaze just skimmed the desk-top, from his base position.

"Quite a turnover, yes." The face dipped forward over Charlie's record-sheet. "By this, you don't know how long you've had the feeling. . . . Time doesn't mean much to you?"

"Let's just accept that I've stopped racing against it." Call this Rehabilitation! . . . No arms or back-rest. Like squatting in a vault of sky inverted.

"Time always wins?"

"How can you race with it, when you're given nothing to do?"

"And what about"—a cliché-heralding cough toned in with the purple wall drapes—"the enormity of space?"

Not again. . . . Charlie's gaze strayed out through the view-blister, up to the grainy disc of Deltos.

"Glactophobic," pursued the COG Boss, when he didn't answer. "Attention drawn outwards, beyond our moon-scape. . . . It's emptiness you fear? Not the claustrophobic cramping of the space-suit?"

"I don't *fear* anything. When space pulls, and the suit pushes, the effects cancel out." Charlie had weighed this much up radians back, on the Outer Spiral. "Like the

medics said—I'm pure normal. My problem is—I've got no problems."

"Yes, yes. Multiple insignificance. You won't be alone in that complaint here." Nodding wisely, the COG Boss fingered the record-sheet, for something he could approve. "At least your Cognito Handler reports that you'd been impressed—by the coincidences of C.O.G. initials."

"Can anyone fail to notice?" Incurious, Charlie broke the watery stare by adding: "He said you might explain."

"By all means." The COG Boss nestled back. "Centuries ago—we don't know how many—after Man first spread into space, he was in danger of lapsing into too mechanical a role—playing the proverbial cog, as collective Man absorbed the individual. Till some well-meaning pioneer devised an idea for warning him. And that's all that was intended, a warning. . . . Now to be effective, a warning must be really striking; so he compiled a list of several hundred hypothetical ranks, each linked with some futile task, and having the initials C.O.G. For example"—his eyelids dropped like anaemic blinds, as he coaxed his memory—"a Chaser Of Gloaming, who could never catch up with planetary sunsets; or a Chance Orbit Gambler—which was meaningless, when orbits were so predictable. The list, taken supposedly from the Catalogue Omnibus Galactic and signed by the Consort Of God, was publicised in multiplicate. It rained through the spaceport bureaux, and was plastered up in all major ships. . . . And there was the special rank of Cognito Handler, who diagnosed the dreaded incognito sickness, and directed the hard cases to Rehabilitation Settlements. . . . Plus other doubtful refinery, like the transhipment gear you started limbering up with on *Cogitator IV*."

The COG Boss beamed affably. "Now these ranks were never meant to exist in practice. But the snag was, the idea came too late. Man had already reached the cog-status; so, far from serving a timely warning, the scheme was self-defeating. When it got out of hand, and promotion-redundant crewmen began to take these appointments, no one took a scrap of notice. Flights were booked to wherever there was wisp of a chance that a new duty assignment

might be carried out. They spread among the stars like meteor showers. . . . The first flush of fantasy had blossomed into fact."

"Must have been a deadbeat age, if nobody tried to stop it."

"A few go-aheads did try—eventually. Issued an order to cancel all C.O.G. appointments, and destroy all lists. But again they were up against the essence of cog, by which you can't fully obliterate an existing system. Many lists were never burnt—like yours on *Sunny Jim*. Most worlds had already been staffed with Cognito Handlers ; and some rigged out with Rehabilitation Settlements. It was possible that these did a useful service, so they were kept on. . . . Just as well."

The COG Boss stood, and took a fatherly stroll around the desk perimeter. "Somehow, certain people are still taking these C.O.G. appointments. And with everything so widespread through the Galaxy, we don't know where to stab our thumbs down to stop it. They go through the cosmic mill, and most of them end up at a Rehabilitation. The odd thing is, going by the ones we get, that their own initials too are always C.O.G. You spotted that, Mr. Gradie? Most of them do."

"Vaguely." A microglow of curiosity kindled in Charlie. "How's that happening?"

"Ah—if we knew! . . . It could be a thousand and one ways. For a start, we believe that wherever they grade employment, they have one official per set of assignee's initials—an outcome of the vast populations dealt with in the Universal Classification."

"That's right." Charlie's eyelids lost a wrinkle, as he recalled happier days when he'd no employment status. "The application-form I was given to fill in—'Request for Suggested Employment'—was stamped C.O.G."

"From your own initials. And this would be transmuted to the record bureaux. . . . Now my guess is, the dunderhead who gets deluged with application replicas bearing name initials C.O.G.—perhaps a Clerk Ordinary Grade himself—has got his wires crossed. From the duty data in his archives, he's rooted out one of the banned lists. He

assumes that the initials of names are supposed to link with the initials of ranks."

"And still nobody clogs his gears?"

"Why should anyone? People on new assignments always feel useful at first. By this time they don't, they're too remote from him in space-time to trace him—"

"But this goon's probably sticking pins in the list. The applications are just through desk-traffic, that he rank-endorses then forgets about."

"Precisely. There might be more than one Clerk on the same half-witted racket. But *they're* all right. They do their turn in the smooth machine, and the backlash is negligible." The COG Boss's mouth tugged into a waxy smile. "I always explain this at the outset, to show that it's no good fretting over bygone mix-ups. You mustn't bear any grudge, just because Charlie O. Gradie got saddled with Captain Of Globetrotters and a ten-year posting he need never have taken."

The vapid mood sluiced back through Charlie. "It's only hypothetical," he grumbled. "Bygones."

"Exactly. What does matter, to everyone here—is *now*." The COG Boss rummaged for a name-tag on which he wrote Charlie's rank. "So the others'll know you." He stuck the tag on Charlie's jerkin.

"You'll find here, it's more than personal service," he wooed Charlie. "We've a common problem, and we help each other. Everything—recreation; eating; sleeping; dressing—all aimed towards this one end. Mutual therapeutics. . . ."

As long as it wasn't pin-tables *ad infinitum*.

". . . Now, I'd like you to meet a few of the others."

An attendant with bull-calf shoulders took Charlie along to the Blending Bay.

"Built on conchoid plan," he explained, "like a caved-in spiral. So called, because of the constructive aims."

It wasn't meant to shake off the space glut, Charlie learnt, like the Cognito Handler's atom-sprinkled ceiling; but to tone it in with a healthily balanced life.

"And correctly styled thinking." The attendant forged

through an orange froth of net curtaining. "From the moment of entry, we get you used to things not being what they seem. Take these flapping curtains along the conch wall. . . ." He waited while Charlie peeled a length from his face, where the corridor air had plastered it. "They aren't the trailing flames of gaseous nebula that you'd imagine."

Charlie hadn't given them a thought. He passed on to a line of oblongs that gave him a sausage-head, and drum-type body.

"Warping mirrors." The attendant flourished. "Shows there are other senses of proportion."

On metal backboards beyond the mirrors were the art-daubs of earlier inmates. Various C.O.G.s reclined before them.

The attendant whispered confidentially. "Daub-studying. People forget their own problems by trying to interpret those of previous rehabilitees. Everybody paints his daubs before his existence-status becomes readjusted."

He left Charlie in the centre of the Bay, where several more men, in various garb, loafed about or indulged in aimless recreational tasks. The Castor Oil Gargler, Charlie noted, was already installed, spread pronewise on a sofa and looking as pale as one of his valise-stickers. Charlie ignored him, mooched until he was satisfied there were no pin-tables, then settled near a couple of white-haired innocents who were trying to stimulate their minds with 3-D ludo. They used space-ship counters, and stared at the ludo-frame like monkeys contemplating a climb. On his other flank, assorted individuals lurked behind copies of the local Spaceport Gazette, which Charlie later found carried a COGS' Corner for rehabilitees—though from the hush they were making, they could have been reading it upside down.

The nearest neighbour husked his paper down. He was a watery-eyed creature whose balding head, shaped like an inverted pear on its stalk, suggested brains. When Charlie tried to pick them, the man gaped.

"Dimwit," thought Charlie. More precisely—now he read the name-tag—a Censored Obsolete Genius. Charlie turned to the 3-D ludoers, hoping for better contact. They seemed

to be playing not to win, but to keep their fingers occupied. With their amethyst reclining togs and careworn smiles, they were as alike as a couple of Dumdees from the world of Tweedle.

"Our complication," said one, once they were talking, "was that our duties didn't entail space-travel at all. . . . I was assigned as Chief Ornamental Guest ; and my colleague here, in acknowledgement of his duffership awarded during training, was allotted the booby appointment of Capricorn Or Goat." His jowls drooped. "If you've never felt unwanted, with nowhere to go ; lost your usefulness ; or sobbed for someone to take an interest in you—these are the ranks you should experience. The quintessence of doing nothing."

"I know," Charlie sympathized without feeling. "Sounds much the way I get myself. Going places doesn't help. . . . They say there are teeming millions of humanity ; but we're so dispersed, the others might as well not exist. They keep telling me I have individuality ; but how'm I to know, when it amounts to zero? Sometimes when I'm cooped up there alone, like a stray can of provisions rolling round an empty larder, I think maybe I'm already dead—'cause there's no way of telling otherwise."

The Dumdees' heads wagged sagely.

"And even if I was," Charlie added, "nowayears you can't even find a Cemetery Of Graves, to give you a civic burial."

"Exactly," echoed the Chief Ornamental Guest. "Nothing reacts with you ; there's no one you can compare yourself with, to prove you're still alive."

"Whereas here, we can all react together." The other Dumdee flipped a counter up a ludo-frame diagonal. "A tiny shoulder-rubbing concentration of Man," he recited. "You turn ; we all turn—each C.O.G. functioning with the others. That way, they claim, we recover a purpose in life."

Charlie looked round the Blending Bay, trying to show interest in the mottled gathering. "How long do people stay?"

"Oh, it varies," said the Guest. "Some do a quick turn-over. The Chairman Of Graft was only here a few days. We were glad to see the back of him. Always bleating—on the futility of graft, when there are no laws to break. Mind you, the Casual Offences Gaoler has much the same complaint—that's him over there—and he's been here half a decade. . . .

"Now, yon fellow—he's undergoing suggestion-therapy." He pointed out a barren-faced chap who was surveying a half-built model from under a rose-tinted eyeshield. "He's exactly the opposite. Masterly inhibitions. Good at his handicraft—"

"What's he making?"

"An up-to-date ship, eighth-scale, out of obsolete splints called matchsticks. . . . But talk about doggedness! Even I can't convince him that gasclouds can't be colonized. Reckons, once he's back, if he persists long enough, he's bound to succeed. . . . It gets you all ways."

The Dumdees spent all evening doing the honours to break Charlie in. But by next morning, he was bruised with boredom again. The ludo took priority, so they shunted Charlie over to a man with scrambled-egg epaulets—good for shoulder-rubbing, Charlie mused sourly—who professed to be wearing the uniform of a Canteen Offerings Gourmet. Munching imagined succulents between his energy pills, the Gourmet oozed amid the canes of a wicker-seat.

"Half the C.O.G.'s here couldn't locate their sector, let alone the planet they hailed from." His thumb-twiddling hands just spanned a stomach as ovate as a scout-sloop's nosecone. "No doubt our COG Boss told you—we're only pitched in here because of some untraced bureaucratic to pin-tables.

He cast a dreary eye over Charlie. "You didn't keep records either? I'm still waiting for a C.O.G. who's kept records. No one does; not by the time they seek a cognito handler. The universe is a one-way system. Not a hope of bouncing out and back through the same route." The eye grew dreamy. "Like playing an impossible game of chance with a great big currant-bun. . . . So why should anyone bother?"

"Why," repeated Charlie flatly, preferring currant-buns to pin-tables.

"I hear you're one of those who sometimes think they're dead. Now me"—the Gourmet smacked his lips, as though swilling a bite of bun down with imaginary cognac—"I couldn't feel like that. More as though I've just never been alive. As though I couldn't die. Ageless."

Real souped-up gourmet logic, Charlie assessed.

Impossible games of chance must have gone to the Gourmet's head. "Fancy a round of cog-and-anchor?" he challenged. He drew a plastic game-board forward. It was inlaid with sequin-stars, like an occultist's zodiac-table. Charlie puzzled over them.

"You won't identify them," champed the Gourmet. "Even real constellations aren't cognizable nowayears. No point—when navigationally they no longer mean anything. I hear there are so many co-ordinate-systems now, that no one knows which to use. All fixed points of reference have been lost."

Charlie dug out his protein-cubes that they'd decided on for stakes. "I hadn't looked at it that way," he confessed.

"Why, yes. That's half the reason why stellar paths can't be back-traced."

Sense enough. Even forward-travelling, you just took potluck till you zoned in on a world.

The champing was catching. Charlie was not only twelve cubes down, but chewing three others, when the bull-calf-shouldered attendant came and restocked his ration-pouch.

"There, you see!" A raw edge of security jabbed at Charlie, as the attendant went. "This is like everywhere else. We're so comfortable, well-catered for—I can't even take risks." His game spoiled, he flounced back in his seat.

"Ah, you approve of risk?" The voice came from a straw-haired old boy, who'd inched his shaky legs over to watch the game. "Yes—a little more would help, by enlivening our interest." He wore clinical slippers of congenial design. "But it's a fact we must face. Space-travel would never have spread so far afield, unless the risk had been reduced to almost zero."

The Gourmet introduced the newcomer as a Cosmic Odour Grader.

"Except I've no sense of smell," said the straw-haired one dolefully. "Makes me hopping mad at times." Far from hopping, he shuffled away to join a flamboyant man with airlock-square nostrils who was gazing glumly through the lateral view-blister.

"His pal," the Gourmet explained. "Niffs of perfume. They get on well together. . . . He booked in as a Centre Of Gravity, but says he can never find the gravity to scent."

"He's right about risk though," Charlie vouched. "It happened to me. Lack of risk not only numbs the mind, but can flood it with delusion. They can stick things under your nose—no reflection on the Odour Grader—and you won't see suns for stars. . . . When I first cruised out, not a single soul on any world I visited questioned my status. That alone made me feel revered—too important to be asked. Then after I'd found this list of ranks, it took the next three trips before the truth tumbled."

Charlie was lapsing into dull reverie, when a coaxing voice broke in: "Try to explain that a little, Mr. Gradie."

The COG Boss, on morning tour, was drawing up a spare wicker-seat.

"Simple." Charlie snuggled into his own chair. He felt vaguely deranged, to find himself budding with philosophy. "The list got me doubting my rank all right; but at first instead of making me feel insignificant, it boosted my sense of importance. . . . I convinced myself—after half a decade of globetrotting, someone must have suspected that my act was a phoney; so why had no one rumbled me? Because nobody dare point it out. Even though I was botching the assignment, my rank could still hold authority—to pitch any sceptics out with the garbage. . . . That's the sort of dream-world you get to live in, when nothing reacts with you."

A fanciful sheen lit the Gourmet's face. "The tiny Crown Of Glory we all yearn for." He nodded as though swallowing more succulents.

"Till—slam!" declaimed Charlie. "The master fact hit me. It wasn't that they daren't point out. I was way off beam with my basics. . . . How can anyone show any importance with a *wrong* rank? I was so insignificant, that

no one could realize I'd been wrongly assigned; because nothing I ever did affected anything." Charlie wallowed in verbose self-pity: "I was like God deflated. Pseudo-elation plummeted into the abyss of despair."

"Good, good," said the COG Boss feelingly. "A fresh aspect. This pleases me. You're opening up a little." He inched his seat nearer, and beamed round at the conchoid outskirts. "You're understanding more now—of what goes on here?"

"No; I'm baffled. Does anyone?"

"Ah—you see? When circumstances baffle, it's a sign that you're recognising them."

"It's always puzzled me"—the Gourmet heeled the cog-and-anchor board to one side—"why C.O.G.'s don't just quit. Theoretically, you're supposed to get a pension—"

"You imagine I hadn't thought of that?" Charlie gazed at the Dumdees, plodding round their ludo-climb. "How do I know who to resign to, when I can't trace the world that booked me out?"

"But you would resign?" approved the COG Boss, his moon-face slightly fuller. "Now many C.O.G.'s—those who really believe there's nothing to fear or fight for—they'd say it's impossible to quit from something that has no meaning. At least you're over that hurdle. Keep it up, Mr. Gradie, and you won't be here many days."

"What good's a pension anyway?" Charlie spread his hands. "With or without it, we'd still be looked after. If we weren't so dispersed, everyone'd just keep on scratching the next man's back—and so on, round the mulberry bush. Besides, d'you really believe they'd issue a pension? They can't even give folk a reason for their assigned status—"

"Sometimes there's reason." The Gourmet appealed to the COG Boss. "Wasn't it the Constabulary Ordinance Gladiator? . . . They spun him a tale about space anarchists needing quelling."

Charlie pulled a wry face. "Don't say he actually quelled some!"

"How could he? We've no laws, so we've no anarchists. Or we're all anarchists. . . . Well looked after, yes. But are we legally content; or illicitly satisfied?" The Gourmet stifled a burp. "Nothing makes anyone criminally different

from the rest. If we cut up rough, we can't even have the ecstacy of being convicted."

"Supposing I punched you on the nose," Charlie posed a hypothetical case.

"Motives would be sifted," chipped in the COG Boss, "and action probably registered under one of the Natural-Responses classes. It doesn't give lasting satisfaction, I assure you. Ask our friend here."

The Gourmet hung his head. "Yes; I took a sock at the Circus Orgy Gymnast, for insulting behaviour. A two-hour cool-off in an outside straitjacket, and I was back to normal."

Charlie reflected sluggishly. "I once wondered about stoving the hull in on *Sunny Jim*. . . ."

"In preference to a fellow-being?" The Gourmet brightened. "Yes—space-craft are the mainstay of existence; you might have made more mark—"

"I think Mr. Gradie means for another reason."

"This was after the insignificance slammed me. Mentally deflated—I felt like being deflated physically as well—"

"To do it out there?" The Gourmet's eyebrows soared. "Not the pleasantest way. I thought you meant stove it in while grounded; and hope that some relic or legal loophole might open, to give you adverse recognition."

"More likely the launch-pad orderlies would stick me on the waiting roster for a hull weld."

"It wouldn't do much good. People who start stoving in hulls"—the COG Boss rose with a chuckle, to resume his tour—"usually get passed via Cognito Handlers to Rehabilitation Settlements."

It was like that for five days, while Charlie went through his paces. By then, even the warping mirrors were looking normal. Each morning he grew more pally with his fellow-C.O.G.'s, as they discussed their cases with one another. In the afternoons he scratched his head over the art-daubs of C.O.G.'s departed; and on the last two evenings sloshed his own on to a spare area of backboard.

During this time, the Gourmet never stopped champing; the Dumdee reached their third ludo impasse; the Gargler

cut down to a bottle a day; and the Colonizer's matchstick ship grew a few microns higher. Two new arrivals turned up—a Census Organising Gazetter, who'd gone white-haired during transhipment, trying to figure out what the Corona-Oersted-Gyroscope kit was for; and a Criminally Obese Gormandizer, who looked like posing good competition against the Gourmet.

On day six, the COG Boss sent for Charlie.

Charlie plumped on to the settle, while the COG Boss went through the finger-bridging act again. Upside-down across the desk, Charlie's record-sheet looked as incomplete as before.

The moon-face tilted up suddenly. "How are things, Mr. Gradie?"

"Common or garden," grunted Charlie. "I'm still a lump of dead wood. Non-progressive."

"What sort of wood?" joked the COG Boss academically. "Mulberry bush?" As Charlie went blank, he added: "I was intrigued by your full-circle back-scratching reference the other day. You know what a mulberry bush is?"

"As far as I'm concerned, an expression. I've never seen a mulberry bush."

"No." The COG Boss stood, and gazed placidly from the view-blister—which Charlie resolved as a friendly sign. Through their atmosphere, Deltos looked like a tarnished coin. The COG Boss gestured at the star scatter beyond.

"In all that smear out there, only one planet contains mulberry bushes. They're as scarce as the Gargler's castor-oil seeds are plentiful."

"Really." Charlie wasn't enthralled by mulberry bushes.

"The planet from which Man first expanded, to chart the universe."

"Before he lost the charts." Charlie began to pick his teeth with a stray matchstick of the Colonizer's. "I suppose he must have blossomed out from somewhere. But I wouldn't know that planet from any other—"

"You could if you sought it—"

"Clip an atmos-corrector on my helmet; and a grav-adjuster on my suit-seat—and they're all alike to me."

