

THE
GOD KILLERS

by
JOHN BAXTER



They murdered God on Merryland a century ago.

NEW WORLDS

JUNE 1966
Vol. 50 No. 163

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Cover by Keith Roberts for The God Killers

Interior illustrations by Cawthorn, Douthwaite, Yates and Gilmore

Edited by Michael Moorcock
Assistant Editor Langdon Jones
Editorial Office:
87a Ladbroke Grove, London, W.11
 (Advertisement enquiries: ROY 6557)

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HERE'S YOUR CHANCE . . .



YOU WILL FIND, sandwiched somewhere in this issue, a list of questions which will, if answered, enable you to influence the policy of this magazine. The questionnaire is specifically designed to give you the chance to tell us what sort of stories you would like to see in future issues. It would also help if you could let us know, somewhere on the form, what your favourite story in NWSF was over, say, the last year, and if you have had any difficulty obtaining your copies locally. For your convenience, the form is post-paid and all you have to do is fill it in, fold it up and post it. We shall publish the results of the poll in a forthcoming issue. Thanks in advance for your help.

The latest issue of RIVERSIDE QUARTERLY to hand continues Alexei Panshin's *Heinlein in Dimension*—perhaps the first long, critical look at the work of Robert Heinlein that has been published. Mr. Panshin has written a book of critical articles on Heinlein which was due to be published by Advent in the U.S.A. but complications arose and they are not now to publish the book. This is a pity for, though Mr. Panshin's essays could do with a bit more polish here and there, the work is one of the most ambitious pieces of bibliography and commentary in the sf field and succeeds admirably in putting Heinlein's career into perspective. The article in the current RIVERSIDE QUARTERLY is called *The Period of Alienation* and deals with Heinlein's "third period"—in which he wrote his most controversial novels, *Starship Troopers*, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, *Glory Road*, *Podkayne of Mars* and *Farnham's Freehold*—and of which Mr. Panshin says:

"Instead of concerning himself with facts, he has written about morality, sex, religion, war, and politics ; but he has treated these opinions as though they were facts. More than this, he has so concentrated on presenting his opinions with every available narrative device that he has neglected story construction, characterisation, and plot, as though they were completely subsidiary to his opinions-as-facts . . . The result from an artistic point of view is a mistake."

Mr. Panshin goes on to discuss the books individually and presents the best balanced look at them that we have yet seen in print.

RIVERSIDE QUARTERLY also contains *Work in Progress* (an interesting, uncompleted piece of fiction by Arthur Cox), part two of *A Critique of T. H. White's "Once and Future King"* by Barbara Floyd, poetry by Joyce Pollard, reviews by Jim Harmon and an editorial on *The Evil of Banality*. The only regularly published magazine of serious sf criticism in the U.S.A., RIVERSIDE QUARTERLY may be obtained through its British agent, Graham Hall, 57 Church Street, Tewkesbury, Glos. (2/6 should get you the current issue). Another part of Mr. Panshin's book is published in ZENITH SPECULATION, 2/- from Peter Weston, 9 Porlock Crescent, Northfield, Birmingham 31, and is about Heinlein's non-fiction.

In our editorial *The New Prism* in NWSF 158 we touched on the idea that the symbol of the Atom Cloud was replacing that of the crucifix. A few readers were irritated not so much by the suggestion itself as by the word "symbol" which is often used in NWSF editorials and which, it appears, these readers confuse with the word "abstract". Space is limited and it would be impossible here to develop the argument which led us to the conclusions expressed in that editorial. We should like to recommend, however, the work of Ernst Cassirer, an exceptionally readable German philosopher who has translated his work into English. His great work is his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1929) which is now available in a Yale Paperbound edition (3 vols). An excellent introduction to this, specially written

Continued on page 65

THE GOD KILLERS



JOHN BAXTER

o n e

LONDON HAS ALWAYS been a city of enduring flexibility, adapting itself to whatever demands its inhabitants laid on it. At various times a camp, a market, a fortress, a port, a commercial city, a centre of the arts, a seat of imperial government, the world's brothel and its cathedral, it became in the 27th century, when war and peace had blended into

a twilight of action, that least alive of all living centres, a university town. The attitude which holds that nothing but ideas are really worthwhile settled like a fog on to the city, and London by degrees began to die. The mathematicians went to Moscow, the engineers to New York, the architects to Chandigar, and London was left to the philosophers and the dusty sweepings of the intellectual universe.

Elton Penn entered the telephone exchange and stood watching the other callers around the lofty light-filled room. The place was empty but for the calling machines, a hundred white cylindrical columns three feet high jutting from the floor in a circle, and three people using them. Penn walked to the far corner of the room where it was quietest. He had a small leather case in his hand which he put down carefully on the floor before feeling across the flat end of a cylinder for the patches of warmth that were its controls.

He was still clumsy at this, even though he had been on Earth for three years. The manipulation of monopolar machines was a skilled one picked up early in life or never entirely mastered. Penn had been thirty years old when he came to Earth from the worlds beyond The Limit. His mind and body had never entirely adjusted to a monopolar universe, a world where machines no longer had moving parts, switches, dials or knobs, but were only smooth-faced blocks of germanium-impregnated stone designed to trap magnetic monopoles and channel them into electrical paths impressed on the substance of the block. His fingers were slow and awkward as they traced out the calling pattern, but he refused to start again. Finally the heat ceased and there was an audible click in the centre of the column. He lifted his fingers.

"Yes?" a voice said from the air just in front of his face.

"It's Penn," he said.

"Is it arranged?"

"Yes. I'll be at the meeting place in ten minutes."

"So soon?"

"It must be now. I have to leave tomorrow."

"Very well. In ten minutes."

The heat resumed. The call was over.

Penn picked up the leather case and went out into the street. Light rain was falling, giving the already polished and antiseptic streets and buildings a gloss which made them seem more impersonal than ever. This must be how a microscope slide looks to the bacillus being examined, he thought ; a hostile and repellent place that might at any moment become a killing ground. He slipped his free hand inside his robe to keep it warm. The rain depressed him. On Earth, one never really adapted to the changes of temperature. It seemed that, on a world where man was so much in control of his environment, where the last secrets of science and nature were displayed for everybody to see, that heat and cold would likewise be subjugated. But it was a skill that Earth scientists had never bothered to pursue. Each storm and frost was, to Penn, a subtly disturbing event. At home he had not minded the extremes of climate because his was a Limited world, beyond the sphere of Earth hegemony, inhabited by Earth colonists but abandoned by the administration when the first tide of colonisation had reached its high-water mark, and then ebbed. On Merryland, one expected bad weather ; on Earth, it was a perpetual surprise.

Wrapping himself against the rain, he took the stairs up to the flyover which curved above the wide plaza in front of the exchange. There was only the narrow ribbon of metal ; no railing, although a waist-high tangle-foot field had been installed to prevent children from straying too close to the edge. Penn strolled along the walkway, watching the evening walkers. There were more people on the streets than usual tonight. It was Graduation eve and London was filled with students and teachers, there either to give degrees, receive them or comment noisily on the fact that none had been offered. They hurried across the square, too busy to look up. Even if they had, they would not have seen the thin pale man in grey standing there. The flyover was very high.

His contact arrived on time, walking quickly along the street and glancing worriedly around the square before mounting the steps. Seeing him, Penn moved back from

the edge of the path so that the meeting would be shielded from anybody who should look up. As he did, his foot slipped on the wet surface. Somebody could very easily fall from the flyover on a night like this.

Penn took the papers the man gave him and put them into his pocket without looking at them.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"They're all the reports I could find in the files. Material on the Limited Planets is usually locked up in the secured bureau but this must have slipped out."

"Here." Penn took a sheaf of notes from the leather bag and gave them to the man. There was no comment.

"Is there more?" Penn asked.

"I don't think so." The man stuffed the money into his clothes awkwardly as if he had to force himself to take it.

"I'll pay well for anything you can find."

"There isn't anything else, as far as I know. Except . . ."

"Yes?"

"It's against the law to buy official secrets."

"And to sell them."

"Don't worry. I'm not going to blackmail you. But I'm wondering why you're prepared to risk so much just for some technical information collected by a small research group years ago on a remote planet nobody has ever heard of."

"It's the planet I was born on," Penn said.

"I know. But that doesn't explain it." He paused. "What is it? If the information is valuable, I know markets that you don't have access to."

"Nobody but myself would be interested."

"Perhaps not. And yet, reading through those reports, I started to wonder if perhaps they hadn't found something important out there in that little unit. They were experimenting with the cobalt reaction in monopolar material, weren't they?"

"They didn't find anything."

"Probably not. Still . . ."

Penn felt his skin prickle. "Yes?"

"I think I might look into it. After all, you're going

back tomorrow, so it can't interest you any more. But a lead on the cobalt reaction—that could be very important.”

He looked up at Penn.

“As long as you don't mind, that is.”

“No. Not at all. Why should I?”

Then he punched the man squarely in the stomach. He went down without a sound.

The tangle-foot field was like an invisible thicket of vines along the edge of the pathway, but by heaving the unconscious man on to his shoulders Penn was able to raise him above it. He poised himself for a moment, then toppled the limp figure over the magnetic barrier. It fell down through the gusting rain, still silent.

At the bottom of the steps Penn joined the crowd and listened to their talk of suicide for a few seconds before moving on. Finding a quiet alcove, he took a black graduate's gown from the leather bag and slipped it on. Then he threw the bag away and went to a party.

Everybody held a party on Graduation eve. It was the high point of the academic year, the day when all the greatest minds were in London at one time. The pleasure gardens of the three university towns, London, Oxford and Cambridge, were booked out months ahead by hostesses anxious to be the first to invite the really famous educators and the most brilliant students. Penn was not a brilliant student or a great mind. He had managed to earn a second-class degree in a relatively easy course, the sort of course that was offered to those few off-worlders who came to Earth to study. In the beginning he had expected much more, but he was put in his place soon enough in the first few days of his visit to Earth. The Dean, he remembered, had been as helpful as possible in the circumstances. He walked among the chattering party guests, remembering.