"It's a question of planetary records."

"Ha! And they're a fat lot of use." Charlie scowled at

the COG Boss's profile. "Show me one planet that keeps any."

"But you're thinking of their Galactic co-ordinates; dossiers of stellar neighbours. Granted—it's impossible to relate one planet to another, with any sense. But the private-purpose records of any world are often comprehensive, back to the time when it was first colonized." The COG Boss turned, smiled mistily. "So, assuming Man's birth-planet has done likewise, it will be the one and only world whose records start before the onset of space-travel. It is unique."

Charlie stared, incredulously. "And you expect me to back-check the files of every space-beach I'm stranded on—just to find which one grew mulberry bushes?"

"Mr. Gradie." The COG Boss paced flatteringly. "You may not believe me—but you've taken quite an active part in our programmes. I've watched you. They all come here with a secret itch to strike a wee Crop Of Gold; and you're no exception. But you've blended well: a first-rate incognito-discusser. And from this you've naturally gained."

The COG Boss staved off Charlie's objection with a hand raised, as at the swearing-in.

"And you know something else, Mr. Gradie? You're like them all in another respect." The moon-face grew so full, it almost dilated its own halo. "You're one of the biggest egotists I've met."

"Me?" Charlie rocked with surprise. "I'm nothing—"

"Yes, you," pressed the COG Boss. "You admitted it yourself. Half a decade back—still feeling like God, even though you thought they'd floundered up your status. Isn't that the mark of an egotist?"

Charlie gaped, and dropped the matchstick. "Yes, but then I swung right over—to insignificance—"

"Exactly. Nothing but complaints, about being nobody. Anyone as riled as that can't fail to be self-centred."

"No. You're only saying it." Squirming, Charlie jostled on the springs. "It's the stock patter you give them all—"

"All I'm aiming at is getting you to face life again. If you really want to prove yourself worthwhile, go and root out that original planet."

"What—now?" Charlie bridled. The fuzz in his skull

seemed to be melting into a slowing churning slurry. "It's belittling. Like stepping into the past."

"There's not much point pottering on into an aimless future. Think of the privilege—learning how Man grew from his humble beginnings. . . . And what if it is stock patter? It gets them searching. Maybe some never find the birth-planet. But it's better to leave with ambition, like most, than to loaf round here till you're like an idler-gear gone long in the tooth. I've seen too much of that. . . . And don't say you haven't strength, when you've felt like God. If an egotist can't see that. . . ." The COG Boss tongued his cheek, turning the moon-face gibbous.

"I don't want to know about humble beginnings. I'd had a helmetful of insignificance before I got here—"

"Then what are you waiting for? You bleat on about insignificance, but you never accept it. You've got to. . . . It's like space. Been with us for centuries. You wouldn't dream of saying that a man who never gets to know his own test-tube children hasn't accepted insignificance."

"I know about those all right. It takes half a lifetime to hit on a world that runs a fertilization bank."

"Don't remind me." The COG Boss tugged a sweat-pad from his cuff, and patted his brow mildly. "We've had our share of Child Orphan's Guardians through the Settlement. Guardians indeed!—when everyone's an orphan. . . . And the Custodian's Offspring Geographer due next transhipment sounds about as pointless." He hauled out of his reverie, and wheeled suddenly at Charlie.

"Well? Do we book you a flight back to Taurasia, where you left *Sunny Jim*?"

Charlie thought hard into the silence. "Could they find Taurasia—?"

"Remember though—if you take up this quest, you can't go pegging your ship down on the first small world, and expecting some cognito handler to work miracles with your skull."

The slurry was flocculating into slaky lumps, like functional bits of brain, bird-size.

"Didn't they have a saying once?" Charlie warmed, a smile jerking at his mouth. "About it being a small world—when you ran unexpectedly into a space-pal at the wrong

end of a solar system? The smile faded into a bleak mask. "That'd be the snag again—it's all so friendless. . . . The loneliness of it all."

"But you make friends easily. I've seen you."

"Here maybe. But out there. . . . Chance meetings; hyperspeed travel. Friendships are so short lived, as to be non-existent. You can't even keep them up by radiolink—not when a multi-shared wavelength restricts you to short-range transmission. . . . A two-light-year flip—and the last nomad you chummed up with is ten decibels below reception level—"

"Then now's your chance to do something." The COG Boss flapped a palm at the view-blister. "Instead of making Man sound like seeds in seedless jam, smeared from the Hub to the Outer Spiral. . . . Drop in on that planet. Prove otherwise—by making that small-world remark, that Man has come to look on as meaningless. You'll not only show that friendship still exists; but on *that* world, things might move at a saner pace—where friendship could be lasting." He loomed at Charlie. "Swallow that incognito! Become yourself again!"

Charlie rebounded, after the blast of rhetoric. Flakes of satisfaction seemed to nudge inside him, like the bid for life of a crystal virus. He perked up, inspired by the radiant light in the COG Boss's eyes.

Charlie found himself standing. A barren joy crawled inside him. He wanted to dab his own eyes with the purple drapes.

Something useful. . . . The challenge of the search. . . .

"I'll do it."

One planet among a billion suns? . . . What if his chances *were* nil? . . . His egotist's excitement stirred him to the marrow.

"Lay the back-flight on. And book me a long-distance refuel."

He might even smoke out a mulberry bush. . . . And once out there, with ambition again, his rank wouldn't matter a pink parsec.

Not even if he was Clean Out-Generalled. . . .

As Charlie plunged out, the COG Boss slumped seat-

ways, and let his moon-beam sag with a sigh. He mopped his flat tract of brow again, and felt as dough-faced as a Dropsical from the Land of Lackadaisies. He drained a long swig from an iced glass of imported Deltosian water.

One more through the mill. . . . It took it out of you, getting these boyos shipshape and out on the old goose-chase.

And not a mumbling of thanks.

Tough case too. Especially with that end-snag about friendships. . . . He stuck a tired thumb at his desk hailer.

"C. Oliver Grant speaking," he said.

"Who?"

"The Warden. I'm pep-talked out ; fagged with revitalizing. They go off clutching the brief straws I give them ; and nobody gives a damn about me. How the hell I got pushed into this job—"

"Hold on. What Warden?"

"Central Office Garbageman," snapped the COG Boss. "Get me an appointment with the Cognito Handler."

SAM WOLF

EYEBALL

IRRITATION SURROUNDS the glowing softness, the jelly mass light sponge crisping in the raw sunlight attack. The red streaked itch and harsh grains of invisible sand dust. Ganglion strands sucking away protective juice. Inside the convoluted grey mass impulses clot. Ticker tape sensation and painful wriggles of inside lightning. Simmering in the stew pot brain the awareness of the enemy within. Click and there is the rational understanding message flashing on the wall for me to read, swallow, digest but no escaping the soft pressure of fact, limpet pain glued to my face. Enemy within.

Examine the situation as if it were a paragraph in a future history book. A being of superior knowledge in some galactic research academy perusing the primitive era.

In his own language the creature inside a mobile thought pod: At a point in the light wave flow dated by era-three primitives as the one thousand nine hundred and sixties A.D. this hominoid, an occupant of planet Alpha 762 in the off-shore galaxy, realized that he had become the involuntary host of a hostile spaceship from a nearby planet.

The invaders using their simple knowledge of matter densification and sub atomic wave particles had transformed their spacecraft into one of the hominoid's two sight organs. Or rather, the spaceship had replaced the organ though maintaining its complete appearance and substance. There was little loss of operational function for the hominoid except for some irritation which he initially attributed to scrapings of dust in the atmosphere.

At that pretended distance the awareness is objectified and becomes a curious phenomenon. As if it were somewhere else at another time. But put it into now language and the terrifying statement snatches away equilibrium. How is it possible that on a calm Saturday afternoon with

the sun shining, with ordinariness everywhere, I realize and am afraid?

Let the tiny muscles snap the sliver of flesh across the right eyeball. Street and people, tired, stupid, gaping at nowhere faces, and crumbling grit of slum stone. Steel boxes on wheels, barrel-shaped slugs with artificial teeth hanging inside the slop mouth push squalling prams. Shrivelled up things in trousers sucking pipes of burning tobacco. Metal containers of price-reduced for this week only sludge in shop windows. Scraps of newspaper flopping out life in the gutter. Large black letters saying nothing—ten thousand foreigners dead in some earthquake, a princess turns up for tea a big photograph of her smiling.

The left eyeball lets in light and the images of a street seep in. As if the left eyeball were quite normal and not a Martian spaceship.

Open the one remaining eye. Snap the flesh shutter on the traitor jelly. The same vision, dreary mess of people shambling around, from a slightly different angle. But scrambled in the brain the inner view.

Intricate details of an electron motor churning sun power and speed of all dimensions, kinetic pulses radiating to the motherland, planet Mars. Energy ducts scooping intra-atomic space into quantum slabs, particles of void become cosmic fuel bricks. And tiny Martians, impossible to describe, turning instruments to spy on human life, coding conversations whispered some thousand miles away, tabulating production data by measuring the heat given off by machines on the other side of the world, computing languages, scanning books and secret documents. Sending information on us Earth creatures to the motherland, planet Mars. From my left eye.

Not quite accurate. My left eyeball is a Martian spaceship. I would never have known it if the space travellers' matter transformation technique had been perfect. But occasionally there is a hole in the meson barrier. Perhaps they miscalculated the Earth's magnetic field. Then image of the enemy slips in when the left eyelid comes down. At first, disbelief, some malfunction of the optic nerve. But the repeated clarity, precise details, inner workings, the Martians.

Vortex of panic thought. Am I the only one? My face in the right latitude and longitude with the Earth's axis at the correct angle? Or others? Strangers and those I am acquainted with, know the shape of their—the word becomes fear—faces. Hosts to the invisible plague.

Danger in this inner conversation and who would dare the belief of a spaceship from Mars embedded in the left eye-socket. Impossible to tell others. No outward show, no tell-tale signs for others to stare at. A perfectly normal face. My own, except for the transformed jelly transmitting information across interplanetary space. For what purpose? What ugly doom for us Earthlings?

Pluck it out. Stamp on it. Squash the hostile sphere. Destroy the invaders.

Fear snaps the links of musculature. Dread of reprisal. Not that easy to slip out the pseudo eyeball or wrench the softness from the face and slam it underfoot. They must have electron fences to protect their craft. Pain searing across cheekbones, rasping agony into the throat. Unbearable vibrations and acid oozing throughout tortured body. Pain the supreme weapon. They know all about me by now. These thoughts homing through space to Mars before I know of them myself. So I am powerless.

Destroy myself and wreck the hostile substance? But would it damage the space craft? Transformation of matter a rapid process. Quicker than the dying of one Earthman. A slight delay as the space ship seeks another host.

And for me the complete end. I don't love the human race that much. Actually, not at all. Not a sacrifice. No nobility or such slogan trash. Just me dead.

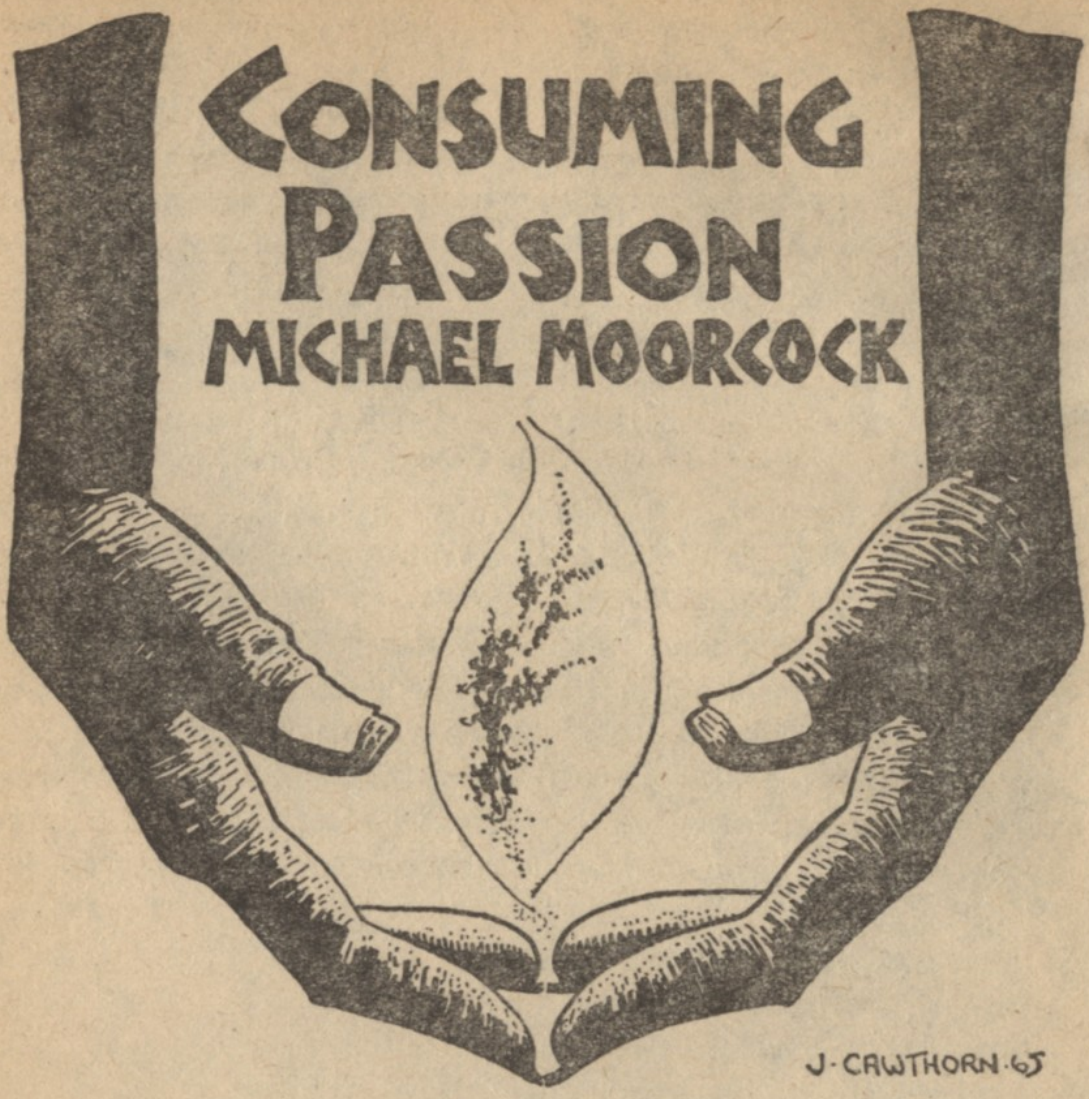
Nothing I can do or can be done. No hope or help. Alone. With the Martians.

Flicker of osmotic pressure on shimmering skull lining. Spherical moisture and dabs of floating corpuscles bring black streaks and sunlight flutter. Protoplasm twisted into circuits throbbing current to the mirror box inside the lobe. Red streaked itch. A ganglion shatters with awareness vibration. Pink rimmed terror.

And a small paragraph in the ancient history of some forgotten planet.

CONSUMING PASSION

MICHAEL MOORCOCK



I TRAVEL SWIFTLY and cautiously over the soft, dry wood-shavings. All around me loom the canvas-covered piles of timber. It is on nights as dark as this that I enjoy my work ; the fruits of my labours are that much more apparent.

I feel my mouth go dry, as dry as the wood I tread on ; my breath comes quickly, in and out of my lungs ; my heart pounds heavily against my ribs. Here is a place, a dark, quiet place with light doweling stacked high. Fine kindling.

From my special little pocket, I extract my sleek, shiny petrol lighter. Press of a thumb, scrape of a wheel, a random spark shoots from flint to wick—and lights the invisible fumes. How perfect it is, this little pointed, flickering flame. How much bigger it will be soon.

In my jacket pockets is paper, screwed up tight. I stuff it into gaps between the heaped dowels. Now I apply the flame.

Beautifully, the fire begins to lick explorative tongues delicately upwards, darting along the wood, further and further. The delicious smell of woodsmoke fills my lungs.

I stand back and I want to laugh at the flaming glory I have created. It will soon engulf the stacks of timber, but now I must run away. Far away. To be found here would mean that my days of creation would be over. It is warm, near the fire, and the night air chills me as I run.

ANOTHER BIG BLAZE

Arson strongly suspected.

Is maniac at large?

Jordan Mennell reads the headline with a slightly thumping heart. A faint smile plays around his well-shaped mouth. His eyes, too bright for grey eyes, scan the columns avidly.

Once more a masterpiece accomplished.

This makes ten. Ten great works of heart. Ten triumphs; ten little note-books with ten collections of clippings pasted neatly in them. And they have a name for him now.

Pyro Jack!

His pseudonym.

Tomorrow I try for eleven. No more petty ignitions of garden bonfires; no more the occasional surreptitiously dropped match in a waste-paper bin. Big ones from now on. Vast timber yards, rubber dumps, petrol reservoirs. Like God I create the flame which destroys. Yes, I am a creator and a destroyer. The power is in my hands. The glory of leaping, yelling, roaring, soaring flames—the red, yellow and blue, the gold and the silver. The tall columns of smoke and the red glow on the skyline. And frantic, terrified little men hopping about, impotent and frightened.

Tomorrow, the eleventh and greatest ever creation. Tomorrow—Dennissen's the furniture store. No watchman; quite safe. Eight storeys of combustibles. A fitting monument to my power. Today, dull wood and fabric; lifeless. Tomorrow—a glorious, sentient mountain.

He pulls on the black trousers, the dark shirt, the soft-soled shoes; feels for the lighter, checks for paper. Paper safe and crinkly against his thigh; lighter hard and smooth.

He goes out of the brown and grubby back door from which the paint is peeling. He turns the rusty key in the stiff lock ; picks a silent path through the rubble of the yard, past the dilapidated shed with the door which hangs on one hinge. Over the leaning fence and into the narrow, cindered alley.

Softly, he crunches along, keeping to the maze of alleyways which run between the identical banks of houses. Bright lights of the High Road before him. A sudden dash across it into the gloom of another narrow alley. But this one is of firm concrete, a wall on one side, a tall corrugated-iron fence on the other. The fence is pointed at the top, like triangular fingers clutching for the sky.

Panting now, after the exertion of the swift run across the deserted mainstreet. A white-painted sign, white foam on the undulating sea of the corrugated fence. He removes his jacket.

With a quick movement, he sends the jacket sailing upwards so that it falls and hangs on the barbs of the fence. An agile jump and his hands are on the top of the fence, padded by his jacket. With little obvious effort, he hauls himself carefully over the fence and, hanging for a moment by one hand, grasps his jacket with the other and drops. The jacket comes with him, but it rips loudly as it comes. He puts it on again and looks around him.

He can guess what the dark silhouettes are ; old chests of drawers, ancient divans, bed-springs.

Now he takes out his sharp, steel knife and begins to force the lock on the door. He hacks at the wood which surrounds the lock and knows that this damage may be discovered. Good, he thinks, they will know that I am responsible.

I am in a dark passage full of the odours of wood-polish and veneer and cloth. I walk along the passage and find the stairway which leads down into the basement. I have been here before. I bought a chair in the second-hand department. That department is in the basement.

I know what I must do. I must ignite the furniture in the basement, then I must go quickly up to the eighth floor and light the fabrics they keep there. Then I must

open some windows so that a breeze will fan the flames.

I take out my small pocket-torch and flash it around the basement. A carpet on the floor, wardrobes, tallboys, book-cases. Many of them frail-looking. All the better. A cupboard painted dull cream and very flimsy. The ideal spot. I take the paper from my pocket and put it along the bottom shelf of the cupboard. Some curtains partition off another piece of the department. I walk over to them and rip them down ; they tear with a tiny tinkle of curtain rings.

Stuffing the curtains into other shelves of the cupboard, I take out my lighter. A great feeling of elation and power begins to surge through my body. I breathe heavily, my hand shakes a little, my heart is beating a frenzied tattoo against my rib-cage. This is the ultimate of sensations, almost all I desire. I press my thumb on the lighter.

Nothing happens, a brief spark but that is all. I press it again, there is a tiny snap. I know that sound, the sound when the flint is finished. I moan in anguish and pass my hands through my hair in violent frustration. I glare with rage at the cupboard. And the cupboard bursts into flames.

Not with a delicate flicker of light, but with a sudden snap and a roar and it is burning ; burning so brightly, wonderfully.

I stare at a cabinet and will it to burn. But nothing happens. Then I realize that the flames are licking nearer to me. I turn and run from the basement, up the stairs, three at a time, opening windows at every landing. Up another flight of stairs, and another, and another, until I am breathing very heavily and irregularly and I am at the top of the building.

But I realize I have no matches, no lighter, nothing with which to create another blaze. I feel frustrated among the rolls of cloth, the cotton and the nylon which will burn so well. I feel like a writer without a pen, an artist without his brushes. The canvas is before me, but I have nothing with which to paint it, to turn it into glowing beauty.

Anger once more consumes me. Is God so frustrated when He works *His* miracles? I wish with all my heart that the cotton and the nylon will burn. And it does. It begins to burn all around me, quite suddenly. I stand for

a long moment and revel in the passionate wonder of the dancing flames. I breathe in the smell of the burning fabric.

Then I realize that if I stay and watch, I will no longer be alive. No longer will I be able to create more grandeur and magnificence. I turn and dash down the stairs. As I reach the last flight, I see a glow, a glorious glow, in the basement.

I fling open the door through which I entered and rush out into the yard. The fence stops me. Why hadn't I thought about the fence before? Leering, jeering fence! My teeth clench tightly, twisting my mouth. I sob in anger. And the fence begins to melt. A hole appears in it; drops of white-hot metal fall from the edges of the hole. I dash through, howling as a piece of molten iron drops on to my shoulder and sets my jacket ablaze. I tear off the garment and fling it behind me as I run down the alley the way I came. No one is in the High Street. I run across the road into the safety of the alley-ways behind the rows of houses. I moan softly to myself; the pain in my shoulder is agonising.

Jordan Mennell sits in the shabby armchair reading his paper. He is dressed only in a pair of pyjama trousers and his right shoulder is crudely smothered in a large piece of medical plaster which is wrinkled and dirty.

The same faint smile is on his face, the same bright light in his eyes. He is reading his latest reviews.

ONE OF THE MOST DISASTROUS FIRES IN SOUTH LONDON!

Who is Pyro Jack?

says one critic. Praise indeed! The critic mentions that the police suspect arson once more. And Pyro Jack, as the public knows Jordan Mennell, is credited. The eleventh big fire in the area within two weeks. Jordan Mennell has been able to see the flames from his bedroom window. He decides that this was the biggest. His unnamed critic agrees. And now Jordan Mennell has the power to create more great fires wherever he pleases. If his anger is sufficiently roused, he supposes, he can start a blaze anywhere he wishes. He is content.

The pain in his shoulder is great, but it will go away

soon. His eyes follow the front-page columns, reading the speculations and assertions. He comes to a paragraph and the smile clears from his mouth as it opens slightly. The police have a clue. A charred jacket which was left on the scene of the fire.

For a moment, Jordan Mennell knows concern. But then he is his old self, his old powerful self. With his new talents, he can defy the police even though they may catch him. He knows what he is capable of, now. Concentration will help him channel his talent, he will not need to feel anger, there will be other emotions. Concentration and power. He has both.

I am dressing, ready to go to work, when there comes a terse knocking on the door of my house. I am puzzled but I finish dressing before I walk down the narrow stairs which creak, and reach out my hand to the handle of the door. As I turn it, I have an inkling of who my caller is. I open the door slowly and confront the man who stands on my step, his left foot close to a bottle of milk and a carton of eggs; his right foot on the cracked concrete of my path. His trousers are black, like his shoes; his raincoat is khaki and grubby. He wears a dark jacket, a striped shirt and a blue tie. He has a double chin and a small moustache and his eyes are deep blue under thick eyebrows. On top of his head is a brown felt trilby. He is, I feel certain, a plain-clothes policeman.

"Yes?" I enquire, shortly.

"Mr. Jordan Mennell?" He knows who I am but I answer him all the same.

"Yes," I tell him. I know the next words before he speaks them.

"I am a police officer. I wonder if I might come in and ask you a few questions?" His voice is gruff and he attempts a politeness which is not in his nature, there is a rock core beneath this very thin veneer.

What else can I say but "Very well."

He enters and I lead him into my small sitting room. I indicate a chair and the movement sends spasms of pain through my throbbing shoulder. I manage to smile.

"What can I do for you, officer? Looking for burglars?"

"No, sir," this he says slowly. "It's about the big fire at Dennissen's."

"I read about it this morning," I say, keeping perfect control of myself. "A terrible catastrophe."

"Yes, sir. The whole place was gutted. Your jacket was found nearby." This is an attempt to shock me. A bluff. But I am ready for this policeman with his shallow cunning.

"My jacket!" I manage to seem astounded. "But that is impossible!"

"Your name was on a tag fixed inside the jacket, sir. Most of the right side of the jacket was burned, but much of it was left when we found it. Perhaps you would like to come along to the station and identify the jacket, sir?"

I feel anger coursing inside me, but I control my emotion and smile again. "Very well, officer, but I am sure you are mistaken." What can they do to me, anyway? I am invincible.

We reach the red-brick police-station and walk together along a cold marble passage, up a short flight of stairs and into a warm room. There is a gas-fire burning against one wall. A desk is before it and a coat-rack beside the entrance to the room. The desk has wire-trays and papers on it—and a parcel. There is a small window which looks out on to the street. A grey street, with an occasional dull-coloured car flashing by, or a darkly-dressed man. These people should feel honoured that I bring such magnificent colour into their lives. But instead they resent me. It is wrong, but I must accept it.

The policeman walks over to the desk after shutting the door behind us. He unwraps the parcel and discloses the remains of the coat I wore last night.

I feel annoyed because I have been so careless. I had assumed that the jacket would have burned to ashes.

I feel another upsurge of power within me, just as a uniformed policeman enters. He begins to tidy up the desk.

"That is my coat," I say, after having glanced at it.

"And," I add grandly, "I was responsible for all eleven fires you have been worrying about. I shall also be the cause of many more."

"Pyro Jack, my God!" says the younger uniformed

policeman. I bow slightly to him as he makes for the door with an armful of papers, bent on telling the news to his companions no doubt. After all, I am a personality whose work has been very much in the public eye recently. They may ask me for my autograph. I shall refuse.

However, I am still angry, but manage to retain a mask of calm.

The policeman is visibly shocked by my statement, but he recovers his composure enough to say "In which case, Mr. Mennell, perhaps you'd like to make a statement."

"I have made all the statement I wish to make," I reply, "Now I must leave."

"Oh, no you don't!" He moves forward to stop me as I make for the door.

I wheel around and glare at him, if only he would burn, too, it would be easier for me.

He shrieks horribly as the flames lick at his flesh. But he has stopped by the time I reach the entrance of the police station.

"*Stop him!* That's Pyro Jack!" The young policeman yells shrilly, excitedly. Another policeman, entering the front of the building, moves forward to stop me. I burn his uniform. He begins to beat frantically at the flames.

I walk calmly out of the place and stroll along the street. A few minutes later, a police-car pulls up beside the pavement. I melt it. The men inside scream in terror.

I laugh out loud, glorying in my magnificent power. The instinct of self-preservation is a wonderful thing.

People rushing. People shouting. People pushing. People grasping. People burning brightly like giant skipping fire-flies, a glorious dance of death.

I walk on down the long brick-lined avenues, I stride along burning and melting anyone or anything which comes in my way. I can conquer the world, and turn it into leaping flames, like a second sun. It shall burn in the heavens as it did millions of years ago.

I thrill jubilantly and my steps are light and buoyant. An hour passes, then manlike, mis-shapen things shuffle clumsily towards me. They have a single broad eye and carry guns in thick-fingered hands.

"Stop, Mennell! Stop, or we shoot!"

Asbestos! Of course, I see it now, I cannot burn asbestos. And those guns can kill me. I shudder and wish that the guns would catch fire, too. They melt.

But the men in the asbestos suits draw nearer. They reach out their coarse, ungainly hands to grasp me.

I draw back, the indignity of it all appalls me. I run away from them towards a tall building; a tall white building. The public library.

A woman shrieks as I rush inside but I ignore her and run on. The clumping of my pursuers' boots echoes down the corridor towards me. I dash into a high-roofed room lined with bookshelves.

The men come nearer and nearer, I stare wildly around me, looking for a route of escape—but I have entered through the only door. Framed in it now are the three asbestos-clad monsters.

It is unfair, they should herald me as master of the world, not treat me as if I were an abnormal beast. I am a supernormal man!

They spread out their arms and move in a cautious semi-circle towards me. I feel enraged at myself and admit that my own blind folly has led me to this trap.

"Back! Get back!" I roar, my voice reverberating round the lofty room. "Back, or I will destroy you!" Still they come nearer, light glinting on their cyclops' eyes, their face-plates.

I scream at them, but the fools still advance. I deserve to burn, myself, for my negligence. A flicker of flame appears on my trousers, runs sensuously up my leg, caresses my thigh. Frantically, I attempt to beat it out, but it is too late. I can start fires but cannot extinguish them—I have never wanted to.

I glare at the books. Voltaire, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Shakespeare, Conrad, Hemingway surround me, glaring back, mocking me. Their work will last, they seem to say. Mine is finished.

My anger sets tongues of orange flame writhing around the books. Everywhere on the shelves the books begin to burn. I feel the heat of my flaming clothes, the pain of the fire. Softly, at first, I begin to laugh. I have achieved some small measure of triumph.

JOHN BRUNNER

The Evil That Men Do

Conclusion

six

IT WAS WITH a sense of burning his boats that Godfrey put in his call to Laszlo at five-thirty, as arranged.

"Yes?" the doctor said. And then: "Oh, Godfrey, of course. You have decided?"

"I think you're right," Godfrey admitted. "I should see Fey at least once before making any inquiries about her background—especially as there's a risk of her relapsing into her former state and being reluctant to go ahead with treatment if there's too long a delay."

"Very good. I will arrange for the use of my room here from eight to nine on Thursday evening if that is convenient. I have only two evening appointments, luckily. Restrict yourself at first to the most clinical detachment, but as you begin to make progress I should say you ought to increase the degree of your involvement—start asking her out to dinner, for instance. But not—I stress this—not before there has been some marked development to encourage her trust in you. And no passes, naturally, until a very late stage."

Godfrey gave a snort of irritation. "What do you prescribe for nymphomania—a course of satyriasis?"

Laszlo chuckled. "Well, you will write to her tonight, of course, telling her to come at the appointed time—and I would suggest on Tuesday and Thursday, my clinic days, as a regular schedule. Thus, if any crises do develop, I should be able to stay over after my own appointments and act as consultant."

"That's very good of you," Godfrey said gratefully. The prospect grew more daunting as he considered it further; he'd always ducked this form of responsibility. "I

felt I ought to lay some more groundwork, by the way. I've already been in touch with Eirene Jackson and I'm going to call on her this evening to talk about Fey in the context of her job, and so forth."

"Admirably thorough, Godfrey. And you are coming with me to Wickingham tomorrow, yes?"

"Tomorrow!" Godfrey exclaimed in dismay. "But I took off most of this afternoon from my work, and I can't—"

"Godfrey!" There was a note of sternness in Laszlo's voice. "You have got to decide once for all where your loyalties lie. You asked, did you not, to meet Alan Rogers?"

"Yes, but—"

"And you have known for as long as I have been going to Wickingham that Wednesday afternoon was my regular day for it?"

"Of course I have! Even so—"

"Therefore I will come past your office with my car and pick you up at one-fifteen tomorrow. If you are to be behind with your—your abstracts in consequence, take some work home tonight."

"I told you, I'm going to see Eirene Jackson—"

"Then tomorrow night!" Laszlo was beginning to sound exasperated. "Heaven's good name, boy, how do you think I fit everything in that I am committed to do? I lecture, I organise research programmes, I treat my patients at the clinic, I attend at three prisons—once weekly, two in alternate weeks—and I have also written some books of small merit. Besides, I am married and have two children. Is this impossible, you think?"

"No." Godfrey muttered.

"Then it is settled. At one-fifteen tomorrow, then."

In a much chastened mood, Godfrey pressed the doorbell of the Jacksons' apartment. It was Tom who answered, for which he was grateful. He wanted a few minutes to settle down before tackling Eirene's particular brand of effervescence.

She called a greeting from the kitchen, over a clatter of crockery that indicated she was clearing away the

dishes from their dinner, and promised to be with them in a minute. Tom waved him to a chair.

"Drink?" he suggested. "Gin, Scotch—or I think we have a few cans of beer left from the party?"

"Beer if you have it, please," Godfrey sighed, leaning back in his seat.

Tom fetched it, and some for himself. As he brought Godfrey's glass to him, he studied his guest with veiled interest.

"I—uh—I gather you turn out to be quite an important person in your field," he said diffidently. "I'm afraid I'd never realised."

"I don't quite get you."

Tom glanced towards the kitchen and lowered his voice. "I understand from Eirene that you're going to treat this girlfriend of hers—Fey, that was here the other night. Isn't this right?"

"Well—yes."

"That's what I was referring to. I'd been under the impression that you were in some other kind of job. I knew you were interested in psychology, but—"

"If you really want the truth," Godfrey interrupted in a brittle voice, "I'm a dabbler who's finally got more than his feet wet. It's not something I bargained for, I've never tackled this type of thing in my life before."

Tom raised his eyebrows. "Eirene said—"

"Yes, I can guess what Eirene thinks about it. Would you do me a favour? It might make the work easier if she wasn't disillusioned."

Tom gave a shrug, looking very puzzled, and had no chance to speak again before Eirene came to join them, rubbing cream over her hands to protect them after the washing-up.

"Godfrey, I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting! This really is wonderful news about Fey—I've been in despair of getting anything done to help her. Have you been given a drink? Oh yes, I see you have something. Tom, how about one for your dutiful little *Hausfrau*?"

She dropped into the deep cushions of a long settee and kicked out her plump but shapely legs to their full

extent in exaggerated weariness after her housekeeping. Tom gave a rather sour grin and fetched her something long with gin.

Godfrey put his beer up on a handy table, took his notebook from his pocket, and poised his pencil. "I hope it's not too much bother, Eirene, but I would like to learn as much about Fey as I can before—well, before trying to help her. And you're the only person in London who knows her at all well."

"I wouldn't say *well,*" Eirene disagreed, and pursed her lips. "But in the whole country I imagine there's only myself and a couple of other people who know her at *all*."

"Could you tell me how you got to meet her, first?"

"Well, it all started with my school friend Dolly Warner—Dolly Eustace as now is. Now she comes from a Somerset family whose home is actually not very far from Market Barnabas and poor Fey's old home. She got married to Wilfred about—oh—six or seven years ago now, after being put off for ages and ages because of the horrible name he suffers from: I mean, Wilfred Eustace is *too* much, isn't it? But they'd known each other for years, I think since they were in their teens, and he comes from that part of the world too, and he hung on doing various locum jobs until finally he managed to get a practice out there in Somerset. He took over from some doddering old wreck who'd been endangering the lives of the peasants for absolutely donkey's years, and I remember him saying no one for miles around had had proper medical care since about 1938 unless they had an accident and got put in hospital."

"These are the people who befriended Fey?" Godfrey suggested, delicately trying to steer her flow of gossip back on course.

"Oh yes." Eirene looked at the ceiling. "It must have been—let's see—just after they moved in down there . . . I think almost three years ago. Wilfred was leaving his surgery in Market Barnabas—sort of call-there-once-a-week arrangement he has in a room behind the post office—when out of nowhere comes this *apparition*: this gawky girl, hair all over the place, wearing incredible

clothes mostly cast off by her mother—who was sort of *balloon-shaped*—blushing like a positive garden of roses at having to speak to a man, stammering out this story about her mother being terribly ill and would the doctor come at once?

"And that was when they found out all about it. Wilfred was horrified, but Dolly was beside herself. Because they'd driven past her home any number of times without realising what was going on. You can't see the house itself from the road, but the gate was off its hinges and the garden was a jungle, so they'd taken it for granted the place was uninhabited. About the only contact there had been with the outside world since the war was the delivery of groceries.

"Oh, that can't have been everything, I grant you—I mean, adventurous boys from the village have climbed the wall and gone exploring, that kind of thing . . . But for example: when Wilfred got there, he found a downstairs toilet which had got blocked in 1951, and the mother wouldn't even send for a plumber. She simply locked the door and threw the key away! They didn't use coal; they burned wood from the garden and not much of that. There was a postbox directly outside the gate, and the mother sent for things by mail order occasionally, but when they were delivered the postman never went right to the house—just parked the parcels in a box at the end of the drive and left them there. Said he'd inherited this from the old man who did the round during the war. Orders from the mother, presumably.

"Lord knows how long it might have gone on this way if she hadn't fallen sick. Fey was so agoraphobic by then it took her a whole night sitting up without sleep to pluck up courage and go down the village street looking for the doctor."

"You had all this from your friend Dolly, presumably."

"Of course. She immediately made it her business to help Fey, but it took weeks—I think I may still have the absolutely heartbreaking letters she sent me before she won the girl's confidence enough for her to leave a nurse in charge and go over with Wilfred in the car to

dinner at Dolly's. It took almost the entire six months her mother was ill to get her behaving halfway normally. Then the mother died, and that set her back practically to the beginning . . .

"Finally, though, she got up some spirit and asked Dolly what she ought to do. Dolly taught her to type and—oh, everything from wearing stockings to the proper use of money! Then she wrote to me and asked me to help her get a job. Luckily we needed a copy-typist just at that time, so I suggested her for the vacancy, and the man doing the interviewing I *think* was more impressed by her looks than her abilities. Still, with a little nurse-maiding here and there we got her settled in, and the only problem remaining, really, is this incurable shyness she has."

"Did she come and live with you when she arrived in London?"

Eirene shook her head. "Wouldn't. We offered—we have a guest-room here—but she only stayed three nights. Then she asked one of the other girls in the office to tell her how to find a room, went off after one she'd seen advertised, and she's been there ever since."

"She said she preferred to be alone," Tom put in.

"I'm not surprised," Godfrey muttered. More chance to indulge in her autohypnotic daydreams, presumably. "Has she no resources? Did her mother not leave the house to her?"

"The house is worthless. In that area, you can't even sell the site, knock it down and rebuild—there's too much land available in more favoured situations," Tom grunted.

"I see." Godfrey tapped his teeth with the end of his pencil. "Eirene, would you do me a favour? Would you give me an introduction to these friends of yours, the Eustaces? I think I ought to run down and see them as soon as I get the chance."

"Of course I will. I'll write to them straight away. I can't tell you how pleased I am with what you're doing! Poor Fey is such a complete waste in the state she's in."

"Maybe it's just as well," Tom murmured. "If she was

in her right mind, none of the men we know would look at anyone else."

"Tom, don't be cynical," Eirene said crossly. "Anyway, she isn't out of her mind in the ordinary sense. She's just had this appalling childhood, and it's left her with this—this withdrawn thing, this habit of seeming to spend half her time in some other world."

The words struck a chord in Godfrey's mind. He regarded Eirene closely. "Do you mean her—well her daydreaming?"

"I suppose that's what it is. I call it mooning." Eirene emptied her glass and held it out to Tom for refilling. "Lord only knows what she thinks about—nothing's *happened* to her!"

Godfrey hesitated. "Then she hasn't ever told you about her daydreams?"

"You mean, discussed the subject of them?" Eirene gave an emphatic headshake. "Absolutely not. She shies off like a scared rabbit if I so much as mention the habit to her."

In that case, since she was so positive, there couldn't be much point in bringing up the matter of the white dragon. Godfrey closed his notebook with a snap.

"Thanks very much, you've been extremely helpful. If you could just let me have the Eustaces' address, I'll be on my way."

seven

HIS INTENTION IN leaving the Jacksons so early had been to go home and settle to some of the work he wouldn't be able to handle at the office tomorrow if he was to go to Wickingham with Laszlo. However, he couldn't concentrate on the papers before him. Fizzing trails of cross-references to phrases used by Fey, or Eirene, kept distracting him and eventually he was gazing at the wall as blankly as though he too were in an autohypnotic trance.

It was useless to tell himself that he must make haste slowly—that piling up too much secondhand information

about Fey's problem involved the risk of prejudging the issue. To be completely honest, he was scared of the prospect confronting him, and wanted to miss no opportunity of preparing to deal with the task ahead.