“Please don't feel,” the Dean had said, “that this is in any way a criticism of your intelligence, Master Penn. It has been some centuries since the colonial planets had any real contact with Earth. There is a . . . well, shall we say a lag in development between the two. On Earth, our education system makes it possible to train children earlier

and teach them more. I'm sorry that you weren't aware of the situation before you came such a long distance to study on Earth."

"I thought that free education was the right of every citizen, regardless of where he is born and what his qualifications are. In effect, I'm being penalised because I was born on a colonial world and not on Earth."

"No, not at all," the Dean said patiently. "In many ways, it is our loss to be born on Earth. We live shorter lives, our houses are small, our cities congested. And do you know that the suicide rate is 27% of the total death figure? Benefits such as our education system and the high degree of automation possible through the use of monopolar machines don't really compensate for these disadvantages."

"All this is beside the point. Do you mean to say I can't study here?"

"I didn't say that, Master Penn. You have come a great distance to reach Earth. We can't let such enterprise go unrewarded. We are prepared to offer you the facilities to take a degree at one of the Earth universities." He leafed through a pile of papers on his desk, and selected one of them. "However," he went on, "I regret that it can't be the degree you wish to take."

"Why not?"

The Dean read slowly through the application in his hand.

"Master Penn, I'm not sure you realise what is involved in this course. Even a qualified student from Earth who had been trained in our systems since birth would have difficulty in studying such a range of subjects, let alone measuring up to university examination standard in them. Educative Psychology. Well, you might do that, with a lot of work. Ancient History. Yes, I suppose so. But Mathematics! And Monopolar Mechanics! Do you have any idea what is involved in a study of subjects like this?"

"I can do it."

The Dean shook his head. "No, you can't, I'm afraid. The work that goes into even a general study of the basic principles is incalculable. You need a knowledge of mathe-

matics that only a few talented people possess before you can begin to study Mathematics as a university subject. As for Monopolar Mechanics, you would have to master Mathematics as well as three or four other subjects before you could even begin to study the field. No, it's impossible."

"I'm prepared to try."

"Yes, I see that. But we can't permit you to waste your time and energy, not to mention that of our tutors, on such a hopeless task. We can offer you a course covering Educative Psychology, Comparative Philology, General Mathematics for Technicians, and Computer Engineering, with History, Ancient and Modern, if you feel you can handle the extra subject. Computer Engineering will give you a grounding in the general principles of monopolar mechanics and of course the ability to operate and service certain basic machines."

"What is the alternative?"

"There is none. If you don't accept this course, the government will have to rescind your visa and return you to . . . what world is it you come from?"

"Merryland."

"I don't recall having heard of it. But of course I'm out of touch."

"Nobody on Earth has heard of it. It's beyond The Limit; one of the lost worlds. The last report from a survey ship is dated more than two hundred years ago."

"But how did you get to Earth if no ships have visited your world? Surely it hasn't developed space travel?"

"I didn't say no ships had called there; only that no reports had been made. A party called three years ago, but the crew was killed. I managed to get on board their ship and take it off."

The Dean looked blank. He was not used to the intrusion of real life into his quiet and scholarly existence. Penn glanced around the over-decorated neo-classical office with its fittings of brass and chrome, facings of marble, glass and stone. It made him feel uncomfortable, and he wanted to get out of there as soon as he could.

"I'll take the course," he said shortly.

The Dean recalled himself with an effort. His mind was

still on a world where Earthmen were killed by savages and young men stole spaceships.

"Of course, of course. I'm sure you'll find the subjects very satisfactory."

"I'm sure I shall," Penn said. It was a lie, the first of many lies he would tell on Earth.

The party was getting noisy. Penn withdrew his mind from the memory of three years before and looked around at the crowds. He needed a drink. The after-effects of the murder were beginning to creep over him. Finding an automatic drink dispenser, he felt for the black control block on the side. The machine responded to his order pattern, but sluggishly. That was no surprise. Even after years on Earth he had a clumsy touch. Children did better, but of course they grew up with monopolar machines. Penn was thirty-five, and had been twenty-three before he saw any machine more complex than a wheelbarrow.

As he turned away from the machine, he heard it buzz twice. The sound was a sign of some defect, usually a blockage of the memory track caused by mishandling. The machines were incredibly sensitive, and even the slightest clumsiness in keying them could cause a breakdown. Penn had heard the buzz hundreds of times before, mostly as a result of some error on his part in using a machine. He looked around for a waiter or mechanic. The machine continued to buzz.

"Allow me," somebody said. "I'm afraid our hostess has invested in some low-quality catering machines this year."

Penn turned quickly and saw a man standing there. He was as short and chubby as Penn was tall and thin, and his face had the barbered elegance of a patrician. Though he wore the same black graduate's gown as Penn did, he seemed at home in it, as if he wore it all his life. Suspicious of this lack of precise definition in a world devoted to categorisation, Penn was cautious.

"Don't concern yourself. I'll find a waiter."

The man put down his glass and felt under the switching box with his fat fingers. The buzz rose in intensity for a moment, then stopped.

"There. These hired things usually have a cut-off underneath the block."

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it." He picked up his glass again and looked around. "A poor party."

"Yes."

The man glanced over his shoulder. Two men were pushing their way through the crowd, looking neither to left nor right, saying nothing but watching everything. They were short and stocky, dressed entirely in black. They looked very businesslike.

"Not only dull," the man said, "but in bad taste, too."

Penn watched the men pass.

"You take risks," he said. "The proctors might have heard you."

The man took a medallion from around his neck and showed it to Penn. He recognised the seal of a minister.

"I'm safe enough. As chaplain to the household, I'm expected to say 'unworldly' things. They let me get away with a great deal."

"You're the first minister I've met since I came to Earth," Penn said. "There can't be many of you."

"Oh, there's still religion on Earth," the man said.

Penn looked across the lawn to where two women were staging a dress battle. Both had brought their dressmakers with them and their clothes shimmered from colour to colour and style to style as the men dictated. Neither woman looked at the other but the eyes of their dressmakers flickered quickly over the clothes of the other and the fingers of each danced on the control panels at his side. By manipulating the static electricity of the materials, the gowns could be made short or long, thick or gauzy, flame red or deepest black. One moment clad in a cloak of butterflies' wings, the next naked but for a huge Elizabethan ruff around her neck, each woman struggled to be the more striking.

"I know what you're thinking," the man said. "In many ways it's a godless place. But we have our rules. Even the richest."

"Most of all the richest," Penn said. "The rich always have the more interesting rules."

"You sound jealous. What world are you from?"

"Merryland," Penn said. "You won't have heard of it."

"I have, as a matter of fact. Isn't it beyond the Limit?"

"Yes. And under proctor quarantine too."

"A sector cordoned off. That's unusual, isn't it?"

"The proctors are nothing if not unusual."

"True. I'd rather like to go to some of these worlds beyond the Limit. I wonder why that area is quarantined."

Penn knew, but it was a piece of information he would never disclose. It was the one concrete asset he had gained from his visit to Earth, and he had killed to get it.

"I wouldn't worry about it," he said. "Being a religious man, you wouldn't like Merryland."

"Oh?"

"No. They murdered God on Merryland a hundred years ago."

The next day Penn took the first step on his long journey back to his home world. It would take him two years to get there, and another six months to penetrate the proctor quarantine. Only then, in the spring of 2833, was he able to begin his search.

t w o

ALTHOUGH GOD WAS DEAD on Merryland, they still said grace.

"Our Satan who art in Hades, hallowed be thy name
Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done in heaven as it is on
earth. Give us this day . . ."

While the prayer droned on David Bonython looked down with distaste at his plate. It was not that the food was poor ; as always, the meal was perfectly edible, even appetising in a bland way. His cousin Edith was a good wife in all things, including her choice of a cook. Perhaps

it was the way it was served. The others at table—the farmer, David's cousin, the couple's three sons and two daughters—all ate from plates of metal. David's was earthenware, brown and cracked like dried mud. It was his pride he found hard to swallow, not the food.

"Out of the depths have we cried to thee, O Lord of Darkness. Let thine ears be attentive to our plea. Visit us with thy strong arm. Guard us against the weakness of the spirit. Harden our hearts that we may resist the blandishments of a soft god and the lure of his magic. Destroy the unbelieving and . . ."

The farmer had long ago forgotten what he was saying. It was all a meaningless mumble that lost what sense it had ever possessed in the passage through his thick black beard. However, everybody listened ; listened while the food dried on their plates ; listened while their necks became stiffer and stiffer in the unnatural attitude of reverence that custom demanded—back rigid, head tilted forward at a sharp angle, hands folded in the lap, eyes fastened on a point somewhere on the table before one. It was uncomfortable, it was ridiculous, but it was the law.

For the tenth time that day David entertained a particularly delightful fantasy. It was a work of art, an elaborate piece of mental scrimshaw embroidered and improved upon over the weeks. There was no work on the farm for a boy of David's slight build and impractical mentality, so he was given the job of sorting out books—he alone in the house could read—and servicing the icons, statues and shrines. In the long hours, he had time to invent dreams, like the one in which he rose from the table in the middle of one of these interminable prayers, took up his hat from the row standing on the bench beside the table, smiled at the assembled company, riveted them with some classic insult, and departed. Whence he departed, or what he did when the huge oak double doors of Padgett farmhouse had shut behind him and he stood, an orphan, destitute and outcast on the front steps—these things never came into the dream. It ended always long before then, at that disturbing moment when Samantha saw what he had done and looked admiringly up at him. From then on, the

dream tended to run away with him. He hated these moments, yet enjoyed them too. Samantha was, even by the standards of Merryland, an evil, hateful and thoroughly wicked girl. All his instincts told him this. Yet he dreamed of her just the same.

The thought caused an uncontrollable desire to look at her again and he glanced up covertly under his brows to where she sat, directly opposite him. He didn't catch her eye, which was dutifully directed at a point somewhere on the table between them, but he was glad of this. It allowed him to watch without interruption her face and that part of her body not covered by the high-throated black dress that she, like all other girls of marriageable age, wore. The part revealed was not particularly extensive ; no more than her slim neck and throat, but he lingered on this for a long moment. Also, he could see her hair. Thick hair, black and mane-like, but streaked by threads and blazes of white. The old woman called it Witch's Hair, and said that each white hair represented an unforgivable sin. David could believe the story. He knew Samantha.

For a few seconds he lingered on her throat and down-turned face, gauging the transparent shadows that blocked out the strong, violent lines of her features. Everything about Samantha—her face, her body, her nature—was nervous and active, as if her life force was distilled and concentrated. David felt the familiar tenseness coming over him, the welling up of a thousand wishes, hopes and ambitions that daily he had to fight down. If only he had influence, money, power—then he might do something. But he was helpless, alone and imprisoned in a system from which nobody had ever escaped. Then the prayer rumbled into its last few phrases, faltered and subsided in a mutter of "amens" from those at the table. The farmer straightened up, reached across his wife to wrench a choice leg from the roast goose and said to Garth, his eldest son, "Did you get all that manure in before the rain?"

Dinner could now commence.

David ate quickly. The family always dined at five, summer and winter. It was summer now, and the days were long. If he finished his meal quickly there might be time to

go exploring again in the upper reaches of the farmhouse, among the old corridors that fascinated him more than anything else in the world. Except for the farm talk there was no conversation during the meal, and David used the time to plan his route to the upper reaches. First up the back stairs that led to the main floors of the house, then past the shrine and up the huge winding staircase that penetrated the ten or twelve storeys above the inhabited part of the house. After that . . .

"David!"

Edith Padgett's voice was sharp and irritated. He looked at her in surprise.

"Your cousin asked a service of you. Please be good enough to oblige."

He looked around the table. Paul and Stephen, the two youngest boys, were gobbling noisily on their food and fighting a covert battle of kicks and prods beneath the table. Anastasia, the youngest sister, was gazing into space with her usual expression of vague wonderment. Samantha, however, was looking at him coolly. Her eyes, cat-green, touched him like sly fingers. He blushed.

"A favour?" he said, confused. "What . . ."

"The salt, boy! The salt," his cousin snapped. "Really, child, you are getting worse, not better. What you think about at table I don't know."

They were all looking now. The old man paused in mid-mouthful to glance at him. It was not an unkind look. He knew better than anybody what a shrew his wife was.

David picked up the dish of salt and handed it to Samantha. Their fingers brushed momentarily as she took it and he felt a suggestion of pressure. It would have been his imagination, but he thought not. The incident filled his mind again with thoughts of her, and of the things she had said to him that morning. Shocking things, but not unpleasant. Then he pushed the ideas away to the back of his mind and concentrated on the task of getting away from the table and up again into the enchanted world at the top of the house. Up there, he could think.

Waiting until the whole family seemed otherwise occu-

pied he rose from the table and reached for his hat standing beside the others on the settle.

"Where are you going, child?" It was his cousin again. She must have eyes everywhere.

"I thought I might go outside for some fresh air," he said lamely.

"Fresh air!" The idea scandalised her. "If you don't have work to do, there's plenty I can give you. For a start . . ."

The farmer glanced up from his discussion with Garth.

"Let the boy go," he said. "Have you found those maps with the drainage levels yet, boy?"

"No, sir. There are hundreds to go through."

"Make it as quick as you can then." He bent back to his talk of stock and fences. Edith Padgett looked from her husband to David and back again, her eyes spiteful, but there was nothing she could do. David grabbed his hat and got out of the kitchen. It would take a search party to find him once he was up the steps to the main house.

His feet moved silently over the brick floor as he walked quickly through the pantry and up the narrow stairs. This part of the house was old, dating in some cases back as far as the wars, or even before. Generations of feet had ground the stone into concavity so that the steps seemed to sag with the weight of age. Scattered about the walls were patches of red bricks, their geometrical exactness a sharp contrast to the rough stone slabs that made up most of the chamber. The presence of the bricks was an index to the age of the house. They had not been produced for centuries. The skill of their manufacture, like that of milling aluminium plates, of making automobiles, aeroplanes, spaceships and all the other machines of the Old World had perished in the bombs, and nobody dared to search for it again. To experiment with the forbidden sciences was the worst crime known on Merryland, the ultimate treason.

At the stair-top an alcove separated the kitchen from the rest of the house. Beyond it, the floors were polished. There were images and icons, carpets and brass lamps. Here he put on his best manners, walking carefully, his eyes downcast. At the first of the icons, he paused, dipped

a finger into the pot of mud and smeared it dutifully across the face. It was a long time since the icon had been cleaned and it was almost completely covered with a grey crust. His nail caught a flake and a few square inches of mud fell away, revealing a soft brown eye. The eye of God.

He picked at the mud until the face was fully uncovered. It was a sad, flat face, a face that would accept anything done to it, even the indignity of ritual vilification. And yet, was it such an indignity? This was the theory, but the execution had made it less an insult than a sort of genuflection. The smear of mud had become almost a prayer; twisted, perverted, but a prayer all the same. It was odd. David felt no hatred towards any unreal thing. Insults, scars and bruises—the people who gave him those were worth hating. A spirit . . . who could hate a spirit? And especially a spirit that didn't have the power or pride to strike back at its enemies, no matter how much they did to its images. But this was close to heresy. With a guilty glance over his shoulder David hurried on, leaving the abandoned god to mourn in darkness.

"Where are you going?" somebody asked.

David turned quickly and looked into the room he was passing. Wheatley, the steward, was sitting inside the little chamber, cleaning the rust from some old shearing blades. He seemed out of place in the house. He was thick, stupid and unkempt, better suited for the stable than the house.

"That's my business," David said. "What are you doing here? The proper place to clean those is outside in the barn."

"I'll clean them where I like." As if to emphasise the point he gave one blade a last languid buff and dropped it clanging to the floor.

"I'll tell my uncle."

Wheatley put down the polishing cloth and stood up. He looked huge in the small room.

"You won't tell him anything, unless you want him to hear about the books you've got upstairs. Or what you do when you're supposed to be sorting out those old papers."

David opened his mouth to reply, then said nothing. Wheatley was dangerous. His uncle would not understand

why he kept the books in his room, or why he spent so much time studying the old manuscripts stored in the attics of the house. He had no concept of reading as entertainment. To him, it was some arcane knowledge close to witchcraft. David was permitted to exercise it only as long as it was done for a sensible purpose, like looking for old survey plans of the Padgett farm or details of soil tests. If he knew of the manuals and maps David had hidden in his room, his reaction would be unpleasant. Looking at Wheatley's face again, David knew he would tell his uncle without the slightest compunction. Angry and embarrassed he turned his back on the man and hurried on.

Above the kitchen and storerooms, most of which were underground, the main body of the house lay deserted. David padded through reception rooms, still chambers where old chairs and cabinets sat under their dustcloths like sleeping ghosts, past museums filled with the incunabula of dead decades, through rooms dedicated to the celebration of birthdays, the playing of games and the laying out of the dead. Rooms all unused, empty and dark, dry vessels of a dead heart. Beyond them, near to the cliff on which the house leaned wearily for support, the stairs led upwards, twisting like vines towards a hidden sun.

The building had begun as a fortified farmhouse during the time of the revolts, twelve years after the last world war. Backed against the wall of the valley it had looked out defiantly on a country where daily living was a dangerous and deadly business. Over the years the house had grown with the prosperity of the family, extending itself outwards and upwards. When new quarters were needed, another terrace was cut into the hillside and a barracks built. The need for more living room was met by extending the house forward another few yards. When the area threatened to get out of hand an extra storey was added, then another. Extra storeys were added to the terraces also and joined to the main house by stairways, corridors and steps. Over a century it had grown, haphazardly, formless at least in the sense that no architect could have found any pattern or logic in its layered construction. But David, who knew the house better than anybody else, saw its branched

growth as something grand, like the spread of a tree or the lazy sprawl of some old animal. It was in some ways his friend, the only friend he had.

Ten minutes of steady climbing brought him to the furthest edges of present habitation. A wooden fence barred the way. Beyond the barrier the stairs had a look of abandonment and disuse. Isaac Padgett kept few servants, and, no longer polished daily, the wooden panelling and twisting banisters lost their patina and grew drab. The brass fittings were tarnished, the stair carpet, where it existed at all, threadbare and dusty. David alone ministered to the house, tending the lamps weekly with acolyte devotion.

Pushing aside the wooden barrier—an easy task ; he had long ago removed most of the nails—he moved up the twisting spiral staircase. In these places, close under the cliff, the way was cramped, but he moved confidently in the shadows. Here at least he was master, if only by default. He paused only once in his climb, to look out through a round dusty window which lit one of the cramped landings. From the window he could look down the valley and across the land his family owned.

It was good land, rolling sheep country which would make any farmer rich. The present owner had let much of it lie fallow. He had few servants, little stock—yet he was still rich. A better man, David's father for instance . . . but that didn't bear thinking about. David's father was two years dead, the victim of one of the shooting matches that still sprang up even in these peaceful times. The Bonython lands had been small but David's father was a good businessman and the chances had been good that they might have been extended. However, with his father dead the land had gone to the closest male relative, his uncle by marriage. David had gone with the bequest, and old Isaac Padgett had thought it a small price to take over the feeding and education of his benefactor's eighteen-year-old son. David had no say in the matter, nor would he until he was twenty-five. Then, he told himself a dozen times each day, then . . .