In eventual exasperation he got up and went over to the phone. Whether it was worth doing what he had in mind, he didn't know, but even a passing acquaintance might have picked up some useful information. He leafed through the directory.

Locke, Marcus—and a number in the Kensington area.

He dialled; waited; then a woman's voice said, "Nadia Locke speaking."

"I'm sorry to disturb you so late," Godfrey said, with a glance at his watch. It was after ten-thirty already—he must have spent longer in a brown study than he imagined. "But I wonder if I could have a word with Marcus . . . ?"

"I'm sorry, my husband isn't here. He's always very late on Tuesday nights. Wednesday is his press day, and the review section has to go to bed the night before because they hold the news pages up to the last possible minute."

Damn. Godfrey hadn't settled on an answer before she spoke again. "Can I give him a message, perhaps? Who is it calling?"

"Godfrey Rayner here—I was at the Jacksons' party the other night."

"Oh, the hypnotist!" Sudden warmth came into her voice. "I thought you were wonderful, and I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to tell you so. Marcus had met you before, hadn't he? I was dreadfully annoyed that I wasn't with him when—"

"Thank you," Godfrey cut in. "Nice of you to say so. But I actually wanted—"

"Is the girl all right?" Mrs. Locke apparently hadn't paid any attention to the interruption. "The one we took home, I mean. She seemed all right when we left her, but after the state she'd been in earlier I was a bit worried, I must say."

"As a matter of fact I was calling to ask a few questions about her."

"I don't see how Marcus or I could help you." Doubt coloured the voice. "We'd never met the girl before."

"Almost anything might be useful," Godfrey encouraged. "A single chance remark in the car going home, for example."

"She didn't talk very much, you know . . ." A pause. "Look, why don't you get hold of Marcus at his office tomorrow? He won't be there till after lunch, I'm sure he wouldn't mind if—"

"I shall be out of town tomorrow afternoon. How about the evening—will I catch him at home?"

"I'm afraid not; we have a dinner date. Look, I have an idea. The best thing is for Marcus to ring you, isn't it? Let me have your number and I'll ask him to get in touch as soon as he can."

"Any interesting developments, my boy?" Laszlo demanded as he snaked his car expertly through the packed lunchtime traffic on the roads leading north out of Central London. "What, for instance, did your Mrs. Jackson say?"

"A great deal," Godfrey muttered. He'd had time only for a sandwich by way of lunch, and had gulped that too rapidly for it to settle yet. "But mostly second-hand stuff. I'd really like to talk with some of Fey's newer friends —people she's met since she started working in London."

"My understanding was that she didn't possess any."

"So Eirene claims. Last night I even tried to get hold of the man who gave her a lift home after the party, in case he heard her say something significant. A sheer waste of time most likely."

"Don't be so pessimistic, Godfrey. Clues may crop up even in such unlikely places as that." Laszlo braked for a red light and muttered a curse.

"How long does it take to get to Wickingham?" Godfrey asked glancing at the clock on the dash.

"About thirty-five minutes unless all the stop lights are against us." Laszlo thumped the wheel with the back of his knuckles. "Speaking of attention to detail,

as we were in effect: you have researched this man Rogers whom you are about to meet?"

"Lord no. I haven't had the time!"

"Is this not time now? The landscape is not so marvellous between here and Wickingham that it should engage your attention." Laszlo let the car roll again. "I will brief you, then. Alan Rogers, age now approximately twenty-eight years, born in Harrow, Middlesex, only child of prosperous middle-class parents. Education excellent—all at fee-paying private schools, though not at the famous Harrow School itself which was a little beyond the family's means.

"Medical history—good average. Several childish ailments but nothing serious. IQ believed high, though his schools didn't test for it and he won't co-operate with me in determining it. General personality bookish, somewhat withdrawn, but not so severely as to make him disliked at school. His former friends remember him as very quiet but very alert.

"Adolescence late and extensive; he was not physically mature till the age of fifteen, and displayed no interest in girls until after leaving school at eighteen. Thereafter he had two girl-friends who did not sleep with him but indulged in heavy petting, and two highly unsatisfactory party experiences when he had drowned his inhibitions in drink. Typical, hm?" He glanced sidelong at Godfrey. By now they were almost clear of London, and a fast wide road lay ahead.

"Far too typical," agreed Godfrey. "What's the mother like—heavily repressed?"

"I would imagine so. After his jailing they changed their name and moved to some other part of the country . . . I have not been able to trace them."

"Bastards."

"Yes, bastards, but what will you?" Laszlo made a dangerous gesture of annoyance with both hands; fortunately the road ahead was clear for an adequate distance. "Where was I? Oh yes. These party experiences, so unsuccessful, had the expected impact on his self-respect, and there was a long interval of no sexual activity. He

had been intended for university, but some financial difficulty prevented this; he went instead to train for management in a large multiple store, and that was where he met the girl whom he—mistreated."

"I'm starting to recall some of the details," Godfrey nodded. "Wasn't she by way of being an amateur tart?"

"She was in the habit of supplementing her earnings in the store, yes. But she had not bargained for certain developments in Rogers's proclivities."

"Yes, I do remember," said Godfrey slowly. "He tied her up—"

"Which is so common as to be unremarkable, and she had submitted to others in this fashion before—"

"But then he still proved to be incapable of doing anything to her."

"Precisely. So he symbolised the act he wished to achieve," said Laszlo heavily. "And he used as a symbol a red-hot iron."

The prison was a shock. They drove through Wickingham—a quiet English country town, marred but not spoiled by commuter development on the southern side—and from the market-place in the centre took an unfrequented road lined with trees that were just putting on their spring leaves.

Abruptly, like a nightmare image bursting into a pleasant dream, a bend in the road disclosed the jail. Brick walls twelve feet high surrounded it, lined with revolving spikes of black iron; over the gate loomed hideous Victorian turrets in brown brick and black and yellow tile, with every window thickly barred. Godfrey found himself shivering as Laszlo sounded his horn for the gates to be opened.

"You have not been inside a prison before?" Laszlo asked.

"No, never."

"It is a shock. I have sometimes wondered whether there truly exists a scent of fear. Even knowing that I am free to go out again, I have sensed the overpowering

depression that is breathed in a jail or a mental hospital. It is like the sun going behind clouds when you pass that gate."

A uniformed prison officer came out to open for the car, and the gate clanged shut behind them. For a moment Godfrey wondered why they had to drive in; then he reasoned that if a prisoner got over the wall and found a car parked outside he might use it for a getaway. He checked the time again. It had taken exactly the promised thirty-five minutes to get here. Ten minutes to two p.m.

"The hospital wing is over there," Laszlo said, nodding to his right as he drew on the parking brake. "I phoned Dr. Hatch—he's the prison medical officer—and asked him to spare us a few minutes for discussion before Rogers comes in."

Nervously, Godfrey followed Laszlo along a succession of dreary corridors and then up a clanging metal stairway. They passed several prisoners and two or three warders. It seemed to Godfrey that both had the same look in their eyes: a look of hopelessness. He shuddered at the implication that this place could make all its inmates equally depressed.

Laszlo had a point about the scent of fear, he told himself. Even when they came into the comparatively welcoming atmosphere of the hospital wing—painted throughout in clean gay pastel colours, boasting a few pictures on the walls and even a pot of spring flowers pathetically challenging the aura of gloom—he enjoyed no lightening of his mood.

Hatch was a lean man of early middle age who seemed also to have been infected by the prevailing state of mind. He barely managed a smile by way of greeting, and waved them to chairs without enthusiasm.

"I understand your friend here is working on a case that has points in common with Rogers's," he said gruffly. His sharp eyes scanned Godfrey's face.

"That's so," Godfrey muttered.

"Then I wish you more luck than Dr. Laszlo is having

with Rogers himself. The man isn't fit to be released anyway and sooner or later he'll have to go—either to a criminal insane asylum, or simply out." Hatch wiped his face with a harassed air.

"Dr. Laszlo was refreshing my memory of the case on the way down," Godfrey said. "What I can't make out is why the man's not in a mental hospital anyway."

"I wasn't involved with his trial," Hatch snapped. "And as far as the authorities are concerned he's a model prisoner—that's why he's qualified for full remission. Does as he's told, spends most of his time staring into nowhere and not bothering anyone . . . The only problem he's ever caused is the one Dr. Laszlo knows about —the difficulty of getting other men to share a cell with him. One after another they request a transfer on the grounds that he's 'creepy'. But even that is a recent development, over a year or so."

"Has he only been 'creepy' for a year, then?"

"Oh no. But up to—let me see—last summer, I think, he was in with a man called Wagstaff who was pretty much the same way. Did you meet Wagstaff, Dr. Laszlo?"

"His case was not drawn to my attention," Laszlo sighed "I wish I had time to inspect the records of every man in the prison, but there are four hundred of them at least, and I should make a start, though, by checking all those whom you regard as model prisoners."

Hatch stared at him and flushed dully. He said, "I resent the implication of that remark, *doctor*."

Godfrey interjected hastily, "And what became of Wagstaff?"

"He qualified for full remission too; he was on a life sentence, which is generally counted as twenty years. He was here when I arrived, you understand, so I am not fully acquainted with his history."

"And he was released?"

"I told you. Last summer—May, or perhaps June. And the third man who had been in their cell was also released about the same time. Since when we have had these complaints." He looked ostentatiously to the wall-clock. "I believe Rogers will be waiting for you, Dr. Laszlo. Should you not go to the interview room now?"

eight

A WARDER was waiting in the corridor, not to show them the way, which Laszlo obviously knew, but to escort them. Stepping briskly ahead of the man, Laszlo muttered a question to Godfrey.

"What do you think of Hatch, hm?"

"He doesn't like you much, that's plain," Godfrey returned dryly.

"Nor I him. He's luckily among the last of the aspirin-for-everything brigade. Some of his assistants are at least aware that the prisoners possess minds as well as bodies. But I know he disapproves of the therapeutic approach. I should love to know whether he was beaten by his father when he was a child."

He shot out his hand and opened a door on his left. From Hatch's use of the term "interview room" Godfrey had expected a forbidding cell like a public lavatory, divided down the middle with wire mesh. Instead, this was like any other room in the hospital wing—fairly bright, with nothing but the barred windows to remind one of the place's true nature.

"I'll bring Rogers in right away, doctor," the warder said from the door.

"And another chair, if you don't mind," Laszlo grunted. "Unless you fancy an hour on your feet."

There were in fact three chairs in the room, and a wide though rickety table. Godfrey had not realized someone else would be present with Laszlo—a warder.

"Don't they trust you on your own with prisoners?" he inquired.

"Rogers is officially a violent man, in view of the offence for which he is here: grievous bodily harm. After four and a half years in this brick box, he has not even initiative left, let alone any violence." Laszlo scowled. "Accordingly, there must be two persons at least in the room with him. What will you? Doctors are not immune from assault, one must grant that."

The only striking thing about Alan Rogers was his lack

of affect. He seemed to be almost on the verge of catatonia. His eyes were dull; his drawn, intellectual face—by which one would have judged him to be at least five years older than his true age—was slack-cheeked and lax-mouthed. When he came in, he shuffled, hardly raising his feet from the floor. On being told to sit, he let his body fall on to the chair and left it as it fell, not making the ordinary movements of a seated person in search of maximum comfort.

There followed a long pause. Godfrey was beginning to wonder whether the man was so completely out of reach that he would show no response during the entire interview, when he finally surveyed the room and concluded by fixing his gaze on Laszlo.

"You again," he said. There was neither interest nor resentment in his voice.

Godfrey's mind flashed back. When he'd first seen Fey at the Jacksons' party, she'd had an expression he had to struggle to define to himself. And here it was again: a blankness beyond description, a neuter condition. Of course, she hadn't gone as far as Rogers. But she was on the same road.

He surreptitiously slid out his notebook and put it on his knee out of Rogers's sight under the table, feeling as though he were about to cheat in school.

Laszlo nodded. "I've just been talking to Dr. Hatch," he said. "I gather that your release has been definitely fixed. Have you decided what you're going to do?"

A few muscles moved in Rogers's body. The whole gave the impression of a shrug, but it wasn't so energetic. And more silence.

For a while Laszlo continued on the same lines—for his benefit, Godfrey presumed, since this must have been done already a score of times with the same negative result: no reaction at all, or at best a disclaimer of concern. It really made no difference any more to Rogers whether he was kept in prison or turned loose. Even the fact that outside he would starve, while here he was at least fed and sheltered, seemed not to matter to him.

At length, however, Laszlo changed his approach. He felt in his pocket and drew out a short chain, from the end

of which dangled a polished metal bob. Without comment he let it swing steadily to and fro above the table.

It was a while before Rogers summoned the willpower to divert his gaze from the wall behind Laszlo to the tiny pendulum. Perhaps half a minute ticked by with no sound in the room except their breathing and the almost imperceptible swish of the chain.

Rogers ceased to blink after that. His eyes glazed, like those of a dead fish. Laszlo let the pendulum swing to a halt.

"Alan Rogers!" he said sharply. "What are you doing?"

"Waiting."

The change in the man's voice was incredible. It now held a foul kind of eagerness, so that Godfrey half expected to see him lick his lips.

"Where are you waiting?" Laszlo demanded.

"On the gallery of my castle," Rogers said. This time, the words were coloured with a sigh of yearning, like a man referring to his beloved mistress.

"What is your castle like?"

"Vast and black, with ten thousand battlements. From afar off it looms like a thundercloud on the horizon. It is all of basalt and marble, and there are bells in the towers that ring and shake the world."

Godfrey wished he had more than a superficial knowledge of shorthand. He scribbled desperately, using longhand abbreviations when his memory failed him.

"What can you see from the gallery?"

"I can see the pit where the white dragon keeps his lair, the fumes rising thick and choking, the glow on the walls of cleft rock. Soon, soon it will be time!"

"What are you waiting for?"

"I am waiting for the victims to be brought to me." Now the tone was gloating and the voice seemed to bubble through saliva.

"Who are the victims?"

"The lying cheating girls, the beautiful virgins, the vessels of evil!"

"Who will bring them to you?"

"The Emissaries! The Emissaries with eight long arms!"

Godfrey started and nearly dropped his pencil.

Now, without prompting from Laszlo, Rogers was falling into the loathesome climax of his fantasy. He rocked back and forth on his chair, his staring eyes fixed on a point outside space and time.

"They come, they come, now they come, weeping and moaning and struggling, but they can't break loose, *oh* no. Arms as rough as ropes bind them fast, arms smeared with the mud where the Emissaries lurk!"

And Fey had said: *like ropes covered with wet mud, rough and slimy. . . .* Godfrey hardly dared breathe for fear of missing what Rogers was saying, in a voice that was scarcely above a whisper by this time.

"Chains, bring me the chains! Listen how the sweet music of their jangling mocks the victims, mingled with their moans and screams! Give me the keys to turn the locks. . . . And once I've chained them fast, their clothes—off with their clothes!"

His hands rose as far as his chest, pantomiming the ripping of thin cloth as they were snatched apart.

"It'll burn, you dirty tart—that curling hair down there. Hear me? It'll burn off you, and see how you like that. And inside there the milk will boil! Boil over—he-heh!" The words dissolved into obscene giggling. Godfrey felt his guts churning with nausea.

"He comes!" A sudden shriek. "The dragon comes!"

Godfrey stole a glance at the others in the room. The warder was trying to keep any emotion from showing in his face, but he had his hands clasped in his lap; even Laszlo was affected by the revolting flow of Rogers's words, for his forehead glistened ever so slightly with perspiration.

"Ohhhh. . . ." Air hissed between Rogers's clenched teeth, and hinted at confused words; another minute or so, and he was talking clearly.

"Let me look at you, my pretties that were. How do you like it, getting what you deserve? Oh, doesn't the skin peel nicely when it's so brown and crackly? I'll take it off like your clothes, darling, I'll make you *really* naked. If you could only see yourself smiling at me now, with your lips so shrivelled they don't meet over your teeth! But you

won't see anything again, will you? Not when your eyes have melted and burst in their sockets. . . ."

"Oh my God," said a thin voice somewhere. "Oh, my God." And he listened curiously. Finally, it came to him that the voice was his own.

Rogers had gone, and the warder, and there was only Laszlo looking at him sympathetically.

"Disgusting, isn't it? But it's not the worst I've heard, by a long way. I promise you that if there are limits to the foulness of the human mind, I've never found them."

Godfrey shut his notebook to hide the record of the detestable fantasy. He said, "Is this a replay of the scene he acted out with—with the girl he tortured?"

"One moment," Laszlo countered, raising a hand. "I have a question or two to ask you, please. Your general comment, first."

Godfrey struggled to order his confused thoughts. He said at last, "Well, the castle—that's presumably a symbol for both security and power. Ah . . . the burning of the girls fits with what I know about his mental history; fire's one of the earliest masculine symbols, presumably because of the phallic form of the firestick and the unleashed power to which it gives rise. . . . And of course now I know where you got the Emissaries with eight long arms, that so surprised Fey when you mentioned them to her. Though where she got them from, heaven alone knows."

"Ye-es. . . ." Laszlo rubbed his chin. "There's a point you haven't covered. Think a little further."

"I don't— Oh! you mean he didn't burn the girls himself. He chained them up and exposed them to the dragon, is that right?" And on Laszlo's nod, added, "Perseus and Andromeda?"

"Now that's a parallel I missed," the doctor grunted. "I wonder if there's anything in it. Thanks for the suggestion. But go on about the dragon."

"Ah. . . . Well, we know it lives in a pit with fumes coming out," Godfrey mused. "That figures; I never thought of it before, but there's a twisted logic in it. A dragon is supposed to breathe fire, which argues a pretty

fierce internal metabolism. It would have to lair in—geysers, maybe, or volcanoes, to conserve its body heat. Not the sort of point I'd have thought likely to occur to a man like Rogers, though."

"I doubt if it did. I'd suspected that his mental orientation was wrong for this sort of disciplined fantasy, and of course since your girl-friend indicated knowledge of it we must seek some exterior source. But one more important point regarding the dragon, please, bearing in mind his equation of fire with the masculine principle."

"Got it!" Godfrey rapped. "An absolute dichotomy between his sexual capacity and his conscious mind. He regards sex as a fearsome monster ; even though it belongs to him, it inhabits a deep pit masked by fumes. On this basis the castle represents not only abstracts like security, but also his persona—his head, in which his awareness is sited, and his face, which is the appearance he presents to the world. He said it looked like a thundercloud from far away."

"Very good," Laszlo approved. "There are innumerable smaller symbols involved in the whole, but by and large this is a reasonable summary."

"What about the Emissaries?"

"I suspect a complex based on a diagram of spermatazoa he saw as a child, but I have never managed to get him to describe them adequately. When they arrive on the scene, he wants to progress to the climax at once, and won't delay for questioning. I do know that like many repressively toilet-trained children his first sexual stimuli associated to excrement, and perhaps this explains the mud in which he says they live."

Laszlo paused, and gave a heavy sigh. "Put this way, it sounds most clear and comprehensible, hm? I wish it were! For now I will answer the question you put a few moments ago: is it a replay of the scene he enacted and thus landed himself here in the jail? And the paradoxical, damnable answer is *no*. What is worse—what is completely baffling—is that we possess the complete record of that scene which the unfortunate victim placed in evidence at the trial. And I mean *record*. A literal tape-recording.

"Not only does the current fantasy bear no resemblance

to what so excited him then. The former stimuli have totally lost their power to affect him. Godfrey, it's quite beyond me!"

nine

"IT MUST BE a book," Godfrey decided aloud as Laszlo slowed the car in deference to the denser city traffic they were now meeting. "It can't be a picture, unless there's a caption with it which names the Emissaries. Do you agree?"

Laszlo answered with a noncommittal grunt. Godfrey took it for approval, and went on.

"Query: is the sexual material in the original, or added by Rogers to flesh out a set of symbols that he found adaptable?"

"You'll have to ask your girl-friend about that," Laszlo said. "Tomorrow evening, hm?"

"I wish you'd stop calling her my girl-friend," Godfrey snapped more sharply than he meant to.

"I am merely pointing out that for all we can tell at present she clearly remembers from what book she took the fantasy." Laszlo sighed. "Also it may not be a book. Perhaps a poem ; perhaps a movie or a TV or radio programme they both recall from many years ago. . . . And it is too early to rule out one other important possibility."

"What?"

"Direct contact."

"For heaven's sake, doc, by the time Fey moved to London Rogers was in jail, and she'd never been anywhere near—where the hell? Ah yes—Harrow in her entire life!"

"The converse may not be true," Laszlo countered. "Rogers will not talk about that, and his parents, who would doubtless recall if they had ever taken him on a visit to Somerset when he was a boy, have done this disgraceful thing and abandoned him. So we have no means of telling."

"Yes, I have to grant you that," Godfrey admitted. "Or more likely, they might both have had contact with someone else unknown to us. . . . Doc, you're not thinking of taking me all the way home, are you? It's miles off your route."

"True. Where shall I put you down? Will you brave the rush-hour on the Underground?"

What crazy kind of link could there be between the unfortunate sadist Rogers and the isolated girl in the decaying country house? Godfrey was still shaking his head over that mystery when, shortly after he got home, the phone rang and he answered it in an irritable voice.

"Marcus Locke here," the caller said. "Nadia tells me you were trying to reach me—something to do with the girl we gave a lift to the other night, Fey. Look, I'm always willing to help out if I can, but really she didn't say much to us except thank you for the ride, and so—well. . . .!"

Godfrey hesitated. He said finally, "Frankly, I did only call on the offchance. The difficulty is, you see, the girl has made practically no friends here except Eirene, and I desperately need more information about her before I start—"

"Just a second," Locke muttered, and covered the phone at his end as though to answer a call Godfrey hadn't heard. When he came back, he sounded hurried.

"I'm so sorry, but we're supposed to go out to dinner and Nadia's getting fidgety. I promise I would help if I could, but I really don't think there's anything I can add to what you must know already."

"In that case I'm sorry to have bothered you," Godfrey said, and was about to cradle the phone when he jerked it back to his ear. "Hey! Are you still there?"

"Yes." Locke chuckled. "No need to shout like that!"

"Sorry. It just this moment occurred to me. As a critic you must get a tremendous number of books through your hands. I wonder if this means anything to you."

Baldly he summarised the content of Rogers's fantasy, then waited hoping against hope for a miracle.

It happened. Locke said slowly, "You know, that rings a bell. . . . Though if it's what I think it is, it's a most peculiar book to have come to Fey's notice. Eirene told us something of her history, and I can't imagine. . . ."

"What is it?" Godfrey demanded, unable to restrain himself.

"I can't remember the exact title offhand—it must be

ten years since I saw a copy. It's by Duncan Marsh, though, I'm virtually certain of that."

Godfrey snatched a pencil and was about to note the name, when Locke dashed his enthusiasm. "Don't go chasing off to the public library after it, though. It's never been published in this country. *Lady Chatterley* is a schoolroom primer compared to Marsh's stuff."

"Damn. Is there any way I can get hold of it?"

"If you know someone who collects deep dirt, he might let you see a copy. I doubt if you could buy one for under fifty quid; there was only one edition—I think Octagon Press did it, in Paris—and of course you can't even print that kind of thing in France any more. . . ."

"Did he write anything else, milder perhaps?"

"For all I know he wrote scores of other things. But nothing else under the name of Marsh." Locke interrupted himself again to soothe his wife and promise he was just coming. "I tell you what, though. I'll dig around, and if I manage to trace a copy I'll get in touch. Okay?"

"Thanks very much indeed," Godfrey said, and set down the phone.

He'd expected that this windfall from Locke would ease his mind and allow him to think of something else than Fey. It didn't. It was too tantalising to have it dangled under his nose and then withdrawn. The following morning he passed on Locke's news to Laszlo, thinking that he might have run across a serious collector of pornography among his patients, but that was no help.

"Godfrey, let me tell you something about pornography," the doctor rumbled. "Addiction to it is highly cathartic. One might almost call it a do-it-yourself psychotherapy. I have yet to be consulted by anybody with access to a first-rate range of erotica. Unless, to be sure, he was denying himself the enjoyment of it for some reason of repression."

"How about de Sade?" objected Godfrey.

Laszlo sighed. "I wish they would publish all his works in this country and clear up the mistaken impressions fools have of him. . . . He was a prison pornographer, so to say; he preferred practice above fantasy and was in jail when he wrote the *120 Days*, for example. As a result of which he

has some claim to be the compiler of the first *Psychopathia Sexualis*. I must loan you some of his works when I get the chance."

"But the name of Duncan Marsh doesn't mean anything to you?" Godfrey persisted.

"No, Godfrey, I'm afraid not." It sounded as though Laszlo was fighting a yawn. "You will be here at eight, yes, to see your girl-friend?"

I wish she was, Godfrey thought as he went through the motions of welcoming her and making her comfortable in the stark back room of the Halfway Street clinic. He wanted to plunge his fingers into the sleek midnight of her hair, learn the taste of her mouth, tighten his arms on her slender body. . . .

What would she do? Scream?

The violence of his reaction alarmed him. He was quite sure all of a sudden that she was the most beautiful woman he was ever going to meet; she must have touched some subconscious trigger in his mind by her mere appearance. That was one hell of a note on which to begin his first supposedly responsible act of therapy!

He forced a smile and ordered the papers in front of him. "Well, how've you been the past couple of days since I saw you?" he said at random.

"All right, thank you." Her eyes wouldn't meet his, but roved the room. Her hands were white-knuckled on her lap.

"Good. Any more of your—your trouble?"

She gave a quick nod, biting down on her lower lip as though to stifle accompanying words. Godfrey studied her, hiding a desire to frown. If the outward signs were a fair guide, he was lucky that she'd summoned up the courage to come here—she might just have let the whole thing drop and gone home.

He was going to have to work long and patiently to win her confidence. Accordingly, he leaned back in his chair with the most relaxed attitude he could contrive and smiled again.

"Let's just start by talking around the subject for a

while," he suggested. "There are still so many facts about you that no one else can tell me, which may prove to be important. Tell me—oh, tell me your earliest memory, how about that? Nothing like beginning at the beginning."

"I don't remember very much before I was about eight or nine," she said after a long pause.

Typical, but bad. Godfrey shrugged. "Start there, then!"

Hesitatingly, with frequent pauses for thought, she gave him some material which indicated that Eirene for once had proved a remarkably accurate channel of information. When she was so far involved with her story as to show signs of resentment at the weird upbringing she had had, Godfrey decided he could safely tackle the central problem.

"Good, thank you," he murmured. "Now I think it might be worth trying the technique Dr. Laszlo mentioned when you saw him. How about it? Taking you back to a time when the day-dreaming was pleasanter than it is now—regression, as they say."

For a moment he thought she was going to refuse, but she finally shrugged. He stood up, and gestured at the couch along the wall of the room.

"If you'd like to lie down here—"

"I'd rather not," she said firmly.

It would be dangerous to argue. Lord knew what kind of rape-fantasy he might crash up against. Godfrey let it pass. "Then make yourself as comfortable as you can in that chair—legs relaxed, arms resting gently by your side—let your head tip back a little—let your eyes close. . . ."

As he was speaking, he moved around behind her and put his fingers very lightly on her forehead. She flinched from the contact, and for a few seconds he had to fight his own impulses as well. But repetitive stroking was a great help in a fast induction.

"Don't worry," he soothed. "This is just the kind of massage you give for headaches sometimes—easing the muscles and making them relax, relax, relax. . . ."

Imperceptibly he extended the sweep of his fingers, talking all the time in the same monotone, repeating the key commands: *relax, rest, sleepy, hear only my voice*. She was without doubt the best subject he'd ever tackled; in

spite of her fear of him as a man and the content of her autohypnotic fantasies, she went under within three minutes.

He'd told her a white lie. At this first session he didn't propose to attempt regression—without some sort of guide-line, for instance substantiated dates (or rather ages, since dates could have meant little in her childhood), it would be ineffective. What he did want to do was to get at some of the instinctive reactions she was masking in conversation.

He'd drafted a free-association list before coming to the clinic. Returning to the desk, he picked it up. Hypnosis made this a far more useful technique, since he could be sure of getting truthful responses unless there was a real block somewhere.

He summarised what he intended to do, and shot the first few simple words at her in quick succession. "Home! Mother! Father! Book!"

There was a pattern almost at once. This girl was even further from the normal than one might have expected. "Mother" should match to "Father", and didn't; it provoked "Warm", while "Book"—typically associated to something easy, like "Read"—produced a yearning sigh of "More!"

Slowly, he changed the course of the questioning.

"Castle?"

"I—I—*no*!" It was a frightened whimper.

"Arms?"

"Please don't, please, please, *please* . . .!"

He soothed her back to total relaxation, and decided that that was far too sensitive an area. But there were three or four items he must fit in before the hour was up, and time was pressing. He took them quickly; they were all names.

"Eirene?"

"Friend." But not very enthusiastic.

"Dr. Eustace?"

"Car. . . . Yes, car."

Second thoughts even in deep trance, Godfrey noted. He continued evenly, "Godfrey Rayner?"

"Kind."

Well, that was hopeful enough! And now the clincher, the climax. He said, "Duncan Marsh?"

And she was answering doubtfully, "Who?"

ten

WELL, LOCKE HAD warned him that Marsh's book was unlikely to have come the way of a girl leading the sort of life Fey had had to endure. And in other respects his luck was definitely in. Eirene had called him to say the Eustaces were delighted to hear something was to be done about Fey, and conveyed their invitation to call on them and ask for any assistance they could give—accommodation near her old home, more information, guidance as to who should be questioned among the local people.

He had booked a hire-car for the weekend, and proposed taking them up on their offer straight away.

Also, despite the time lost with Laszlo, he had somehow managed to get the week's work out of the way; the full copy for the month was prepared for the printer, and it would not be till a week from Monday that he had to revert to it, correct the galley proofs and paste it up for publication.

And then Locke triumphantly called up and suggested he come around and see what he'd unearthed.

The Lockes had a handsome but rather stark new apartment in Kensington, with almost all its walls lined with shiny-jacketed review copies of novels. Godfrey had been unable to picture Nadia Locke when they spoke on the phone; at Eirene's party he had barely noticed her. He placed her at once, however, on his arrival: a tall, lean, rather pale woman a few years older than her husband.

The Marsh book was not mentioned for some time, since two children were with them: the Lockes' daughter and the son of a friend whom they were putting up while his parents were out. Godfrey suffered drinks and small-talk for about half an hour. Eventually Nadia took the children in charge and led them away to bed, and Locke put down his drink and went to open the drawer of a wall-hung bureau.

"There you are," he said, turning with a flourish to Godfrey. "Check the passage I've marked and see if it matches what you've been hearing from your—uh—professional sources."

Godfrey took the book with some eagerness. It had originally been a paperback, but someone had rebound it in fine black leather. There was no wording on the cover. He turned to the title page and read: *The Harder Dream by Duncan Marsh, Paris 1949 at the Octagon Press.*

A slip of paper poked out of the top of the book about one-third of the way through. He did as Locke had suggested and found a poem headed, baldly *MATING OF DRAGONS.*

In pits close to the furnace heart of earth
The dragon nests. They say it breathes out flame
Its veins must run with magma and its hide
Glow like sheet metal red or white. Its birth
Must predicate a mating without name
Think how the male must fume and pant astride
The female dragon till his final surge
Brings seed as hot as lava from his flaming verge.

And it went on: in extremely precious typography, a French face rather like Perpetua but with an excess of ligatures and swash letters at every possible opportunity. It was followed by a prose narrative which made the most startling variations on a traditional theme, that of the knight rescuing a damsel from a dragon. But the notion that dragons must glow white-hot was literally developed, and when the knight claimed his physical reward—described in immense erotic detail—maximum use was made of the girl being bound hand and foot, partly flayed by the heat, not to mention the overt phallic symbolism of the tree she was lashed to.

"Well?" Locke said at last.

Godfrey had never seen such elaborate stuff in print before. Locke had said *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was childish compared to this, and he had been absolutely accurate. Such singlemindedness in pornographic description was in itself repellent, and Godfrey got as little kick from it as from a medical text—which it somewhat resembled in its pedantic-

ally thorough attention to detail. Nonetheless, he was somewhat embarrassed and had to answer in a forcedly off hand tone.

"You're almost certainly correct. This is so like some of the material I've been dealing with it can't be chance. Is the rest of the book similar?"

"Pretty well." Locke retrieved his drink and sat down facing his guest. "It's a set of what the author is pleased to call archetypal situations—though I doubt if Jung would have agreed with his use of the term. Oedipus and Jocasta, Hamlet and Gertrude, Cleopatra and Ptolemy, Heracles and Hyacinthus, Achilles and Patroclus, Sappho—you name it, he found some kind of legendary peg on which to hang it."

"Incest, homosexuality, sadism. . . ." Godfrey shut the book with a snap. "Did he leave anything out?"

"Not if he could help it," Locke said with a rueful grin.

"How did you get hold of it?"

"Sorry, I can't tell you who lent it to me—the owner is far too famous and respectable now. But he does have one of the finest libraries in Britain of—ah—curiosa." Locke waved his glass. "Another?"

"No—no thank you," Godfrey said absently. "May I have it for a while? Or could you arrange to have the relevant passage copied, perhaps?"

"I promised not to let it out of my sight," Locke shrugged. "If you can send me around a typist who won't faint at the sight of some of the words in there, I suppose that would do, would it?"

"In that case I'll probably have to copy it myself. It's not a job you could farm out to an agency." Godfrey leafed through the book rapidly. "I owe you a considerable debt of gratitude, I must say. You have an amazing memory if you were able to spot the reference on the data I could give you."

"It's not the kind of book one could easily confuse with the general run of fiction, is it?" Locke murmured.

"And you know nothing about the author?"

"One can deduce a great deal from the text. He was young and unconscious of his own absurdities; he'd been much influenced by a hodge-podge of poets from Spenser

to the Georgians but disliked most contemporary authors; he was guilty of haste—witness the use of the archaic term 'verge' meaning a sword, presumably because he couldn't be bothered to hunt out a rhyme-scheme eliminating it. Also he must have had some pretty weird tastes, don't you think?"

There was a long pause. Godfrey had chanced on a passage in the Hamlet fantasy, where the hero successfully poisoned his step-father and seduced his mother.

"Yes," he said at last. "Very weird indeed."

His plan was to get up early on the Saturday morning—about six o'clock—and do the trip to Somerset without having to hurry; he judged he ought to be able to call on the Eustaces by about noon. This, of course, entailed going to sleep early as well, and when he left the Lockes he fully expected to be able to drop off easily—Marcus's fantastic memory had without doubt led to the right source-book.

But something was itching at the back of his mind, and he lay awake into the small hours, cursing it. There remained a flaw in his chain of reasoning. . . .

Got it.

The Emissaries with eight long arms—Fey had known about them, and Rogers had told Laszlo of them, and they didn't figure in the passage of Marsh's book which Locke had shown him. Everything else fitted too snugly to be accidental. Therefore there had to be either another as yet undiscovered source, or a direct connection between Fey and Rogers.

He wasn't much further forward after all, on that basis. Unless the Emissaries cropped up elsewhere in the book. . . .? He repressed the desire to jump out of bed and go back to see Locke—he could hardly do *that* at two in the morning. Not for the first time he wished he had Laszlo's capacity for detailed analysis of work in hand.

Finally he resorted to something he hadn't had to do in years, and revived an autohypnotic formula he had taught himself when he was in his teens. He put himself to sleep with no more difficulty, but his dreams were chaotic, and while it was pleasant to picture Fey in them it was less so

to have Rogers turning up to re-enact his gruesome crimes under the name of Duncan Marsh.

Eyes tingling from inadequate sleep, he left London under a clear sky, but as he worked westwards clouds piled up ahead, and after a couple of hours he was in a rain-belt that cut his average speed sharply. He stopped off for a snack and three cups of black coffee, hoping the downpour might ease a little, but it was still pelting when he passed through Bath and turned southwards, away from the main A4 road, towards his goal.

His map informed him of places with charming, illogical names—Chew Magna, Temple Cloud, Midsomer Norton. The hills heaved up their backs beneath the weight of the car, hollowed with caves; here, he was just a short distance from the Cheddar Gorge, famous not only for its cheese but for caves that were homes for Stone Age man. The rain bleakened the landscape, all colours dissolving to a sombre olive-grey. He wished there was a radio in the car, to provide some relief from the oppressive dullness of the journey.

Market Barnabas, where Fey's home had been, was too small to show on the map he had, but he managed to locate the village where the Eustaces lived, three or four miles away: Cold Feffer was the name, and his disbelieving ears had refused to accept it the first time Eirene said it to him over the phone.

It slanted down a dark hillside into a valley bottomed with a turgid river. Bare trees ran shiny with the continuing rain, and the slate roofs of the houses glistened blue-black like a shark fresh from the sea. At the end of the little hump-backed stone bridge spanning the river, he stopped and asked a rain-caped postman where the doctor lived, and was directed to a handsome red-brick house set back from the road in a sad garden. He ran his car into the yellow-gravelled driveway.

Children peered at him through the streaming windows as he dashed to the porch, and before he could ring the door was being opened by a dark, rather plump woman with flour all over her hands.

"Mrs. Eustace?" Godfrey said.

"You must be Godfrey Rayner! Come in, quickly. You must have had an awful trip in the rain. I'm afraid Wilfred's not here at the moment—people pick the most inconvenient days to have premature babies, don't they? But never mind, you're just in time for lunch, and . . ."

Chattering on, she took his raincoat, which the brief distance from the car had soaked through, introduced her children—she obviously went in for romantic names, since they were called Clive, Melissa and Britomart—and got him what she termed a "warmer-upper" of rough local cider.

He was beginning to wonder how she and Eirene had become such good friends, seeing that each talked so much it was improbable the other could manage to get a word in, when she apologised for having to take him in the kitchen and finish preparing the lunch. He tried to explain that he didn't want to be any trouble, but she refused to admit that he was being a nuisance at all, and certainly she seemed able to get ahead with her cooking while talking of Fey.

"I'm so *pleased* someone is helping her at long last," she kept insisting.

"But you helped her," Godfrey suggested. "Didn't you?"

"We did what we could," Mrs. Eustace said deprecatingly. "She was so difficult to help, though. . . . So out of reach, if you see what I mean. Just to get her out of that terrible house, I used to insist on her coming here and having supper with us, watching television which she'd never seen—and you know, I never once managed to get her to talk about the programmes?"

"She probably hadn't seen them," Godfrey said, and on her astonished reaction explained that the bright screen in the darkened room would readily have sent Fey into trance, so that she forgot everything except her own fantasies.

"The poor girl!" Mrs. Eustace exclaimed. "I feel ashamed of myself, I really do, because I thought she was just incapable of appreciating things people tried to do. When she went to London and simply walked out on Eirene, for example—took a room by herself without warning or explanation. And coming down here without seeing us, that was something that made me terribly disappointed."

"When was that?"

"Oh—I don't know exactly. Towards the end of last year, I think. I only heard through Eirene, you see. But I thought it was *very* odd not to call on us if she was so close." Mrs. Eustace tasted her soup and gave a satisfied nod. "Have you found out anything about these fantasies you just mentioned?"

"Only that they're based on a book which I don't understand her getting hold of—a piece of deep dirt called *The Harder Dream*."

"How extraordinary!" Mrs. Eustace said, staring at him. "Wilfred met the man who wrote it. Or at any rate, the man who *said* he'd written it."

eleven

"GOOD HEAVENS," Godfrey said inadequately after a long stunned pause. "How? And who is he?"

"Well—" Mrs. Eustace glanced towards the kitchen door, around which the fair tousled head of one of her daughters had just appeared. "Yes, darling, what is it?"

"Clive says he's so hungry he could eat worms and how much longer till we have lunch?" the girl uttered in a rush.

"Tell him he's going to eat worms or nothing," Mrs. Eustace answered good-humouredly. "It's spaghetti today. Ah—it'll be another five minutes. Go and lay the table, will you?"

"Ohhh . . .!" protested the girl, but obediently went to the cutlery drawer and piled spoons and forks clattering on a tray. Mrs. Eustace waited till she had left the room before continuing her explanation to Godfrey.

"Well, you know how it is with doctors these days in country districts. The down-and-outs used to go automatically to the vicarage, but now three or four parishes have to share a parson around here, so they tend to try the doctor instead. Well, last summer this man turned up at the door—shabbily dressed, unshaven and not too clean, but very wellspoken—using the excuse that he wanted Wilfred to treat some blisters on his foot. He did have blisters, and Wilfred agreed to dress them—he never turns away any

patient, on principle—but it was just an excuse, and as soon as he was in the surgery in the front room there, he started his story about being broke and not having eaten for three days. . . . *You* know the type.