He looked down the valley towards the lake that lay in its lowest point, about a mile away. The water was still and black, shaded by the green darkness of a willow grove. If

he listened to Samantha he would be under those trees tonight. The two thoughts—Samantha and his ambition—crossed and tangled. He might, with luck, marry Samantha, or at least get her with child and force some sort of recognition. That way he could perhaps wrench a few square miles from the edge of his uncle's estate and perhaps. . . . It was always perhaps. The chances were, he knew, remote. Across the valley, sharp against the evening sky, the silhouette of Stoker Farmhouse stood out barbarically. Its fretted towers and buttresses were a challenge to the whole valley, a challenge David knew he could not take up. Both families wanted an amalgamation of the estates, both families were large, with sons and daughters to spare. Marriage anywhere outside the two clans was impossible, and marriage to an orphan more impossible still. David could see the smile on old Isaac's face when he mentioned it. He could hear his laughter. No. If there were paths of advancement for him, they were not across the valley or along the corridors of Padgett farmhouse, but elsewhere.

As the light faded an eerie calm flowed into the valley so that it seemed brimming with some impalpable magic. On the far side of the valley where the road entered from outside a lamp flared briefly, then settled into a steady glow. The light was moving down towards the lake. Almost at the same moment there was a movement in front of the Stoker farm. He heard a door slam, the sound carrying clearly to his ears in the still air. Somebody came out of the main door of the house and moved quietly down the hill towards the lake that lay silent and glistening under the dark sky. Trees rustled in the night breeze. On the other hills, along the roads, in the fields David saw other small lights, all moving towards the lake and the grove that surrounded it. Samantha and her friends were gathering.

He slowly closed the window and locked it. Immediately the air felt stuffy and thick. It was only his imagination, he knew, but still each breath felt muffled. He turned towards the next flight of stairs, hoping for a glimpse of another window, but there was none. The steps were narrow and steep, the remains of an old catwalk which had been roughly shored up with beams when the main body of the

house had caught up with it. At the top there was a tiny landing and illuminating the landing a window of stained glass. Standing at the foot of the stairs he could see the window quite clearly. There were many small panes of glass, coloured in shades now faded by years of sunlight. He put his hand on the banister.

A little animal padded out from the shadows on the landing and stopped at the top of the stairs, looking gravely down at him.

David had often watched the otters that lived in the lake. They were his favourite animal, perhaps because they seemed always to keep a part of themselves in reserve, some store of talent or intelligence that was always hidden. One saw it only in their eyes, hard and brown and wise. This animal had the look of an otter, though a small otter only, and thin. Nor was it coloured brown or black. Its pelt was a cool and serene blue, like sea-ice or shadowed snow. The presence of an animal here, in the abandoned rooms, David could have accepted, but its colour was too alien. He felt his skin prickle in fear.

For a minute they stood watching each other with equal interest. David followed the quick flickering of the pulse in the creature's throat and the slow wandering of its tail back and forth over the dusty floor. Then, from the depths of the house below them, the prayer gong boomed. The animal started, falling back defensively on its haunches, one tiny paw upraised in alarm. David reached forward with his hand, instinctively trying to reassure it, but as he did so the gong roared again, louder and more demanding than before. With a quick turn the animal disappeared into the shadows beyond the lip of the landing. He wanted to follow, but the gong boomed a third time, delivering a summons that could not be ignored. Reluctantly David backed away. After prayers, he could return.

As he ran down the stairs the little blue animal came again to the edge of the landing and looked down at the figure growing smaller and smaller on the spiral steps. When he was gone it went back to the game it had been playing, which consisted of finding a path through the patches of coloured light from the window that would take it through

the primaries and their subsidiaries in order. When it had done that a few times, it tried looking for a path in reverse order. But only one part of its mind was exercised with this purely intellectual problem. The rest was thinking about the young man and wondering how long it would take him to return.

t h r e e

PRAYERS HAD ALREADY BEGUN when David arrived at the chapel. The three rows of pews were filled, except for a space in the front rank and one almost directly behind it. The rear place was his—but that in front belonged to Samantha. He was puzzled. It was unlike Samantha to miss prayers. If she was in chapel, people never looked for her afterwards. Could she have gone to the lake already? He hoped, though not for any reason he could pin down, that she hadn't. Confused, he knelt at the back of the shrine and bowed his head.

If Hector Canklin noticed that one of his congregation was missing and another busy with his own thoughts, he gave no indication of it. The old man acted as adviser and prayer-leader for most of the families in the district, spending a day with each before moving on. Most of the time his mind was on the trip to the next house, or the offering that the more generous farmers were likely to make. He rattled out the ancient prayers and exhortations with the same meaninglessness that marked those of Isaac Padgett, though now they were punctuated by equally meaningless responses from the eight or nine people in the shrine. From the walls ikons looked down with flat and sad faces caked with the mud of a year's vilification. The air was thick with the smell of a religion gone rotten. Behind the filth one could see sometimes a hint of beauty, of the compassion David had seen in the brown eyes of the ikon looking at him from behind the mud. But it was only a hint.

These days, nobody paid much attention to the grim war

paintings that decorated the walls of the chapel. Most of them had faded into outlines or been masked by dust. Occasionally a brushing shoulder would reveal the shadow of a mushroom cloud or a fragment of some battle scene still preserved from the mildew, but for the most part the paintings were smeared and unrecognisable. In theory, they had served their purpose. The horrors of war were deeply engraved on the minds of every person on Merryland. Never again would they risk a war by tampering with science they could not be sure of controlling. Nor would anybody trust his neighbour again. Each individual must be an armed camp, protected against treachery by his own eternal vigilance. This was the theory. In practice, another attitude prevailed, confused and sick.

David saw the familiar walls of the chapel with part of his mind only. The major portion was concerned with the little blue animal he had seen on the upper landings. He was almost prepared to decide it had been a dream, a trick of the light, a brief intrusion of fantasy into the mundane world he knew, brought on by a momentary black-out perhaps. Almost—but not quite. There was something about the animal that had been peculiarly real and alive, a spark in the hard brown eyes that could not be written off as imagination. No—he had seen it, that was certain. Then where had it come from? And what sort of beast could it be?

He sensed a movement behind him and swivelled on his knees. It was Samantha. Her hair was disarranged and her face more flushed than it had been at the dinner table. David knew she had been looking for him.

"Where have you been?" she whispered.

He looked around apprehensively at the worshippers but apparently the call and response of the litany had worked them into a trance. They heard nothing. He opened his mouth to reply, then thought better of it. As Canklin turned to the chapel table to make some invocation he squirmed to his feet and slipped out into the corridor. A moment later Samantha followed him.

Outside they listened for a moment to the sounds from

the chapel, then moved along the hall until they were out of earshot.

"Where have you been?" she repeated urgently. "I thought you said you were going out for a walk. I looked everywhere."

"I went up to the top of the house."

"Are you coming tonight?"

"I don't know."

"Why not? Are you shy?"

Was he? Probably. It wasn't as easy as that. And the problem had been complicated by the things that had happened on the upper landing.

"A little," he admitted. "But that's not the main reason. I saw . . ."

"There's no need to be shy," she said. Her voice was husky and coaxing. "I was shy at first, but I got over it. We all do. Come down with me. You know I like you, David."

He evaded her eyes.

"Your father would kill you if he found out you had gone Christian," he said.

She smiled. "Wouldn't he. But nobody will tell."

"Doesn't it make you feel . . . well, aren't you frightened?"

"Not really," she said. "We don't mean it. It's just an excuse, you know. Some men come up from New Harbour with candles and pictures. They know some of the old prayers. We even have a password *Dominus Vobiscum*. It's Earth language, I suppose. Anyway, we have prayers, but after that we just . . . well, amuse ourselves. We dance and . . ."

She paused and looked at him defiantly.

"We dance naked."

David's mouth went dry. He wanted desperately to go with her, but still he held back.

She glanced at the door of the chapel.

"They'll be coming out soon. Are you going with me?"

David looked at the stairs, then at her. The choice, oddly enough, was not hard to make.

"I can't, Samantha," he said. "There's something . . ."

There was nothing else that he could say. Quickly he turned and walked along the dark corridor to the staircase. He didn't look back but her eyes glowed in the darkness before him for a long time. *Coward*, they accused. He knew she was right. Then, putting the memory of her words out of his mind, he began to climb.

The house was dark now and only his knowledge of every stair and landing guided him. Each new staircase was darker than the last, until he was moving in only the vaguest blur of twilight. On the last landing before the barrier he paused. There was a lamp here. He groped along the walls, touched something and heard the slosh of oil and the rattle of a glass chimney. Clumsily he lit it. The walls became visible once more, each sharp shadow cast by the light pointing upwards towards the landing where he had been that afternoon. Below, there was nothing ; blackness and humiliation. He was forced upwards.

Ten minutes later he stood for the second time at the foot of the last flight of stairs and looked towards the tiny landing. There was no sign of movement. He tested the first step gingerly, then moved on to the others with more assurance. At the top he held the lamp high and looked around him. The stained glass window was there, but no sign of life. The animal could have hidden, but where? The landing was fully enclosed, a dead end. The walls were panelled in dark wood, apparently quite solid.

Apparently.

Stories were always circulating in the big farmhouses about secret passages, hidden rooms and the like, but David had yet to see any of them proved. He felt along the walls with his free hand, testing the panels and rapping on them. They all appeared to be firm enough. The panel at the very rear of the landing was larger than the others, but just as firm. He heaved on it, perhaps more confidently than he should have. The wall gave. The whole landing was set on a pivot operated by some mechanism behind the wall. There was the sound of a rusty swivel squealing in protest, and David yelled as he felt himself spun around and catapulted into a sudden burst of light. His lamp smashed on the floor behind him, but he was too sur-

prised to think about the risk of fire. He stumbled forward into the light. Then there was a hand at his throat. It closed around his neck like a metal claw. He gasped and scrabbled at the fingers but they did not move. They tightened. There was a roaring in his ears, and a great darkness.