"Well, Wilfred is always ready to help a deserving case, but he asks questions first, and he wasn't exactly satisfied with this man's evasions. He claimed to have been abroad for a long time, and to have lost touch with all his friends, and Wilfred just couldn't pin him down. And then he came out with this astonishing thing about having written a famous book.

"That really took Wilfred aback. Because there was a copy of it there in the room."

"You mean you actually have the book in the house?" Godfrey exclaimed. Then this must be where Fey got hold of it!

Mrs. Eustace looked a trifle embarrassed. "Wilfred bought it in Paris long ago. He thought the author was going to be recognised as a genius one day—you know, like Henry Miller—so he kept it. But it was always locked away in the case in the surgery where he has his medical texts and other things he didn't want the children to see before they were old enough.

"He didn't believe it at first, naturally, because the man had given some other name than the one on the book, but after a bit more questioning he decided he could possibly be telling the truth, and when the man said he hadn't seen a copy for years Wilfred got out his and showed it to him. After that the man apologised—and this was really odd—for coming begging, and as soon as his blisters were dressed he was all set to leave. This finally persuaded Wilfred he *was* telling the truth, so he gave him a pound. He said he would have given more, but the man still wouldn't be open about his past and why he was tramping around broke. He did claim to be a local man, I think, or at any rate to have had friends near here, but Wilfred couldn't get the names out of him, so he was still a bit put off him." Mrs. Eustace lifted the lid of her soup-pan and reached for a ladle just as her daughter came back with the tray.

"Then Fey must have seen your husband's copy of the book," Godfrey said.

"I don't see how she can have done," Mrs. Eustace said positively. "I told you: Wilfred has always kept it in the locked case in his surgery, and I'm absolutely certain Fey was never in there when the case was open, unless Wilfred was there as well. Besides, it was done up in plain paper and tucked right in the corner of the top shelf. Do you want to look at it? Because if so I can get it for you after lunch."

"Thank you," Godfrey said. "By the way, do you remember the man's real name?"

Mrs. Eustace looked thoughtful, but finally shook her head. "I didn't meet him, you see—I was out shopping at the time. I do remember that it was a north country name, perhaps a Yorkshire name, but you'll have to ask Wilfred what it was."

During lunch—which for Godfrey was quite a strain, he was so eager to check further on this likely connection between Fey and Marsh's book—the phone rang in the hall, and Clive went to answer, flapping his napkin wildly like a flag. When he came back, both the girls demanded at once if the baby had arrived.

"Nyup!" said Clive, slipping back into his chair. "It's a bad one and he's going to have to risk moving her to hospital. Doesn't expect to be back before teatime."

"Who'd marry a doctor?" Mrs. Eustace sighed. "Not that you mind much, do you, Clive? More spaghetti?"

So there would be no point in waiting around for the whole afternoon, Godfrey reasoned. He might as well go over to Market Barnabas and take a look at the Cantrips' old home. Directly after lunch he said as much to Mrs. Eustace.

"I'm dreadfully sorry Wilfred can't go with you," she apologised needlessly. "But I can tell you how to find the place, and there shouldn't be any difficulty getting in if you want to—the windows must all be broken by now, and probably half the doors are off the hinges."

"Has it been empty since Fey left?"

"Oh yes. It was far too neglected to be worth repairing and trying to sell it. The estimates were enormous—three thousand pounds just to make it habitable, without count-

ing decorations or any other trimmings. . . . Do you want me to get you that book before you go, incidentally?"

"I would like to look at it, yes. And on that point: Marsh—or whatever his real name is—claimed to be a local man, you told me. Did he turn up again in the neighbourhood?"

"Wilfred did say he thought he'd seen him once, when he was out in the car. But I don't remember anyone else mentioning him. He must have kept himself pretty well hidden, come to think of it; these little villages gossip dreadfully, and you can hardly move without everybody being told. I imagine he must have wandered on, or somebody would have talked about him."

As she was talking, she led the way into her husband's surgery, the smaller of the front ground-floor rooms. It was a rather dark, but pleasant room, with several glass-fronted bookcases and a fine antique oak desk. In one corner, the sterile modernity of a large sink and shelves of basic medicaments struck a contrasting note.

"Now if I can only find the key," muttered Mrs. Eustace, pulling open successive drawers of the desk. "Ah, I think that must be the one!"

And it was. She swung back the glass doors of the largest bookcase, stretched to full height, and could not quite reach the top shelf. Godfrey took over at her invitation, and fumbled in the extreme corner as she indicated.

There was no paperback concealed in a plain wrapper there—just a space half an inch wide between the wood and the last of the medical textbooks.

"That's very curious," Mrs. Eustace exclaimed, and fetched a stool to stand on. After poking and rummaging for a few moments, she stepped down again, shaking her head.

"I'm sorry—Wilfred must have put it away somewhere else. Ask him when you come back, then. It isn't urgent, is it?"

Not urgent, strictly. Still, it would have been interesting to find out right away whether the mysterious Emissaries

were also children of Marsh's warped imagination, or whether there remained another link between Fey and Rogers to be tracked down separately.

Well, at least he didn't have to sit around making conversation with the children all afternoon, Godfrey told himself as he let the car roll down the winding lane towards Market Barnabas. The rain had stopped, but the sky was still grey and water lay in huge puddles wherever the road dipped. The signposts he was following were faded with age and some of them seemed to be rotting in the ground.

Having been born and brought up in towns, he had usually looked on the country as an elsewhere-place, to be visited at intervals. He'd been trying to picture Fey's childhood, with its incredible exaggeration of rural loneliness, and found he could not even feel for the preference of a family like the Eustaces. This village, now—yes, it was Market Barnabas itself ahead of him—there was something fearful about it under the dense clouds. A sort of psychological backwater. No street lighting except a lamp outside the general stores *cum* post office. A triangular green with a churchyard on one side of it, dozens upon dozens of stained memorial stones going back generations, centuries, for all he knew millennia. What primal fear made people prize dead bones? What pagan superstition compelled them to make their dead honoured guests in the very centre of their community?

A pond, very full after the rain. Ducks quacking at his car disconsolately. Nobody in sight, no one moving. The single street as uninhabited as a desert island. A silence which the complaint of wind in the trees served only to make more oppressive. It was a relief when from one of the cottages he caught a snatch of music: a radio.

Just beyond the village, up the hill—that was what Mrs. Eustace had told him. The road became narrower yet, and he found he was hoping not to meet a farmcart or another car.

And yet this was twentieth-century England. There were tractor-treads imprinted in the mud at the gates of the fields he passed; he'd caught a glimpse of a bright red station wagon standing in front of a distant farmhouse, and a television aerial against the sky. No, it must be sub-

jective, this sense of being cut off and far away—something to do with his intense reaction to Fey.

How much of this had she known? How much had been just that short distance, just those few yards, beyond where her mother ruled and the outside world was forbidden to intrude?

And how much, briefly glimpsed on excursions outside the wilderness garden she'd described, had served as nuclei for her later fantasies?

There it was. He recognised the red letterbox inset on the tilted brick gatepost. Braking, he steered the car off the road wondering if the ground was soft enough for the tyres to slip when he started away again.

He got out; the slam of the car door behind him was somehow deadened to a thud by the damp chilly air, like a fist hitting a sack of sawdust. For moments he stood, studying his surroundings.

Only a small section of the road was visible, for he stood on a curve and hedges and stunted trees cut the rest of it off from him. The wall enclosing the grounds of the old house, which must have been built by some landlord intent on extreme privacy, for it was two courses thick and higher than Godfrey's head. Much of it was overgrown with trailing creeper, and here and there frosts, wind and perhaps human intervention had notched the top of it into crazy battlements. It was no longer much of a barrier; where earth and leafmould had piled at its foot, even a tall child could have clambered up and swarmed over. Or a tree overhanging the wall would have afforded entry.

Or one could simply have climbed over the gate. It had been long since it served as any obstacle; it lay rust-rotten beside its post, half-covered with last year's nettles and weeds. From beneath it, in a ditch hidden by tangled vegetation, came the chuckling noise of water.

Shivering, Godfrey drew his still-damp raincoat close about him and trudged up the driveway. Trees leaned on his head, their bare branches struggling to utter spring foliage. Some chattering birds objected to his intrusion and fluttered after him at a discreet distance, giving cries of warning.

Then there were signs of human care. The shrubberies

must have been the owner's pride at one time, for he suddenly realised he was walking among rhododendrons and peonies. They thinned; there was a sketch of a garden, with box-hedges and lawns that had run into square weed-beds, and rambler roses dropped from rotten pergolas. There was a smell of moist decay, and his feet squelched in a thick mess of dead leaves.

And that was the house.

It had been splendid once: three-storeyed, with dormer windows in the roof besides; a flight of stone steps to the high wide door, windows that suggested ceilings at least eleven feet high, a centre block and two extensive wings. How many rooms? Twenty at least, and for all he could see more behind—servants' quarters, sculleries, larders.

But the windows stared like blinded eyes, their painted sash-frames crazily awry on broken cords and glass left only in the corners. The roof was broken-backed like a stranded whale, and slates had slithered into the gutters and torn them away with their weight. Time had passed here, and in passing had stamped with both feet, breaking the spirit of the house.

twelve

GODFREY FELT a strange reluctance to enter the house at once, although Mrs. Eustace had assured him no one could object. He prevaricated, although he knew that with such heavy cloud he ought to make the best use of what daylight remained, and set off first on a complete circuit of the building.

The garden behind was even larger than that in front, and had been expensively laid out. He discovered two stubby pillars tipped over by treeroots, next to some tilted flagstones; there had been a stone pathway here. Following it, peering among the stale grasses, he was led to a sundial that was green with lichens, and scraped away from its top as much as necessary to read the inscription on its corroded bronze dial: *Awake my soul and with the sun. . . .*

A quote from a hymn. He knew the rest.

So all this was the setting for Fey's appalling childhood—the pathway, the sundial, that pathetic relic over there which must once have been a maze, these abandoned lawns and rosebuds and herbaceous borders. . . .

And that house.

There was a terrace running the full length of the back of it, six feet or so above the general level of the ground. He got up to it, slithering on a muddy ramp which must once have been gravelled, and peered in at the windows. Huge handsome rooms spoiled by time and damp; furniture under rotten dust-sheets where mildew flourished; there, a case of books with one door hanging ajar; on that floor, a carpet from which fungi sprouted.

Horrible.

Could it have been like this while Fey and her mother were living here? Much of it must have been. If the mother refused to call a plumber to mend a blocked toilet, how much less would she have bothered to fetch a glazier and mend windows!

He took a deep breath, hating the stench of decay it carried into his lungs, and went to get a stick. With it, he finished the half-completed job of stripping a big window of its glass, then scrambled over the low sill and stood among the wreckage.

The doors all creaked ominously when he opened them. The hallway beyond the rooms was hideously dark; he could just make out that there was a skylight supposed to shed light into the hall, but it would have been painted over as a blackout precaution during the war and most of the paint was still there.

Crazy magnificence assailed his eyes when they adjusted to the gloom: from the wall of the stairwell, a flaking fresco showing a scene from Greek legend; all around the gallery encircling the hall, serving as a landing for the upper rooms, marble masks cemented into the wall. But spiders had hung webs across the white eyes and the silent mouths.

From the hall, as well as rooms, passages led off, running the length of the house's two wings. He shuddered as he looked down them. Those wings had been shut up before Fey could walk. She must have known them only as desola-

tions under her home's roof. "Home" should not mean this—a vast echoing barrenness!

Which rooms had they used, then? Presumably, some here in the centre block. He tried other doors, and finally located a small room which had been inhabited more recently than any others he had tried. There were two or three damp-rotten books on a table, a sofa leaking stuffing, rags stuffed in the window-frames to keep draughts out.

Heaven's name, they must have been living like swine!

He crept up the stairs—crept, because the treads gave noisily to his weight, and he had visions of going through. At the head of them he saw a door ajar, and entered.

This must have been Fey's bedroom. At least, there was that bed, with mildewed blankets on it; there had been a recent fire and the ashes remained. Also there were some books: a volume of Spenser, two Victorian novels and an account of Stanley's search for Livingstone. In the half-open drawers of a chest in the corner, old clothes, much mended.

The room next door was similar. Her mother's. In a waste-basket, some empty pill-bottles and a blunt hypodermic needle. On the wall, a gaudily framed photograph of an Army officer: Fey's father, killed in Africa.

Why hadn't Dr. Eustace tried to get the old woman out of this horrible house? Had she refused to go? Or had he simply been called in when her condition was already hopeless, so that removal from familiar things would have harmed, not helped her?

He tried more of the upstairs rooms, but found nothing of interest, and returned to the entrance hall. It was already dark enough to be eerie in here. He wished he had thought to bring a flashlight; still, if he wanted to he could come back by daylight tomorrow—the Eustaces were willing to put him up.

To get some more light, he opened all the doors to the hallway, and in so doing chanced on a room previously over-looked.

Someone had been here *very* recently. Like all the other groundfloor rooms, this one had a fireplace as big as a cave—indeed, not unlike a cave if one entered it, stooping low as Godfrey now did. There was a fire burnt out on the

stone floor of it, surrounded by some crusts of bread and eggshells, and a heap of newspapers from last year—most of them dated September or October.

A tramp, presumably, who'd put himself up here and moved on.

But that brought another thought to mind. How about cooking and eating? They must have used at least one public utility—water—and in the inhabited rooms so far he hadn't seen signs of a stove or a sink. He continued with his job of opening every door around the hall. The next one, half-hidden under the base of the stairs, proved to give on to a cellar from which the stink was even worse than the average for the house; he shut that again hastily, then reopened it.

Something had caught his eye, lying on the topmost step. A book with brown paper wrapped around it.

He picked it up with astonishment and opened it. It was Duncan Marsh's *The Harder Dream*.

So there had been a copy of it in the house! So Fey had read this of all extraordinary books!

And yet—

No, it *didn't* make sense. He slapped down his original assumptions. True, it explained her knowledge of "what men and women do"—no one, after reading Marsh's work, could have any doubt on that score, although the conditions for the act appeared in a peculiar light. But it didn't explain her ignorance, even in hypnotic trance, of Marsh's name.

He hesitated. And then he caught on. He peeled back the brown paper concealing the cover of the book, and there it was in rusty ink: the owner's name.

Wilfred R. Eustace, M.D.

In that case, the tramp who had camped out here, made that fire and boiled his eggs in the big room opposite, must have been Marsh himself, probably only a day or a few hours after seeing Dr. Eustace. *That* fitted.

Why had he left the book behind? No answer suggested itself immediately; after a moment's frowning over the problem, Godfrey decided to get rid of one at least of his other worries and revert to it. Were the Emissaries in the book he held?

He found a reasonably sound chair near a window, and started to leaf through the passages he hadn't yet read, but the light was extremely bad. The Cantrips must have had candles, he decided, and went hunting for them. He was rewarded with the discovery of a stump about two inches long standing in a cracked saucer, and by its flame he settled this matter once for all.

No Emissaries figured in *The Harder Dream*.

In that case, there was a link between Fey and Rogers he had still to work out, and it wasn't going to turn up as readily as had the existence of this book—there were no helpful Marcus Lockes available. On the other hand, he had not as yet questioned Dr. Eustace. He might know of something, perhaps something raised in his conversation with Marsh, to give a further clue.

A double-check, perhaps? Godfrey turned back to the beginning of the book and this time, instead of relying on the chance of picking out the wanted word, read more closely. In spite of his instinctive reactions, he started to feel reluctant admiration for Marsh. It was easy to see how Dr. Eustace, presumably then young and rather impressionable, could have persuaded himself that Marsh was an unsung genius. The publisher made a similar claim on the back of the book, which he hadn't seen, naturally, at Locke's, for that other copy had been rebound. With his crudity of subject he combined a real sense of language, and some of the images he employed had a strength independent of their pornographic content.

What could have become of him, then? Had he made a name for himself—his real name, perhaps—writing more conventional books, or had he tried to enact in real life the fantasies he so enjoyed and thus run foul of the criminal law?

Rogers? The possibility jolted into Godfrey's mind ; then he dismissed it. This book must have been written in 1948 or 1949 ; even granting that a child of school age, as Rogers was then, might be capable of such crazy imaginings, the notion of him contriving to get them published in Paris was absolutely absurd.

Come to think of it, it might just be possible to discover how Rogers came to know of the book. Locke had said

there was only one edition, and by the time Rogers was showing an interest in such matters it would no longer have been on general sale even in Paris.

Burning.

Godfrey had been so determined to ignore the dank odour of the house that he had been dismissing this new smell for several minutes. Now it jabbed into his awareness. Smoke, and no doubt about it.

Panickily he looked at his candle. It was guttering in a draught, but it hadn't set anything ablaze. And since he came into the house he hadn't lit a cigarette or done anything else to cause a fire.

His heart turned over. The tramp—Marsh—the man who had left the fire in the other room's hearth, the newspapers and the scraps of food! Was he still here?

His blood hammered in his ears. Through it, he struggled to make out sounds that were not due to the age of the house, the rising wind outside. Shortly, he found some, and they seemed to emanate beneath his feet.

Footfalls. Very irregular, very light and faint. And also scraping noises, some softer as though a heavy object covered in cloth was being dragged across the floor, others rough and grating, as when a poker is pushed into a dense fire.

Was it because of the smell of burning he'd thought of a fire, or was it really the right cause to assign the sound?

He closed the book and slid it into his coat pocket as he rose. He was on the point of beating a safe but inglorious retreat, when another sound was added to those heard earlier.

The sound of sobbing.

And it wasn't male crying, either. Men are taught not to cry when they are still boys, and when they break down they break into terrible uncontrollable spasms, as racking as a death-rattle, signalling the end of their endurance. Women as girls have more tolerance shown them; their crying can be lighter, and does not inevitably prevent them doing other things.

This was a woman weeping.

Cautiously, Godfrey made his way to the door of the room. The smell of smoke grew stronger, and he was cer-

tain right away that it came from the door of the cellar, which he had left ajar. Also, once he had adjusted to the almost complete gloom here, he fancied he could detect a reddish glow on the wall beyond the cellar door.

He padded to the head of the cellar stairs, sniffing, every nerve alert for whoever might be in the house with him. The treads leading downward were of worn stone, and would not creak if he put his weight on them. He descended three, four, five of them without a sound, and then looked around him.

A brazier. A big steel firebasket, perhaps the one missing from the hearth on which the tramp had done his cooking. In it, crackling and glowing, a fire of wood with a thick underlay of bright embers.

By its light, fitfully shadowing and illuminating the whole cellar, he saw the man propped against the wall. Stiff-armed, sunken-cheeked, with horrible slime oozing from his nostrils, he was not only dead but had been dead for months.

But he was not the only occupant of the stinking dungeon, not the only guest of the spiders on the wet-shiny walls and the rats that pit-pattered out of sight above, below and around. For the weeping was not a corpse's.

"Come on down," she said, and made a beckoning gesture with the thing in her right hand: a chef's carving-knife as long as her forearm. "Come on down, *all the way down*."

And it was.

Fey.

thirteen

THE SHOCK of recognising her brought him down the last few stairs to the floor of the cellar in a rush, intending to approach her and hurry her away from the hideous spectacle of the dead man. He had had no time to think of what she might be doing here before she made it frighteningly clear by circling him in a few dancing-light steps and cutting off his way of retreat.

Then knowledge burned cold into his brain.

Fighting to resist logical deductions, he stared at her.

She had come vividly, brilliantly alive in a way he would never have suspected from seeing her before, in London. Her eyes sparkled in the red light of the flames; her hair swung and swooped around her finely-shaped head. It was hot here, once one came within a few feet of the brazier, and she had stripped off not only her topcoat, but the jacket of the suit she wore under it—he could see both garments tossed in a heap beside the corpse. Also she had kicked aside her shoes, so that now she wore only the unfashionably full skirt, spinning out higher than her knees as she moved across the floor, and an almost transparently thin blouse which perspiration had moulded to her breasts as closely as a second skin. Her mouth was a little open with hungry eagerness, her teeth sharp and white and pointed. She seemed to vibrate with tension, and the whole air was charged with her presence.