David's first fearful thought when he woke was that he was in a coffin. The darkness, the close proximity of wooden walls and the hot stuffy silence all combined to make him feel hemmed in, imprisoned in a narrow buried box. He struggled for a moment, writhing in the grip of this fantasy until he sensed the greater space above him that was almost completely filled with shadows, and the man leaning against the wall, looking wearily downwards to where David lay.

He was the man with the iron hand. That much was obvious. He had the look of power about him. He was short and solid, hardly more than five feet tall, but massively built. His shoulders were as square and rugged as a block of stone. His legs were pillars. His head was square and bald. He was dressed in a dull black material that looked hard and metallic when the light hit it, and his face was burned almost to blackness, except around the eyes, where the skin was startlingly white, a mask in negative. David had never seen space tan and the effect was eerily new to him. As he watched the man, there was a flicker of movement in the dark and two tiny glittering eyes appeared in the shadows behind his shoulder. The little blue animal scuttled up the man's arm and sat by his head, watching everything.

David did not need to be told the man was an off-worlder. Merryland could never have produced anybody like this. His stance, the way he leaned against the wall as if holding it up, seemed that of a man trapped and lost. His eyes were buried deep in their sockets as he needed only a hint to fall asleep from weariness. Beyond him, the room was in darkness, but there were hints of bulk in the shadows and the loom of something huge and monolithic at the very end of the room, a shape that he half recognised but could not quite place. He stirred slowly, trying to rise. As he did so, the man straightened up from the wall

and David saw that his right arm was bound to his body by some sort of transparent bandage out of which his hand jutted like a frozen thing, white and bloodless. And for the first time he saw his eyes. The right was normal enough, but in the socket of the left a strange thing glittered, shaped like an eye but stone-dull and cold. Nevertheless, David sensed that it could see, and that it watched him.

The man grunted something. David didn't understand, and shook his head.

"Do you speak English?" he asked.

David didn't know the word.

"I understand you," he said, "but I don't know 'english'."

"What do you call it then? The language you're speaking."

"Words, talking. . . . I don't know."

The idea of another language, of new ways to say the same things, disturbed David. "There is One Word, One World, One People—No God, No Love, Nought by the Land." That was the old litany.

The man lurched to the centre of the room and sat down heavily on a box of some kind that creaked under his weight.

"How did you find me?"

David glanced at the little blue animal nestling in the other's lap.

"I saw your friend."

"Does anybody else know you're here?"

"No."

Taking the pet from his knee the man put it carefully on the floor and walked to the secret door through which David had come. He pushed against the panel and the turntable swung out of sight. He was gone for a moment. Then he reappeared, and returned to the box. Apparently nobody had noticed his absence yet. Had he told Samantha where he was going? He couldn't remember. Everything was far away, misty and vague. He struggled to sit up and managed to fall into a wobbly crouch. Even this effort made him dizzy. After a moment he straightened up slowly

and leaned against the wall. His head was clearing now, but his throat was still sore.

"Do you know the country around here?" the off-worlder asked. His back was half turned to David, but something in the way he was hunched forward betrayed his weakness far better than his face could have.

"A little."

"You know the towns and so on?"

David had travelled some distance to get to Padgett Farm from his father's old lands and so he knew the countryside better than most people. He wondered whether to admit this, then decided on honesty, mainly because he felt too sick to lie.

"I know most of them."

"What's the nearest large town?"

"New Harbour. It's on the coast, about seventy miles away."

"Is that the nearest?"

"Yes."

"Seventy miles," the man said to himself. He glanced over his shoulder at David. "I want your help."

David said nothing.

"If you don't help me, I'll kill you."

The man's one whole hand was taloned into a claw on his knee. Even crippled, he could kill.

"I'll help," David said.

The man said nothing for a long time. David waited for some sort of order, even a question or an explanation, but none came. He felt, half through fear, half through compassion, that he should try to help the wounded man, but there was nothing he could do without instructions. For the moment, he was safest if he stood still and said nothing.

He wondered where he was. The room was still dark. What light there was came from a lamp burning dimly at the other end of the room. In the feeble light he could make out only general shapes, but his nostrils told him more about the place than his eyes could. The room was full of smells. Old rotten wood, mildewed paper, odours of cooking and sweat. There was oil too, and other scents he could not classify. Over all, there was the wet metallic

smell of raw rock. The room must be very close to the main cliff, even hewn out of it, he decided. To his knowledge there were no chambers of any kind that close to the hill, but his knowledge had proved to be highly inaccurate already, especially in the matter of hidden rooms. For all he knew, there might be a whole warren of chambers and tunnels built behind those he knew. It would explain how the man had got into the room without being seen by anybody in the house or the surrounding countryside.

David's eyes were getting used to the darkness and he began to examine the room systematically, peering into every shadow. The walls were panelled in a style he had never seen before. Parts of the wood surface seemed to have been decorated with sheets of coloured paper and paintings, but the pictures were faded and the paper had peeled off in mildewed strips. At the other end of the room the black square shape sat menacingly, but the light was too dim to reveal what it was. There were glints of light occasionally when a shadow shifted but that was all. The light seemed to avoid the area.

On the floor was a jumble of angular shadowed objects, twisted by the shadows into odd shapes. In the corner nearest him there was a pile of woven stuff. He reached out tentatively for a fold and fingered it. It was the sort of material they used at Padgett for sheets and blankets in the servants' quarters. Some skivvy would have a lot of explaining to do. The cloth was rumpled and disarranged. This was his bed. The shapes on the floor were boxes, opened food containers and so on, David guessed.

The man reached out for the lamp in a sudden movement that startled him. Light bloomed suddenly and a burst of shadows flew back along the walls towards him like frightened birds. Objects were thrown into sharp relief. David saw that he had been right about the food containers and the bed. Boxes had been tossed carelessly into a pile in the centre of the room and some sort of machine—a stove perhaps—had been set up near them. The room had been used as living quarters for some time. He looked at the man, then past him at the bulky object whose outline he had been barely able to make out. It was clearer

now. This had not been brought from outside. It had been here for a long time. It was a block of black stone half embedded in the wall, six feet high, about three feet wide and so deeply darkly transparent that its length beyond the confines of the room might well be infinite. Its surface was etched with images and tracteries that blazed as the light wove among them in glittering patterns. David had seen pictures of these among the forbidden things in the chapel. It was a matter transmitter.

four

THE MAN LOOKED at David, then over his shoulder at the machine.

"Never seen one of these before?"

David shook his head. He was not frightened by the object, just fascinated by the play of light over its surface.

"I've seen pictures," he said. "Did you come through it?"

"Yes. From a planet named Thurwood."

"What happened to your arm? And your eye?"

The man looked down at his bandaged arm.

"I was shot. It's badly broken. My eye's a prosthetic. An artificial one. I lost the real one when I was about your age."

David realised his legs were getting stiff. Awkwardly he straightened up and took a few steps. He felt dizzy and sick. The smell of the room was suddenly more unpleasant.

"Aren't there any other transmitters around here?" the man asked. "There should be dozens of them."

"I heard once that they found one in Colyer—the next village—but that was years ago, before I came here."

"How far is Colyer?"

"About ten miles west. But there's no point in going there. They destroyed the machine and burned the people who found it."

The man stiffened.

"Burned?" he said. "You mean burned alive?"

"The Examiners said they could have been possessed," David explained. "The machines are proscribed, like all the others. It's the way things are on Merryland."

"Merryland," the man said ironically. "For God's sake."

"Curst," David said automatically.

"Eh?"

"Curst. You said 'For God's sake' and I said . . ." He realised that the man didn't know what he was talking about.

"It's just a response."

He tried to explain but it was difficult. So much of what he said seemed remote from him now, as if he was looking at it through the wrong end of a telescope. It was tiny, pointless, petty, almost ridiculous in its careful adherence to old doctrines.

At the end the earthman shook his head.

"And I had to pick this of all places to hide out."

"What are you hiding from?" David asked suddenly. The words seemed to fall out of him.

"From the proctors."

Proctors? David didn't understand. But the man had not seemed to mind being questioned, so he asked another.

"What did you do?"

There was no reply for a moment.

"I stole," he said quietly, almost to himself.

He glanced at David.

"What's your name?"

David told him.

"Mine's Hemskir."

"What did you steal?"

"I stole . . ." He stopped. "I'll show you."

He rummaged around among the objects piled on the floor and chose one of them. It was a helmet cast in some hard white substance with a visor that covered the eyes. He dragged it free of the rest and held it out to David.

"Put this on."

He took it. His hands were trembling, but he settled it slowly on to his head. It fitted closely. Springs clasped it to his skull, pressing against his temples. He couldn't see. The screen covering his eyes was opaque. Patterns of colour

moved on the inside surfaces of his eyelids, random blobs of purple and red. He waited for something to happen.

When it came, the image was painfully vivid. In an instant the picture seemed to jump into his mind. He opened his eyes automatically in the shock of non-visual seeing but there was nothing there and he closed them again.

First there was a shield, an official seal of some kind. Then a voice. It was hard and incisive, but not unfamiliar. Hemskir had just such a voice.

"This is an official announcement to all settlements above Class GSS 4, Proctor Stations and ships in space. Until further notice the sector bounded by laterals 76.5, 9.0, 3-76 and 2-23 is declared restricted territory. For security reasons, this area is closed and any unauthorised person entering it will be liable to execution under Federal law."

The shield was replaced by a coloured three-dimensional picture. David recognised the face of Hemskir. The image revolved slowly, turning from full face to profile and back again.

"The proctor Hemskir, lately head of 5 Division, Proctor Corps, is required for questioning for offences against Federal law." There was a full physical description. Then the voice resumed. "This man is also in possession of certain restricted material stolen from the Proctor Corps. In the event of his capture, his belongings must at all costs be kept intact and undisturbed. Rewards are offered for information and for the delivery of this man to Proctor Headquarters, Earth, or any regional station." Then there was the shield again.

David felt the helmet lifted from his head. He blinked in the light of the lamp, trying to readjust his vision to the drab brown and black of the dingy room. His mouth was dry and he realised he had been breathing through it the whole time.

"So you see," Hemskir said. "I am very much in demand. They don't offer rewards every day."

"Who was the man speaking?" David asked. "And what's a proctor?"

The earthman smiled thinly. "I've come a long way from

home," he said. "Haven't you ever seen proctors out here? Men like me, with the same sort of uniform."

"No."

"You're lucky. We have our place, but you're better off without us."

"What do you do?"

"Do you have any sort of police force here?" he asked. "Who gives the orders? Is there a king, a governor or what?"

"There's a council," David said, "but I've never seen any of the members. Once a year somebody comes around to collect taxes but the rest of the time people make their own laws."

"Isn't there anybody to settle disputes, to keep order?"

"Only the Examiners."

"What do they do?"

"Interrogate heretics, arrange burnings. . . ."

Hemskir closed his eyes.

"That's not quite what I meant."

At that moment his voice became suddenly thinner and he swayed dizzily. Without looking down he felt in his pouch and pulled out a fat capsule with a needle at one end. Then he drove the needle into the shoulder of his injured arm. The liquid drained away in a few seconds and he pulled the ampoule out again. The drug took effect immediately, and he became more animated, though there was a feverishness about his energy.

"How much history do you know?" he asked. "Galactic History. Ever heard of the Reconstruction?"

David probed around in the jumble of facts he had picked up from the old books.

"The Rebirth?" he asked, snatching at a phrase from among the pile.

Hemskir raised his eyebrows.

"No, not *that* reconstruction. How old are your books down here? I mean the Reconstruction of 2400. Ever heard of it?"

"No."

"Well, around that time there was a major reorganisation of government and to support its administration the new

party introduced an independent force of soldiers cum policemen to keep order where normal forces didn't work. They were completely outside government control, the first really effective peace-keeping force. They answered to nobody except their own consciences. They were called Proctors. It wasn't a bad idea and it worked well for some time, but the sort of power they had made them terribly dangerous. After a few decades the proctors became autocratic and corrupt. At the moment they run most of the universe, and anybody who doesn't care for it doesn't last long."

"You're a proctor," David observed.

"Was, boy, was. I decided that there was more to life than scaring pirates off some miserable outpost planet."

"And they're chasing you because you ran away?"

"Not quite. I took something with me."

He reached into his belt, took out a small mesh bag and emptied the contents onto his lap. It was a small carving of a beetle cut from some green white-veined stone. Looking closely, David saw that the veins were not streaks of white but veils of opacity coinciding with the insect's internal organs and membranes. He admired the way the carver had manipulated the stone so as to take advantage of the white streaks, but it did not surprise him. With their science the people of earth could do anything.

"Is it valuable?"

"Very," Hemskir said.

"It doesn't look it," David said, dubiously examining the tiny piece.

Hemskir weighed it in his palm.

"If men's lives count for anything, it's priceless. Dozens of them have died for this little piece of stone."

He held it for a moment, then slipped it back into his belt.

"Died for that?" David said. "Why?"

✎ Hemskir shook his head.

"The less you know about it, the better."

He paused.

"You've never seen any more stone like that, have you?"

"On Merryland? No. Should I have seen it?"

"If you do, be very careful who you tell. There's some of it here in this sector, perhaps on Merryland. That's what the proctors are looking for. I found out that it was in this area, but they found out about me too. That's what I'm wanted for."

He looked down at his injured arm.

"They nearly killed me once. They won't miss next time."

"Can't you escape?"

"Not by transmitter. I'm like a rabbit when the ferret is down. As long as I sit still, they can't get me. But if I run, they'll catch me as I try to escape. And all the time the ferret is getting closer."

He looked around at the narrow room with its peeling walls. Then he stood up abruptly and went to the transmitter. His fingers played a delicate tattoo on the spectrum panel that edged the upper part of the block.

"How does it work?"

"Monopolar mechanics. You wouldn't understand."

"Tell me."

"No! Shut up and listen."

David stopped breathing and watched Hemskir's fingers flickering across the coloured squares. There was a sudden throb in the still air of the room. It was repeated. After he made a slight adjustment to the controls it came again, then settled to a penetrating hum. Inside the block David saw the beginning of a light. There were shadows, and red lightning flickered among them. Then the glow began to solidify.

"Don't worry," Hemskir said. "It isn't transmitting. I've only got the vision wave on. We can watch them but they can't see us."

David noticed the word "us" but did not comment on it. It seemed right, somehow. He felt like a fellow conspirator, and welcomed the involvement that it gave him in the affairs of the outside world.

In the block pictures and shapes flickered, succeeding each other too fast for the eye to focus on them. There were buildings and cities so huge that David could hardly believe they existed, faces and bodies subtly different from those he knew. Often there were proctors, dark and silent,

who seemed to watch everything. After a minute of this, Hemskir touched the panel again and the glow faded.

"Still jammed. They're over-riding the safety circuits on this wavelength. Sooner or later they'll check this machine."

He turned to David.

"Where did you say the nearest machine might be?"

"In New Harbour, probably. But wouldn't it be jammed too?"

"Not necessarily. They know I transmitted on this wavelength and they're watching it. A larger machine might have a number of channels and I could slip out on another frequency."

The man's words meant little to David, but he sensed the urgency in his voice. The drugs Hemskir had taken were in control of him now and he seemed only half alive.

"Why not hide in the next town, or in the fields? I can probably get you out of the house safely."

"With all this equipment? And my arm? Besides, I don't speak the language very well or know any of the customs. I wouldn't last more than a few hours. No, I'll have to find another machine. This New Harbour place sounds like the best chance I have. How can I get there?"

"I don't know. You can't ride a horse, I suppose?"

Hemskir didn't answer, but David knew that, even had he been able to ride, his arm would have prevented him from going far.

"It's three or four days' ride," David said. "And you couldn't get there alone, especially not on foot."

"Isn't there any traffic between this place and the town? Don't people ever come up here to trade or something?"

Aside from the family, there were few people in the area whom David knew well, and none that he could trust. He needed somebody beyond the law, who moved around a lot and might know something about the shady side of Merryland.

A Christian.

And Samantha had mentioned some Christians from New Harbour coming to the rites that evening.

"I might know somebody," David said. "But I don't know."

He explained about Samantha and the Christians.

Hemskir was doubtful.

"Isn't there anybody else?"

"No."

"Well, try them," he said eventually. "I can't be critical."

He went to the door at the end of the chamber and pushed it open. There was no light on the landing. It was quiet and very still at the top of the house, and as he walked out on to the landing David could feel the night pressing down on the roof above him like a huge black hand applying to everything beneath it, even his mind, a steady and deadening pressure. Perhaps he had a premonition of what was to happen. At the time, he knew only that the night had become suddenly more sinister.

"I'm relying on you," Hemskir said. "And my threat still holds."

"I'll be back as soon as I can," David said.

The door closed behind him. He looked around the landing. Aside from the shattered remains of the lamp he had dropped earlier, there was no sign that anything unusual had happened there. He pushed the broken glass over against the wall, then began his long descent to the inhabited areas of the huge house. As he walked along the dark and dusty corridors, he was alert for the slightest noise, but there was no sound. Nobody accosted him, nor was he noticed as he crept along, except by the icons whose sad eyes followed him along the shadowed halls.

The front door was locked. Carefully he lifted the heavy iron latch and dragged one of the doors open. The night air rushed in on him, soft and warm but touched with the cold of stars. The moon was down, but it was early. Silently he pulled the door closed behind him and hurried down the hill towards the grove of willows by the lake.

f i v e

IT TOOK DAVID fifteen minutes to reach the lake. The way lay across fields roughly divided by hedge and copse, but

he had been this way before and knew the path. Occasionally he passed a sleeping cow, a hunched black shape on the grass, but he disturbed none of them and passed on silently. At the edge of the grove the trees were scarce but as he approached the lake, they closed in around him. He paused, listening. Somewhat ahead of him there were voices, though the trees and the mist from the lake muffled them. He moved towards the sounds, feeling his way cautiously from tree to tree. The ground began to shelve steeply and he could smell the mist, clean and cold in his nostrils. The lake was very near.

On the very edge of the water, so close that he could hear the sucking of the lake among the roots and cavities of the shore, he stumbled on a path. It straggled off into the darkness, skirting the waterline, dodging around trees where they blocked the way. Many feet had worn this path over a number of months. Under his shoes David could feel where roots had been smoothed into the ground by regular pressure from heavy traffic. The sound of voices and laughter seemed guided along this one passageway, and he heard it clearly for the first time. There were beams of light too, lancing through the thin mist. Guided by them he moved forward.

Suddenly a dark shape separated itself from the forest and stepped in front of him. He started back.

"Password," the man said.

What had it been? David groped for the words Samantha had given him.

"*Domus Vobiscum*," he said.

"*Dominus*," the man corrected. "But near enough. *Et cum spiritu tuo*."

He stepped aside and David walked forward into the light.

The clearing was about thirty feet long and twenty feet wide, hemmed in on one side by an impenetrable thicket of willows and on the other by the dark waters of the lake. It was an ideal hideaway. Nobody could approach it from either side, and the only path—that along which he had come—was well-guarded. Its location was too convenient to be an accident. In forests like this, the trees usually crowded

close to the water. Then, glancing at the ground, David saw the pattern of brickwork under the thin covering of earth. And on the other side of the clearing, just beyond the circle of firelight, he could see the shape of a building. A boathouse perhaps. Apparently there had been some sort of plaza here once, or the brickwork might even be part of some other construction. They would never know. The secrets of the clearing had evaporated with the others during the war.