"You did this to him," she said. "You killed him. My darling, my beloved. But he shall live on!"

And the knife dripped with the red light of the flames as brilliantly as with blood.

Godfrey tried to find his voice. Somewhere in the caverns of his throat it eluded him. What to do? He glanced around desperately, and saw only horror upon horror.

The roof of the cellar was crusted, like an underground tunnel, with casual plaster, unsmoothed, and the patches of shadow shifted on it with the dancing fire, making it as alive as the stomach of a monstrous beast, that had swallowed them both. Also the moving glow played on the dead man, so that his face changed, shadow of nose and eye-socket darting fractionally from side to side and giving him the air of watching with excited interest. The putrid fingers jutting from the sleeves of his too-large coat fidgeted without motion, as though they would take on independent life and come crawling across to Godfrey and seize him. A grating in the far wall offered a channel for the smoke, but not all of it was carried on the draught from the top of the stairs, and some came back to make his eyes water and further blur the nightmare vision. Where the hot air rose and spread along the ceiling, cobwebs writhed and withered, and little insectile scurryings marked the displacement of their makers.

Most disgusting of all, though, was the corpse's head: soft, as though a waxwork had been put in an oven and viewed through the glass in the door. Why rats hadn't already cleaned off the flesh and left decent white bone, Godfrey could not tell—perhaps the winter had been hard here, and frozen the body before the predators could tackle it. But the softer organs had gone, the eyes and the brain, and from the stench that overlay the smoke he imagined the intestines had rotted completely. There was foul moisture on the front of the coat to say the same.

"Stand still!" Fey ordered him, and without turning her head, riveting him with her diamond gaze, half-bent with the grace of a *prima ballerina* to snatch up something from the floor behind. A stick? No, for she thrust it into the firebasket and it clanged metallically. A poker, from a kitchen boiler, with the end turned into a loop and serving as a crude handle.

Even yet Godfrey dared not speak. He had guessed at once, when he saw how alive she seemed, that she was in some abnormal condition. Now he felt he had been partly wrong. This was not abnormal—just unusual. This was Fey as she ought to have been, the personality entire, the creature of fantasy integrated with the mouse-like silent girl known to Eirene and the Eustaces.

It followed, therefore, that she was in a trance. The return to her home, or some other stimulus, had removed the barrier separating her daydreams from her ordinary life, and she was acting out a posthypnotic command, whether from herself or given by some third party. . . .

Oh my God!

She had given the poker another twist in the embers, bringing it closer to the cone of maximum heat, and with the gesture everything had snapped into place in Godfrey's mind.

He said in a faint harsh tone, "Fey! For God's sake listen to me!"

"Stand where you are!" On the instant, she was before him, the knife held not with the awkward overhand clumsiness of an amateur Lady Macbeth, but with the controlled waist-level grip of a skilled fighter, a warning sign to anyone not to come close. If he tried to touch her, the

blade would go in under the ribs and spill his guts to the dirty ground. Where had she learned that? From what forgotten childhood romance of piracy in the Caribbean had it grown to become deadly reality?

What could possibly be the key to the trance gripping her mind? The name of the dead man yonder—the real name of the man who had called himself Duncan Marsh, claimed to have friends in this district, brewed incredible nastiness in his distorted mind. . . .

And he didn't know the man's real name, because Dr. Eustace had been out delivering a premature baby.

His mind whirled. Once she withdrew the glowing poker from the fire, he would be helpless—like a steer before the branding iron! Against a knife-fighter, they said you should roll your coat around your forearm—could he get to the coat she had discarded over there and snatch it up before she attacked him? Never in a million years.

There was only one chance: to make her talk, distract her and watch keenly as a hawk for the chance to knock her down. He might not even be able to do that, though he outweighed and outreached her—the trance state might make her supernally fast because absolutely uninhibited, supernally strong because singlemindedly set on achieving her ends. Whereas he had to steel himself at the idea of hitting this most beautiful, most sensual of all women he had ever encountered.

She was bending to the poker again, touching it and making a log fall in the brazier amid a flurry of sparks. He used the momentary distraction to draw out the book from his pocket and hold it up for her to see.

"Fey—"

He had been going to tell her to look, but she was already confronting him again, having whirled literally faster than his eye could follow, the knife making a thin whistle in the air and slashing to within an inch of his chest. But the book drew her attention, and she made to grab it. He dodged.

"Do you want this, Fey?"

"Give it to me or I'll cut it out of your hand," she said without a tremor. "Come on."

"It's all that's left, isn't it? All that's left of Duncan Marsh over there!"

"Duncan—?" A faint frown crossed her face. "I don't know anybody called Duncan."

"But this is *his* book." Godfrey risked a gesture in the direction of the corpse, trying to accustom her to his moving without provoking a knife-slash.

"Yes, it's his book," she snapped. "It tells all about him in there. I didn't know about that till he showed it to me—but it's mine now, do you hear?"

Clumsily she lunged for it again, left-handed, and he had less trouble evading the attempt because he saw it foreshadowed in a tensing of her muscles; the blouse was now so soaked with sweat she might as well have been naked to the waist.

"What was his name, Fey? What was his real name?" Godfrey risked the question with a sensation like a gambler staking his last capital on a turned card.

"He never liked his name—he hated his name, he said so. . . . *Give me that book!*"

He leapt back, and aside at the same time, trying to turn her so that at least he was on the stairs wall of the cellar. Not quite far enough before she remembered the knife and made a barrier of its edge, but it was an improvement.

"Tell me his name and I'll give you the book."

"No! No!" A trace of drool came from the corner of her exquisite mouth and glistened with the red light as bright as blood. Vampire! Vampire! But the hint of hysteria was sweet in Godfrey's ears.

"Tell me, or I'll drop it in the fire," he taunted, putting his arm out over the flames and waggling his fingers in a pantomime of letting go.

"Aiiieee!"

The shriek was inhuman, born of unspeakable terror, and she almost fell into the fire herself as she snatched once more for the precious volume. He swung on his heel and made another yard of progress towards the stairs. What good merely getting away would do, he didn't know—perhaps it would afford the chance of getting a shield for himself, and a stick to serve as a club. Nothing was going to stop Fey doing dreadful harm to him, or herself, short

of finding the key to her trance or knocking her unconscious.

"Tell me, Fey!" The cellar echoed it, rolling, shedding dust in a lazy drizzle of motes which sparkled to the firelight. "Or I'll burn it page by page, hear me? Tear out the pages one by one and throw them in the fire, and you can watch him go, rotting away in the smoke as he's rotting there in the corner—*see him*?"

"It's a lie!" she screamed, and darted to the dead man's side, dropping on one knee beside him with the knife outstretched at arm's length. "Help me!" she moaned to the corpse. "Help me, my darling, my beloved! He'll destroy you if you don't *help* me!"

Now?

But as Godfrey made to use his chance of escape, a relay of memory closed and she realised she was talking to a man beyond hope of hearing. Her face became for an instant as repulsive as the corpse's own, reflecting nausea at the stink from the body, and she was where she had been before, only a pace nearer the stairs, cutting off his retreat anew.

"Never mind, he's more alive in my memory than in that book," she whispered, and unholy joy lit her eyes. "He created wonders for me, terrible wonderful adventures for me, and I'll make one for him now. Stand still, I say!"

And she hurled down the knife and withdrew the poker with a scraping ominous as a rattlesnake's warning. It was aglow for eighteen full inches from the tip, and Godfrey marvelled how she could grasp its other end in her bare hand, but he was familiar with the improbable endurance shown by hypnotic subjects, and he knew he could not hope for her to feel enough pain to let the poker fall.

What she planned to do with it, he also knew, and the thought curdled his stomach in naked, ocean-deep fear.

For an eternal instant she stood with her lip curled back from her teeth, hound-savage, her breast heaving with tremendous sexual gasps, rivers of sweat streaming down her face, while she advanced the poker towards Godfrey to make him feel the sizzling heat, make him cringe away from the threat of the dragon—

And a light sprang up. A roundel of light on the wall

opposite the cellar door, which exactly framed the dead man. A voice said, "My God, it's Wagstaff!"

Fey turned. It was *the* name.

Godfrey wasn't quite careful enough. He was so frantic at this last-second miracle that he missed his hold on her arm, and the poker fell straight down, point foremost, melted through the cheap synthetic fibre of her skirt and seared a line clear as a streak of charcoal down the side of her leg from mid-thigh to ankle. She uttered a tortured animal howl, tried to leap back from the pain, and stumbled on his foot, going sprawling.

He fell on top of her, clumsily dragging her arms behind her back and piling his weight on her legs regardless of her injury so that she had no hope at all of breaking free, and then raised his head.

Halfway down the stairs, gape-mouthed at the scene below, was a man with a bushy brown moustache, wearing a wet raincoat, holding the flashlight which had given Wagstaff-Marsh his temporary halo.

"You must be Dr. Eustace," Godfrey said at length, conscious of the supreme banality of the greeting. "There's a book of yours down here somewhere, by the way."

fourteen

"WITH DR. EUSTACE'S compliments," Godfrey said, ceremoniously handing across the table the small brown-paper package.

Laszlo, frowning, accepted it and made to unwrap it. Godfrey stopped him with a tap on the hand.

"For heaven's sake, doc, it would do your reputation no good to be seen reading that in public!"

Laszlo grunted, shrugged, and let the book lie before him. He said, "It is kind of your friend to part with it, but why did he think to do so?"

"He didn't even miss it when Wagstaff walked off with it; besides, abnormal psychology isn't his field, and he thought it was better in the hands of a specialist after what he'd just seen happen. I imagine—in fact, he told me straight out—he's seen at least his fair ration of horrors in his quiet

country practice: a boy who got in the way of a hay-mowing machine and had both ankles chopped through as neatly as dry sticks, that was one he mentioned. But he said he'd never come across anything so—so *bad* as that: this beautiful girl, whom he'd known as a silent, shrinking kind of creature, getting ready to make a blood sacrifice to her dead lover."

"Burnt offering," Laszlo said. Godfrey winced.

"Doc, this is hardly a joking matter—"

Laszlo waved dismissal of the objection. "My boy, did I not tell you a mere few days ago that if there are limits to the foulness of the mind, I haven't plumbed them? Adrift in a sea of psychosis, what else is there to do sometimes except make a bad joke and keep a sense of proportion? Besides, is the prognosis not favourable now?"

"Ye-es." Godfrey drained his glass and signalled the waitress for another round.

"Good. Tell me then the rest of what happened."

"It turned out that Eustace's way home from the hospital was through the village—Market Barnabas. He saw my car parked at the gate, and realised that I must still be in the house, so he came to see if he could be of any help and maybe save having to come out with me the following day. Of course, I'd already begun to catch on to the explanation, but it wasn't doing me much good ; it took his recognition of the man who claimed to be the author of *The Harder Dream* to break Fey's insane concentration and let me overpower her."

"Did she get badly hurt from the poker?"

Godfrey's face clouded. "Damn it, yes. Eustace dressed the burn right away, of course, but he says it may leave a permanent scar. Have to get a graft for it. . . ."

"Can that not wait?" Laszlo suggested gently. "Is not the scarred mind the more important?"

"Of course, of course. . . ." Godfrey forced himself back on the line of his narrative. "Where was I? Oh yes. Eustace only recognised Wagstaff by sheer chance, actually ; the light from his flash just happened to strike the body at the correct angle, the one which least clearly showed the terrible state it was in, and he said later it was more the cloth-

ing which suggested the identity than the facial features. But he did speak the name, and that saved me. Up till then—Doc, I don't know if you can understand this, but even allowing for the fact that I knew she was in trance, and liable to be very strong and dangerous, I had stood there like a dummy unable to make a move against her for a ridiculously long time. And now I think back on it, I'm sure it was because she looked so goddamned *beautiful*. If she'd got as far as burning me in the face with that poker, I still wouldn't have wanted to hit her!"

"I do understand," Laszlo murmured. "It is—oh, it is the reverse of the state in which you see so many hospitalised mental patients, hm? When the mind goes out behind the eyes, the skin coarsens, the lips are slack and stupid, and what beauty was there, fades away. But she had had the personality restored, for all of it—the vital, important part, rather—was absorbed in her fantasy world."

"She looked like lightning," Godfrey said. There was a pause.

"You were saying—?" reminded Laszlo.

"Oh yes. I spent most of Sunday filling in the background details while Eustace kept her sedated, and then in the evening I had enough information to try and enter her trance in Wagstaff's place. So far, I haven't done more than gain a little of her confidence, but I think eventually she'll accept me in his place, and I can start taking the fantasy apart by stages. I've managed to get a posthypnotic in, I think—if she lapses into autohypnosis now, she'll regress to a time when the fantasy was pleasanter, and that's something. . . .

"As to the man who caused all the trouble, though: I badly need data on his personal background, but I have traced a few acquaintances of his from several years ago. Not friends—he wasn't the friend-making type.

"He wasn't a local man, but he did know the district; he'd been stationed there in the Army. That was when he met Fey—he got into the garden of the house. He was interested in hypnosis himself, and a good many other nastier things too, and he was fascinated to discover that this isolated child had invented a technique of autohypnotic

daydreaming. So it must have occurred to him to supplement her home-brewed adventures with stronger meat of his own. He was thinking of the stories which he later put into *The Harder Dream,* so he used these as a basis, guarding himself against the risk of being found out—corrupting a mere child is a filthy business, for heaven's sake!—by the most ingenious defence imaginable."

Laszlo's mouth rounded into an O of comprehension. He said, "He gave her posthypnotic orders to forget him!"

"Precisely. No wonder she was at a loss to understand how there was material in her fantasies she couldn't have come by consciously. But on the whole, I think, the contact was too brief to have harmed a more normal child. Even Fey might have grown out of her daydreaming once she left the horrible house she'd been trying to escape from.

"Only in the meantime Wagstaff had done two significant things. He'd written and published *The Harder Dream,* and he'd made an attempt to turn fantasy into actuality which went further than Rogers's, but was essentially similar. He'd played with fire and burned one of his unfortunate mistresses to death."

"Wagstaff," Laszlo murmured. "The man who shared Rogers's cell with him and some other man."

"Right. He was serving a life sentence for manslaughter —I haven't had a chance to check the records, but several people in and around Market Barnabas remembered the case. Being one of Dr. Hatch's 'model prisoners', he earned maximum remission, and fourteen years after imprisonment, off he went. But not before he'd met Rogers, learned how similar the man's offence was to his own, and perhaps by way of reward taught him not just the technique of autohypnotic prison-breaking, but the immensely more elaborate fabric he'd erected on the basis of the fantasies employed in his book.

"This puzzled me for a long time. The Emissaries with eight long arms: you knew of them from Rogers, and so did Fey, and they don't figure in the book. But then I realized this was new material, and argued personal contact between Fey and Wagstaff *after* his release from prison."

"This being the point at which the fantasies became so

horrible as ultimately to make her appeal to you," Laszlo said.

"You're ahead of me, but that's correct too." Godfrey paid for the new drinks and took a long swig of his. "Wagstaff—he hated his name, by the way; his parents had had the bad taste to baptise him Horace Reginald, and at least two people I spoke to remembered him as Horrid Reggie. Possibly that was one of the first bonds between him and Fey, because as you know she hated her own name of Emily. . . . I'm wandering again. I was going on to this question of her having been down to Somerset—Mrs. Eustace told me about this—without having called on these old friends who'd done so much for her.

"It's far too explosive for me to have questioned Fey directly on this as yet, but my belief is that she did mean to call on the Eustaces. They'd given her an open invitation, and it never occurred to her to warn them she was coming. On the way, she decided to visit her old home. And there was Wagstaff. After his release from jail, he seems to have wandered randomly for a couple of months, then drifted down to Somerset. He made a fire in one of the groundfloor rooms, which I found traces of, but probably this risked attracting attention, so he moved to the cellar, and the state of the place suggests he hardly left it for a long while before his death. What killed him, I don't know and don't care—exposure, probably. Last winter was cold down there.

"Fey was still wide open to his hypnotic commands. And . . ." Godfrey's mouth twisted bitterly. "Why he did it I can only guess. Wanting to publish the fruit of his long spell in prison, maybe, or simply spread his warped sadistic principles—who the hell can say? Anyhow, he taught Fey everything he'd added to his fantasies in jail, stuffing her mind as full as it would go with revolting images. Then he must have covered his traces with posthypnotics, the same as before, forbidding her to remember their meeting except when she returned to the house, and so making her switch to her fantasy personality this time, even after he was dead."

"What drew her back?"

"I suspect she felt subconsciously guilty about infring-

ing his command for secrecy. After all, she'd come close to revealing the whole story and the rest was bound to follow."

"Yes, it could be. . . ." Laszlo shuddered. "What a filthy legacy for a man to leave!"

" 'The evil that men do lives after them'," quoted Godfrey, and gulped beer as if to wash away a bad taste.

"She is not a virgin, hm?" Laszlo suggested after a pause.

Godfrey gave him a respectful look. "I fell down badly there," he confessed. "I assumed her isolated childhood ruled out that line of inquiry, but when we got back to Cold Feffer and Eustace had given Fey a shot to quiet her, he told me he'd insisted on giving her a complete examination when they first met. And found she'd been seduced at an extremely early age—he said, twelve or under. It was on her medical record card, of course, but though he'd recommended her to a doctor here in London she'd never consulted him. He'd kept quiet about it, taking it for granted that some of her trouble was due to repressed memories of rape. But there was no rape-fear component in the material I dug out of her mind ; rather the opposite, for her fantasy personality is a hell of a sight less inhibited than her regular one. Wagstaff must at least have been kind enough to make her willing before he tried it, and then erased the memory with a posthypnotic."

"But the harm must exist," Laszlo muttered.

"Of course. Don't think I'm overlooking that."

"And the matter which initiated the whole sequence," Laszlo added. "Your friend Eirene Jackson and her white dragon—have you solved that little mystery?"

"I have," Godfrey said with a trace of smugness. "She is really an auditory hypersensitive, with amazing hearing even in the normal state, and it turns out that her friend Dolly—Mrs. Eustace—once lent her her husband's copy of that book."

There was a pause. Finally Laszlo said with a twinkle, "So you're pleased with progress in your first therapy, hm?"

"That's a probe," Godfrey muttered. "All right, here's your straight answer. I've made up my mind. I want to take a medical degree and stop fooling around. I thought

you were an idiot to make me tackle Fey's case, but I've decided I was a worse one agreeing to take it on. It's bloody lucky she hasn't been seriously harmed by my bumbling!"

"I think not," Laszlo said. "Did you not tell me that when she was all set to burn your face you could not want to hurt her? I saw the look you had, Godfrey, the times you talked about her before. It was like opening a window into your soul."

Laszlo used the phrase quite naturally, but Godfrey, coming from a less emotional culture, felt uncomfortable. He could only grin and say nothing.

"And one thing more," Laszlo pursued. "In other cases, I do not think you'll need to worry about emotional involvement clouding your professional detachment. You have enough there to occupy you for many years, till like me you are past such fiddle-faddle. When she is well, she will be a prize for you. And that is good. Almost, I envy you."

He slapped the table and pushed back his chair. "So! I must be on my way. But this is fine news, Godfrey, to hear you will be a real colleague instead of a dabbler. I think you have been purified by the ordeal of fire, hm? Oh, by the way!" He checked in the act of picking up the book Dr. Eustace had sent him. "Where is your patient—down in Somerset still?"

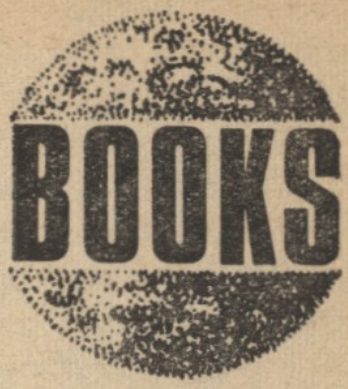
"Nope. In Eirene's guestroom. Eirene's own doctor attended her this morning, and he said she'd be recovered enough to stand another session this afternoon, so I'm just off to see her."

"Then I wish you a successful bedside manner," Laszlo commented, and with a wicked leer he headed for the door.

The End

WILLIAM BURROUGHS

Bill Butler



AS J. G. BALLARD pointed out in his sensitive appreciation of William Burroughs' work, NEW WORLDS 142, Burroughs is not strictly speaking a science fiction author at all. But his work incorporates so much science fiction and so much of a 'sense of horror', the sixties equivalent of the thirties' term 'sense of wonder', that he is a natural subject for NEW WORLDS. Since Ballard's piece it has become a little easier to obtain copies of Burroughs' books what with the publication next spring of two of them, *Nova Express* from Jonathan Cape and *Soft Machine* from Calder and Boyars.