About twenty people were crowded into the clearing, arranged in gossiping groups around the huge fire. David knew some of them. Most of the influential families in the district seemed to be represented, usually by their least reputable member. Two of Stoker's sons were there; his eldest, George, a thin ratty little man to whom David had taken an instant dislike as soon as he met him, and Martin, a sixteen-year-old who followed George everywhere and seemed to imitate his every action. The Nilson girl was there too—Joyce, blonde and stupid, but not unattractive. For a while she had figured prominently in David's fantasies before Samantha's more blunt sensuality had attracted him.

Where was Samantha? He looked across the clearing towards the boathouse. The air above the fire wavered and shimmered in the heat but he could dimly see three figures in the shadows, apparently conversing. One of them was Samantha. He made his way around the clearing, ignoring the curious glances of the others. Some of them seemed to recognise him, but only George Stoker made any comment. As David stepped over his feet, he reached up with his leg and casually hooked David's ankle. He stumbled and nearly fell.

"What are you doing here, boy?" Stoker asked.

The 'boy' stung. David was only a year younger than he.

"Minding my own business," David said stiffly. He was in an awkward position. If he got into an argument with the Stokers, his whole future in his uncle's house could be jeopardised. *Go carefully*, he told himself.

"What business of yours brings you down here, among your betters?"

David ignored the remark and quickly stepped past the two men lying on the ground. Martin Stoker reached up to grab him but he evaded his hand. George laughed derisively.

"Let the rabbit go."

David very nearly turned again, but he held himself in check. He was here on an important mission. If he got involved in a fight, it might never be discharged. And the man from Earth was depending on him.

As he got near the building, he saw that his guess about a boat shed had been correct. There was a pair of double doors opening onto the lake and a crude slip ran two rails down into the dark water. The building was run down but the walls were made of heavy timber and seemed sound enough. Through the door he could see two figures moving about in dim lamplight. In front of the building Samantha was talking to a tall man. He wore a cloak that covered most of his body and there was a hood over his head that made his face invisible. As David came close to the pair they stopped talking. The man looked away in irritation, and Samantha glanced up. When she saw David, she quickly left the man and came over to him.

"I thought you weren't coming," she said. Her voice had the same tantalising timbre that had attracted him earlier in the evening. The conviction strengthened that she was his for the taking.

"I changed my mind." He looked at the tall man who was now standing by the door of the boat shed speaking to the men inside.

"Is he the one from New Harbour?"

Samantha glanced over her shoulder, a little surprised.

"Yes. Why?"

"I want to speak to him."

"What for?" She was puzzled.

"I just want to ask him something," David replied evasively.

"But what? I don't see . . ."

"It doesn't matter," he said, irritated. Brushing past her

he walked up to the man standing by the door. His back was turned to him and he was talking quietly with another man inside the shed. They stopped as David came up to them, and the one inside moved away. The other turned slowly.

"Could I speak to you, please?"

He didn't answer. David tried to see his face but the light shining from behind him, though dim, kept his hood filled with darkness. He could see only the glint of a pair of spectacles that reflected the flickering firelight. They were made of the poor Merryland glass, badly ground and uneven in texture, so that the reflection from them was twisted and confusing. After a long pause, the man answered.

"What about?"

His voice was very deep, and had an odd accent. Its full tone made David feel his voice was thin and childish. Some of his confidence ebbed away.

"It's a private matter," he said, looking around. "Could we . . ."

David could feel the man's eyes studying him. Then he gestured towards the water.

"Over here."

They went to the water's edge, their feet sucking wetly in the waterlogged ground. The lake was very still, the only movements on it long shadows thrown by the firelight.

"Are you from New Harbour?" David asked.

"Yes."

"You know the town well?"

"Well enough."

Now that he was faced with the necessity of broaching the forbidden subject, David was afraid and confused. How should he approach it? He decided on a frontal attack, mainly because he could think of no other way.

"Do you know of any machines in the town?"

"Machines?" There might have been a note of caution in his voice. David could not tell, although he sensed a new tenseness in the air. He took a deep breath.

"Matter transmitters," he said quickly.

The moment the words were said, David realised that he

had used a stupid method to get the information he needed. Where subtlety had been called for, he had been obvious. He had replaced intrigue with childish deception that would fool nobody, least of all the cold tall man he had approached. He saw with horrible clarity the whole range of possibilities that his stupid question had opened up. What if he asked him why he wanted the information, or even how he knew about matter transmitters? What could he answer? He waited in near-terror for the reply.

"You're not very good at this, are you?"

David said nothing. He was too surprised.

"Where do you want to go in a matter transmitter?"

The question took him unawares.

"I don't want . . ." he said, then stopped.

"So it's not for you? Then for whom?"

David's only impulse was to run, but something kept him there.

"Not for a friend of yours, I suppose?" the man asked slowly. "A . . . travelling gentleman?"

He knew! David felt himself trembling. It was impossible—yet somehow this man must have discovered that Hemskir was in the Padgett farm. But how?

"Don't worry," he said. "We've known for some time."

Another figure came out of the darkness. It was one of his assistants. He said something quietly to the tall man.

"We can't talk any more now," the man said. "I'll have to begin the ceremony. See me afterwards."

He turned and went into the boathouse. At the door, he turned and looked back.

"If you should want me for anything," he said, "my name is Penn."

David stood for a moment looking out over the lake, trying vainly to make sense of the conversation he had just heard. How could Penn know about Hemskir? And if he knew, why hadn't he reported it?

"David?"

Samantha was standing just behind him, silhouetted against the red glare of the fire. At that moment somebody poked the blaze and it flared up, etching the outline of her body into his eyes. Every tiny detail seemed inked onto

his brain, even to the last strands of hair blown awry by the soft night wind. His mission accomplished—surprisingly, confusingly, but accomplished all the same—David felt freed of a crushing burden. The fear he had felt earlier that night when Samantha had spoken to him outside the chapel was gone. His mind was occupied with one thought. Taking her hand—warm and dry, not moist like his own—he led her towards the group around the fire.

Its fuel almost totally consumed, the fire had sunk to a pile of red coals, white hot at the centre and flickering with blue flames above. It bathed those who sat around it in a languorous heat so that they seemed to float in another element, neither air nor fire nor water but a combination of all three. Under his clothing, David began to sweat. He loosened the string at his throat and opened his jacket. The air that touched his chest was still hot but it seemed more bearable. He looked at Samantha. With her right hand—David still held her left firmly with his own—she unfastened the top lacing on her high-throated dress. Her eyes never left his as she loosened the next and the next. Her fingers hovered over the fourth, but then she stopped. Inside her gown, now open almost to her waist, David saw the warm swelling of her breasts and sensed the quick dark pulse of blood through her skin.

As the fire's heat had increased its light had ebbed until only the circle around the coals was brightly lit. Those sprawled around the fire were in near-darkness, illuminated only when a chance coal flared up to show their flushed faces. The trees crowded in around them like a wall so that the clearing was as secret as a huge room. Finding a vacant place in the circle, David and Samantha joined the others on the ground. It was very quiet and warm and dark. Nobody said anything as they waited for the ceremony to begin.

From somewhere in the darkness beyond the fire there was a sudden hard sound, like the impact of a hammer against wood. It was repeated three times.

"Enter," somebody said at the far side of the circle. The word was repeated by each in turn. David felt the sound

coming towards him like a wave. The man next to Samantha, then Samantha—then it was his turn.

"Enter," he said quickly, and it passed on.

The word was passed back to the man who had first uttered it and there was an expectant silence. A moment later a tall robed figure walked slowly into the firelight. Although his face was still in shadow, David recognised Penn. One arm was by his side. The other held an ornate candelabra with thin red candles. David counted seven tiny white flames as Penn walked slowly around the fire. In the warm rising air the flames were perfectly still, like eyes in the darkness. Behind Penn walked another of the robed men, swinging a censer. Smoke rose from it in wreathing clouds, and David felt the sting of incense on his nostrils. Not the bitter stuff of his uncle's chapel but a hot spicy fragrance like nothing he had ever smelt before. He sniffed it once, then again eagerly, feeling it flow into him like liquid fire.

Penn circled the fire once, then stopped on the opposite side to David, facing the bed of coals. The candelabra was held high so that he could see the flames of the candles outlined against the darkness of the trees. But they were no longer hard shapes. He saw them blurrily, starred with four points as if glimpsed through tears. He felt his limbs becoming light and weak. Then the prayers began. They were long and, to David, meaningless, but he felt himself lulled by the round rolling cadences of this unknown language. Half asleep, he listened, letting the heat cover him like a blanket.

"Incensum istud a te benedictum, ascendat ad te, Domine, et descendat super nos misericordia tua. Dirigatur, Domine, oratio mea, sicut incensum. . . ."

One of the candle flames went out suddenly. David blinked, and looked again. It was gone, snuffed into darkness.

"Elevatio manum mearum sacrificarium vespertinum. Pone, Domine, custodiam ori meo. . . ."

David had a sense of some impending arrival, of the nearness of another presence, huge and awesome. Another flame went out. The people in the circle were stirring as

the prayer rolled over them, rich and dark like music in the night. At the end of the prayer, their "Amen" was almost a frantic cry for help, an affirmation of their own humanity in the face of the higher power about to envelop them.

Another flame went out, then another. It was coming closer.

"Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus. Dominus Deus Sabaoth."

The fifth flame winked into darkness. David found himself taking up the chant.

"Sanotus, Sanctus, Sanctus. . . ."

The sixth flame disappeared. There was only one left, a single ambassador of light in a world filling with darkness.

"Sanctus, Sanctus. . . ."

Around the circle hands reached out for other hands, bodies for bodies. David felt Samantha tremble. The last flame went out—and suddenly, It was here, around them, filling the darkness with a new and terrifying music. The last voices faded, leaving only echoes. David lay against Samantha, but he floated in an element he did not know, a warm dark nothingness that pillowed him. His circle of consciousness had contracted until he could see and sense only those things nearest to him. Somewhere inside his mind he knew it was time. But time for what?