William Burroughs reads science fiction and uses fragments from science fiction work, for example Eric Frank Russell, in his own cut-up novels. He mentioned Ballard's collection, *Terminal Beach,* published by Gollancz, saying that he had enjoyed several of the stories very much. His voice is dry, a nearly monotonous desiccation in it. He smokes heavily, arranges the ashes in ash trays as he is thinking or talking. His life is ordered, material for his books is kept in a series of files of photographs and clippings which usually travel with him, "I like to be able to use material at any time." They haven't made the trip with him on this occasion, though, "They'd take up too much room." In the files he has folders on science fiction, sea stories—"The 'Marie Celeste' and the 'Titanic'—I'm interested in both of them", bank robbers, Henry Luce—the publisher of TIME, LIFE and FORTUNE.

Burroughs' books, all of them since *Naked Lunch,* have been written with a combination of camera, typewriter,

tape-recorder, and scissors. The pictures go into his scrapbooks, where he has photographs of people resembling his characters. . . . Hamburger Mary, for instance. . . . "We were able to trace Hamburger Mary through her fondness for peanut butter." (*Nova Express,* Jonathan Cape.)

"The files provide the basis for the books written in the cut-up style which Brion Gysin originally suggested to me in 1960. He said writing techniques were at least fifty years behind those of painting. I felt I had been working toward the cut-up method in *Naked Lunch* especially in the editing of the notes for the book from the thousand or so pages that it was at first down to the final 250 pages. Now I spend more time editing than anything else. For ten published pages there are fifty pages of notes to be edited, some on tape and some filed."

He uses the cut-up and fold-in methods of writing "because they make explicit processes which happen all the time. When you read a newspaper column you are conscious of the columns on either side and reading them even if you're not aware of it. I simply extend the process. When I'm travelling I may be reading a book at the same time I'm writing down notes, there's an inter-section, they're happening at the same time. It's also a way of showing the connections of events. Plane crashes, for example, come in sequence. A plane piloted by a Captain Clark crashed in California. Now the crash was caused by a crazed passenger, Frankie Gonzales, who shot Captain Clark. The next major plane crash was at Clark Air Force Base in Manila, no survivors. Frankie Gonzales came from Manila."

A tremendous mass of material is sent to him by other people, much of it through a column he has been writing in MY OWN MAG, Jeff Nuttall's mimeographed magazine from Barnet, Hertfordshire. From these correspondents he gathers material at intersection points in time, "In a way it's travelling in time."

When Burroughs gets down to writing straight sf there is no one else in the field who can beat him for descriptive ability: "They do not have what they call 'emotion's oxygen'

in the atmosphere. The medium in which animal life breathes is not in that soulless place—Yellow plains under white hot blue sky—Metal cities controlled by The Elders who are heads in bottles—Fastest brains preserved forever —Only form of immortality open to The Insect People of Minraud—An intricate bureaucracy wired to the control brains directs all movement—Even so there is a devious underground operating through telepathic misdirection and camouflage—The partisans make recordings ahead in time and leave the recordings to be picked up by control stations while they are free for a few seconds to organize underground activities—Largely the underground is made up of adventurers who intend to out think and displace the present heads—There has been one revolution in the history of Minraud—Purges are constant—Fallen heads destroyed in The Ovens and replaced with others faster and sharper to evolve more total weapons—The principal weapon of Minraud is of course heat—In the centre of all their cities stand The Ovens where those who disobey the control brains are brought for total disposal—A conical structure of iridescent metal shimmering heat from the molten core of a planet where lead melts at noon—The Brass and Copper Streets surround The Oven—Here the tinkers and smiths work pounding out metal rhythms as prisoners and criminals are led to Disposal—The Oven Guards are red crustacean men with eyes like the white hot sky—Through contact with the oven pain and captured enemies they sometimes mutate to breathe in emotions— They often help prisoners to escape and a few have escaped with the prisoners—. . . ." *(Nova Express)* Here cut-up and fold-in work together to make possible the description of an entire society in one paragraph. The language used is that of dreams, fragments of thought.

Burroughs' notoriety as to the subject matter of his work rises from a near total misunderstanding by his critics and by many of his supporters of the book, *Naked Lunch*. One correspondent to the press at the time of its first publication in England cited *with pride* the fact that she had not read *Naked Lunch*, did not intend to read *Naked Lunch*, but, nevertheless, she agreed with so and so who had said about the book. . . .

And so on. What was taken for pornography in the book is, if anything, ultimately anti-sexual in any pornographic sense. Burroughs feels that sex has been used, by that organism known as the Nova Mob in *Nova Express,* as a means of control of the world population together with narcotics and "the word", which he feels is typified in Henry Luce's American empire Time/Life/Fortune ad nauseum. On Luce he can be scathing as he was in the recent Paris Review interview with Conrad Knickerbocker. And further misunderstanding on Burroughs' position on narcotics. The only drug he recommends is apomorphine, and that only as a means to a cure for addiction to morphine, opium derivatives, alcohol, and barbiturates. He is extremely cautious about recommending the use of hallucinogens, "Too many of them are dangerous", except as a means to a particular end and for temporary use only. He believes that they should be studied and their effects used in creative effort only until the individual can find the way 'there' by either conscious or mechanical means. Yet the fact that he has been an addict and has used those periods of addiction as material for a book has made him, in some eyes, an apologist for addiction, perverter of our morals, etc., etc.

William Burroughs is a savage man, one's vision tends to stop, when talking to him, at his glasses and at the dry monotony of the voice, the insect dryness of Minraud. Both glasses and arid sentences tend to filter out his essential savagery. But in his books, the tetralogy beginning with *Naked Lunch* (John Calder), *Soft Machine* (Calder and Boyars '66), *Ticket That Exploded* (Calder and Boyars, no date) and *Nova Express* (Jonathan Cape, Feb. '66), in *Junkie,* his first book published under the name of William Lee, the savagery is unobstructed.

What relief from his 'sense of horror', similar to *1984/Brave New World/A Modest Proposal,* there is in those passages such as this one from *Nova Express*:

"Nothing Is True—Everything Is Permitted—" Last Words Hassan i Sabbah. (Note: Hassan i Sabbah was the leader of the Society of Assassins, known as 'The Old Man of the Mountains'. BB). The Kid starred in sex films and

The People-City pulsed in a vast orgasm and no one knew what was film and what was not and performed all kinds of sex acts on every street corner—

He took film of sunsets and cloud and sky water and tree film and projected colour of vast reflector screen concentrating blue sky red sun green grass and the city dissolved in light and people walked through each other—There was only colour and music and silence where the words of Hassan i Sabbah had passed—

"Boards Syndicates Governments of the earth *Pay*—Pay back the Colour you stole—

"*Pay Red*—Pay back the red you stole for your lying flags and your Coca-Cola signs—Pay that red back to penis and blood and sun—

"*Pay Blue*—Pay back the blue you stole and bottled and doled out in eye droppers of junk—Pay back the blue you stole for your police uniforms—Pay that blue back to sea and sky and eyes of the earth—

"*Pay Green*—Pay back the green you stole for your money—And you, Dead Hand Stretching The Vegetable People, pay back the green you stole for your Green Deal to sell out the peoples of the earth and board the first lifeboat in drag—Pay that green back to flowers and jungle river and sky—

"Boards Syndicates Governments of the earth pay back your stolen colours—*Pay Colour* back to Hassan i Sabbah—"

Both Huxley and Orwell protested against possible futures, however, whereas Burroughs objects to the state of the world *now*. The *Nova Mobsters* are, for him, a real danger: "they intend to blow up the world or otherwise destroy earth and all the people on it. They have planned their getaway." His hope lies in the *Nova Police*: "They are like apomorphine, a regulatory agency only. Once they do a job they'll get out. Not quite the same thing as the narcotics police in America, really. Once you start an organization like that it's impossible to get rid of them."

He expects to see the formation of an ideographic language, used in addition to a spoken language, which will

replace the written syllabic language which we now have: "You know Marshall McLuhan in *The Gutenburg Galaxy* says that syllabic language conditions thought. Words and photographs are used by vested interests as a control machine to manipulate humanity. But their manipulation depends on people being able to read ; so we have universal literacy promulgated. Theocracies, on the other hand, such as the Mayans or the Egyptians, were dependent on an illiterate population where knowledge of even such information as planting seasons rested only in the priesthood. Their control was through ignorance, whereas we today are controlled through a sort of half-knowledge, through the words which we *can* read."

"We must find out what words are and how they function. They become images when written down, but images of words repeated in the mind, repeated in the throat subvocally and not the image of the thing itself. Gertrude Stein's statement, "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" is true only if written down ; but, as Korzybski says, a rose (flower) is, whatever it is, not a rose (word). So a rose (word) is a rose (word) is a rose (word) is a rose (word). No flower."

Though sex in most science fiction has hardly progressed beyond the Martian equivalent of "Me Tarzan, you Jane", in Burroughs it is used to demonstrate the viciousness of the mob and their attempt to manipulate sexual responses which are digestive and totally absorbing: "They use sex as an addiction for control just like alcohol and drugs."

It is plain from William Burroughs' books and from talking to him that he does not regard the atomic bomb as the ultimate catastrophe that will destroy us all. The word, the photograph, the image, narcotics, sex, alcohol could each do the job just as effectively. By using the cut-up to create new associations between images, forcing the reader to think more and perceive previously hidden relationships in events, by discussing the mob's use of sex and drugs as weapons he is trying to prevent the 'nova'.

"Peoples of the earth, you have all been poisoned." *(Nova Express)*. He leaves, really, in spite of illiterate critics, small chance for misunderstanding.

GOD BLESS YOU MR. VONNEGUT

George Collyn

DURING 1965 two science-fiction authors deserted the House of Gollancz in order to take up residence with Jonathan Cape—and they were J. G. Ballard and Kurt Vonnegut Jnr. It is only meet and proper that their names should be coupled in this way since Vonnegut stands in the same relationship to American science-fiction as Ballard does with respect to the British scene—i.e. supreme. Lest anyone should contest this claim of supremacy, let me add at once that I am not applying the criteria defined by science-fiction fandom which tend to be specialist and limiting. Instead I hope I am measuring these authors by the standards of criticism common to literature as a whole rather than to any one part of it. And in so doing I am using the simplest and crudest yardstick available to me which is the acceptance of certain books as literature by the reviewers of general fiction in certain newspapers and magazines. And the fact remains that only Aldiss, Ballard and Vonnegut represent avowed sf writers who received the accolade of such reviews in the past year.

Now, there are those I know who will say that *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* by Kurt Vonnegut (Cape 21s.) is not science-fiction and wash their hands of it with dismissive finality. Yet, whereas this may be true of the specific content, it is certainly not true of its implicit qualities. In his editorial to SCIENCE FANTASY 66, Kyril Bonfiglioli said, "I look forward confidently to the day when a 'mainstream' novelist will not think twice about exposing his characters, like Spartan babes, on the rocks of Alpha Centauri." This, even though he is dealing with the here and now, is what Vonnegut has done with *Mr. Rosewater* since this essentially mainstream novel is written in images and concepts lifted bodily from sf.

And in so saying, I am not merely acknowledging the fact that, of the two sympathetic protagonists in the novel, one is a science-fiction writer and the other a fan. Nor do I consider as important to my thesis the fact that Vonnegut has included in the body of his story three glorious and funny parodies of sf plots. Rather am I saying that, whereas the reader with no knowledge of sf can read this novel straight, the sf addict will constantly find themes and ideas which are direct parallels to themes and ideas he has been meeting in sf for many years.

The plot concerns the Rosewater Foundation which was set up to look after the immense fortune amassed by the Rosewater family and assessed at 87,472,033 dollars and 61 cents, and to ensure that "Tax-collectors and other predators not named Rosewater might be prevented from getting their hands on it." Unfortunately, Eliot Rosewater, the current president of the Foundation, is childless and the heir to the administrative position is a distant cousin. It is this situation which is exploited by Mushari, a sharp-practising lawyer. He sees that if he can handle the transfer of Foundation funds from the holder to the heir he can take advantage of that "magic moment during which a man has surrendered a treasure and during which the man who is due to receive it has not yet done so . . . the lawyer can often take as much as half the bundle and still receive the recipient's blubbering thanks." This, Mushari feels, is most easily to be brought about by proving that Eliot is insane. A not over-difficult feat since, instead of administering the Foundation by the purchase of two million dollar paintings for the nation, Eliot is down in Rosewater County actually *caring* about people and philanthropy and such nonsense; administering the drugs of money, advice, medicine and love to the needy like a welfare state or other crankish and commie institutions.

So, you will see that the book is just one large sf concept in that Eliot Rosewater is a personified antithesis of the Great American Myth while Mushari and his henchmen are the personifications of American conformity and Barry Goldwaterism. Indeed, sf adherents of long-standing will recognize something much more. Regular readers of ANALOG editorials will come to realize, as I did when half-

way through, that what Vonnegut is writing is a reasoned, step-by-step renunciation of all that Campbell's philosophy stands for. In fact Campbell himself appears in this book in the person of Sen. Lister Rosewater, Eliot's father. Anyone who doubts this should read Sen. Rosewater's speeches in the book in conjunction with the more blatantly extreme of John Campbell's editorials—as I did. The sceptic will find that they are as good as word for word—especially those which deal with liberals and the barbarian menace to the American way of life. Throughout the book the anti-Eliot characters are saying that if an American is poor and starving it is his own fault (again a familiar theme to all Campbell-readers) and throughout the book Eliot and his sf conscience, Trout, are saying, "What the hell difference does it make if it is their fault—they're still people."

So read this book if you're never going to read another mainstream novel this year. Forget, if you like, that the reason for doing so is because it's a good, good book. Read it for the pure joy of seeing what the sf style can do when it's weaned away from space opera ; read it as a refutation of John W. Campbell ; read it, if for nothing else, for Eliot's speech to an sf Convention.

"I love you sons of bitches. You're all I read any more. You're the only ones who'll talk about the *really* terrific changes going on, the only ones crazy enough to know that life is a space voyage and not a short one either. . . . You're the only ones . . . to *really* care about the future, who *really* notice what machines do to us, what wars do to us, what cities do to us, what big, simple ideas do to us, what tremendous misunderstandings, mistakes, accidents and catastrophes do to us. You're the only ones zany enough to agonize over time and distance without limit, over mysteries that will never die, over the fact that we are right now determining whether the space voyage for the next billion years or so is going to be Heaven or Hell."

"Eliot admitted later that science-fiction writers couldn't write for sour apples but he declared that it didn't matter. He said they were poets just the same, since they were more sensitive to important changes than anybody who was writing well. "The hell with the talented sparrowfarts who write delicately of one small piece of one mere lifeime, when the

issues are galaxies, eons and trillions of souls yet to be born.' "

So says Eliot, so says Vonnegut, so says I and so say all of us.

'WIRELESS WORLD' STRIKES AGAIN

Langdon Jones

"PREVIEWS OF THE COMING SPACE AGE" is the subtitle of *Voices from the Sky* by Arthur C. Clarke (Gollancz, 25s.), which is not so much an integrated book as a collection of essays, some of which seem to have been published in the most peculiar places.

If 25s. seems too much for you to pay for such a book, then read the blurb instead, which attempts to give a résumé of the whole book and a potted biography of Clarke to boot, and in the process fills the front flap, zips through the back one and flops part of the way down the back cover.

It is very easy for the reader of science fiction to become very blasé about developments in space travel. When another Atlas climbs ponderously into the sky, it is often difficult to keep a faint sneer from our lips; when we see photographs of astronauts floating in space, we tend to complain about the quality of the film (after all Bonestells are *much* clearer). But many of the articles in this book, especially about those developments which will substantially alter our own lives, will help to restore this sense of excitement.

For here Clarke is in his natural element. When one reads his popular science articles, one can't help feeling that Clarke is doing the work the good Lord made him for. He writes with knowledge, assurance and humour, using his descriptive powers to build up a fascinating picture of the future. When my bald patch eventually envelops my whole head and I become increasingly conscious of the passing of time, then I shall sit down and re-read these articles, for only these little glimpses of things to come could make me wish for time to pass more quickly.

Only Clarke (with the possible exception of Asimov) could write about *Space Flight and the Spirit of Man* without descending into dreadful pseudo-poetry and bathos. Only Clarke could present us with such ideas as that of a gigantic catapult on the Moon which could fire freight-carrying capsules down to the surface of Earth. Only Clarke could simplify his concepts so that they may be understood by the least scientifically-minded.

But I don't deny that the book has faults, many of which could have been corrected quite easily. For a start, I fail to see why it should be that a British book by a British author should consistently use American spelling, even if the articles did first appear in America; a few minutes' work with a red pen would have tidied it up much better.

Also, the book suffers from its very fragmented presentation. Many of the ideas are duplicated in different chapters, as in this example from *Social Consequencies of the Communications Satellite*: —

> . . . "most of us have had to take overseas phone calls in the middle of the night. . . . What is inconvenient today will be quite intolerable in ten or twenty years as our communications networks extend to cover the globe. Can you imagine the situation if in your own town a third of your friends and acquaintances were asleep whenever you wanted to contact them? Yet this is a close parallel to what will happen in a world of cheap and instantaneous communications, unless we change the pattern of our lives."

And from *The World of the Communications Satellite*:—

> "When we have true global communications, our way of life will adapt to them—not vice versa. It would be frustrating to live in a society where, at any given time, between a third and a half of one's acquaintances were asleep. This will be the global situation, a quarter of a century from now, and society will have to make some Procrustean adjustments."

One or two examples of this would be tolerable, but it happens time and time again. And what is even worse, Clarke sometimes modifies his opinions from piece to piece,

as when, on page 136, he says that he would make no predictions regarding a global language for international communication, although he inclines slightly towards English; and then on page 143, burns his boats magnificently, and says that the language will be "almost certainly English".

Also, one cannot help, in some of the articles, but to detect a slight touch of egotism. But I hasten to add that it is egotism tempered by humour, and comes over as a rather endearing characteristic.

In one paragraph, there is more than a touch of crankiness:

> "I have already referred to our age as a neurotic one; the "sick" jokes, the decadence of art forms, the flood of anxious self-improvement books, the etiolated cadavers posing in the fashion magazines—these are minor symtoms of a malaise that has gripped the Western world, where it sometimes seems that we have reached *fin de siècle* fifty years ahead of the calendar."

Another minor irritation: by now I should think that the whole world knows about that October 1945 issue of WIRELESS WORLD, wherein Clarke predicted the communications satellite. I don't blame him for feeling a bit fed up about not getting any money for the idea, but reading Clarke on this subject so often is like being forced into a private row. But . . . it must be something about Clarke . . . even this becomes, in a way, a mildly amusing and endearing thing. In this book, Clarke really goes to town. Apart from a few minor references to the idea, he writes an article subtitled *How I Lost a Billion Dollars in my Spare Time*, and reprints the original article in full, as an appendix.

In my more uncharitable moments, I sometimes reflect that Clarke must have made up a good proportion of that billion dollars in articles about how he lost it.

Apart from all these minor grouches, *Voices From the Sky* is an excellent, instructive and entertaining book, and is well worth your pocket money for this week.

I'll just finish up by pointing out one of the most amusing misprints I have seen for a long time. When describing letters he receives from readers, Clarke says the following: "In most cases no more is necessary. Requests for auto-

graphs, corrections of errors (invariably, of course, the fault of my secretary or the printer)." . . . I am sure that it is no accident that the very next word has a letter omitted! Clarke has obviously not learned that printers have the last word, and that they must be very malicious people! (Excepting, of course, the wonderful and brilliant printer who is setting up this copy.)

Langdon Jones

(Limited space has made it necessary to omit this month's letter column (primarily letters on Science v. Religion) which will be included in full next month.)

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THE ASSASSINATION WEAPON
must not be missed.

Also in this issue you will find a varied selection of science fiction stories that will suit every taste.

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JAMES COLVIN
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Consuming Passion

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JOHN BRUNNER
The Evil That Men Do (Conclusion)

PLUS more stories by Harker, Walters.

PLUS our usual features and a new essay on William Burroughs by the American poet Bill Butler.