To see Penn! Of course. About Hemskir. That was why he had come here. The thought stung him into half-wakefulness. He struggled to rise. Around the fire, in the shadows, he could see the slow movement of bodies. Across the coals there were upright figures, but his eyes would not focus. Penn must be there, waiting for him.

Samantha moved, and David looked down.

Her eyes were half-closed, her hair crushed about her head and face. The last shreds of firelight danced off her nails as she guided his hand to the lacings on her dress. He felt the willing cords give under his touch, begin to slide and loosen. Then the heat and the darkness closed in on him and he gave himself up to the night and the girl beside him.

IT WAS COLD. David turned over sleepily and reached out for the blankets. He scrabbled about for a few seconds before he realised that the hard lumpy surface beneath him was not a bed, and that he was lying naked on the ground in the clearing beside the lake. His head ached, his neck was stiff and his joints cramped, while his mouth tasted indescribably foul. As he moved his dry tongue about his mouth, memories of the night returned; memories especially of the incense they had burned and which he had sniffed so eagerly. Apparently there had been more in that censer than aromatics.

Warily he opened his eyes and looked around. Samantha was lying beside him. Sometime during the night she had come awake long enough to gather up the clothes lying about them and make a blanket for herself. He studied her for a moment, wondering at the calm, almost angelic expression on her face. She slept on her side, her arms curled before her breast and the fingers of one hand with their long transparent nails touching her face. Innocence in a crumpled dress. David looked down at his chest where those same nails had left red marks as they raked him like spurs. Then he shivered and extracted his clothes from the pile under which she slept.

The fire was dead now, a blanket of white ash from which jutted heels of charred wood, but few of the others there seemed to care about the lack of heat. Once a tightly-integrated circle, the people had scattered and spread out all over the clearing so that it looked like a battleground left to the dead. Here and there a group of two or three had held together and its members lay where they had fallen, like groups of obscene statuary. Only the slow, heavy breathing and an occasional snore betrayed the fact that they still lived. Leaning against a tree trunk, David pulled on his boots and stood up shakily. He looked drowsily at the sleeping worshippers. How vulnerable they were, how soft and white, like creatures with their shells off. And how ridiculous. He was glad of his clothes now, not only

for their warmth but for the reassurance they gave him that he was a human being, not an animal.

Thinking back to the night, he sorted through those few memories that remained of it. His fantasies now seemed childishly unsophisticated, nursery pictures of sex that he was glad to be able to put behind him. The things they had done, the acts that Samantha had with such abandon demonstrated to him might have embarrassed even him had it not been for the fact that everybody else around had been engaged in the same acts, and sometimes others even more astonishing. But not many. Samantha was an expert. He looked down at the girl curled up among the clothing. With all the desire leached out of him, with all his sexual needs completely satisfied, he was surprised to find left a residue of something else. Real affection perhaps. It was an odd emotion and one which he could not accurately label, yet he found it satisfying. This much he had gained from the night, outside of mere pleasure.

Hemskir! He felt a sudden thrill of horror. He had forgotten about the earthman entirely. Last night Penn had said to see him when the ceremony was over, but he had put it right out of his mind in the first few moments with Samantha. Now the memory of why he had come here in the first place returned to him. He looked around for Penn or one of his assistants but there was no sign of the Christians. Picking his way through the sleeping worshippers he went to the boat shed and looked inside. The three men were sitting around a large wooden box, eating. There was a joint of cold meat wrapped in a white cloth from which each carved slices with his knife. David saw a loaf of bread, fruit and a flask of what he took to be wine. The sight of food made him realise how hungry he was. Tentatively he put one foot over the threshold.

One of the men saw him, glanced at Penn and gestured with his knife. David did not recognise the face when the man turned around. Last night he had seen only shadows, but he knew by the crude rimless eyeglasses that this must be Penn. Without the hood he looked approachable enough, even cheerful in a distant way.

"Sit down," he said, indicating a pile of debris in the corner.

David found a box and sat down with the three men. He looked at the food.

"We're just having breakfast. Hungry?"

David nodded.

The man cut two generous slices from the joint and a piece of bread from the loaf. He gave them to David and put the flask down in front of him. David was more thirsty than he was hungry. He took a gulp from the flask, and was surprised to find it contained water. His reaction made one of the other men laugh. He was short and fat, and his smile revealed a set of blackened and crooked teeth.

"What did you expect?" he asked.

"Wine, I suppose," David said.

"Wine!" Penn put on an expression of mock horror. "But we're ministers of religion."

The remark seemed uproariously funny to the others and they laughed. David sipped the water and took a bite from the bread and meat. He could not see the humour of it, nor what there was in the situation to laugh about. Last night Penn had seemed to agree that the problem of Hemskir was important enough. This morning the idea had gone from his mind. He couldn't understand these men at all. In the places where he had lived, and especially on his uncle's farm, it was not usual to joke about things like religion. Of course Christianity was not strictly a religion. It wasn't hard to see that people came to the rites only as an excuse for licentiousness and nothing more. But there were those who took it seriously. He knew from the things he had read that the whole planet had once been Christian. He wondered where Penn and the other men fitted into the pattern.

"I think we've offended your young friend, Penn," the third man said. He was almost as tall and thin as Penn, but older. His face was a network of tiny lines that reminded David of Hemskir's features. He had the same way of talking too; flat, and with little inflection.

Penn looked at David. "Are you offended?"

"No. Puzzled though."

"Why?" Penn seemed genuinely surprised.

"Well, I came to you last night for help. You agreed that what I had to tell you was important. Yet this morning. . . ."

Penn smiled. "Don't worry about your friend, boy. He's perfectly safe. If he weren't, do you think we'd be sitting here now?"

"But I don't understand. How do you know? All I asked you last night . . ."

"Was whether I knew where there were matter transmitters. Yes. But I knew about your friend long before that. It's part of the reason why I'm here."

He took up his knife and cut another slice of meat from the joint.

"I suppose you think we're just three entertainers hired to put on a show for a crowd of overheated yokels? Or at the best three crackpot religious maniacs?"

David didn't answer.

"Well, of course some Christians are one or the other," Penn went on. "There's still a large underground network of Christian churches and such. It isn't easy to stamp out a church after centuries of existence, you know. But quite a few organisations have found it very useful to use a church as an underground. We won't go too deeply into exactly what organisations or what they're using an underground for, but suffice to say we belong to one of those organisations. It's an ideal cover for us. We can move around the country almost without hindrance."

"Don't you think you're telling him too much?" the fat man interrupted. "Surely, for his own good . . ."

"He's already found out more than enough for his own good," Penn said. He looked at David. "Did this friend of yours tell you anything at all?"

"A few things. About proctors, and some sort of stone . . ."

"Shut up!" the third man said quickly. His face was pale. One hand was outstretched as if to clap it over David's mouth.

"I wouldn't ever mention anything you were told," Penn said quietly. "You can see from Lewis's reaction that it's a

rather bigger secret than you realise. Just keep very quiet. And don't speak to strangers like you did to me last night. Luckily I happened to be the right person to talk to, but you mightn't be so lucky next time."

"He must have been insane to tell him," Lewis said. His face was pale and drawn.

"I don't think he knows much to tell," Penn said. "Rumours, that's all. The ones we have to worry about aren't here yet. This man's arrival on Merryland was an accident, nothing more."

"I hope so," Lewis said.

"Don't worry."

David wondered if he should tell them about the carved amulet Hemskir had. He decided against it. His attempts at intrigue had taught him one basic rule already; volunteer nothing, but ask questions.

"Who are the others?" he asked. "The ones Hemskir is hiding from."

"Hemskir," Penn said. "I thought it might be him. Yes, I should think the ones we have to worry about are the same ones who are hunting him. And they'll catch him too, I have no doubt."

"But you said he was safe," David said.

"I can't make promises for any planet but Merryland. They won't get him here. But once he leaves, I don't like his chances. You don't know what it's like outside. The proctors control everything. Out here, beyond The Limit, they have little authority. It's too far from Earth, and the systems are stagnant for the most part. Of course this makes it a convenient place to hide. But they can't hide for ever, and when they leave, there's only one place to go. Back towards Earth. And then they get caught, invariably."

"Have others come here to hide?"

Lewis almost smiled. Apparently the question was a naïve one.

"It's not unknown," Penn said.

"Hemskir told me that the proctors could tell when a machine was being used. Couldn't they track people to Merryland?"

"The transmitters on Merryland have been rigged to

show an out-of-order signal unless we reactivate them," Penn said. "The machine your friend came through was almost the last one not disconnected. We've been trying to find where it was located, but you seem to be the first Merrylander to ever see the thing. On the proctor charts, most of the transmitters on this world are shown as out of order, so they have assumed the place is reverting to barbarism like most other worlds out here. That's the only thing keeping them off Merryland. If they knew there was civilization here, we'd be finished."

"Well, if the transmitters are still in working order," David said, "couldn't you send Hemskir through the one at New Harbour?"

"Don't worry about your proctor friend," Penn said. "He's already gone."

"Gone?" David said. He couldn't grasp what Penn had said.

"Do you think we'd be sitting around here having breakfast if he was still hiding up there? I assure you that we were just as anxious to get rid of the man as he was to leave. Everything depends on the proctors not discovering what we're doing down here. As it happens, your friend forestalled us."

He walked to one of the piles of boxes and twitched back the canvas cover. Underneath David saw a small machine.

"This is what brought us here. The meter registered an emission of radiation in this area. When you arrived last night we were getting ready to fix exactly what sort of equipment it was and where it was operating from. Then you came up and put the story right into our laps. We planned to go up last night and see what could be done, but the radiation cut off just after you arrived."

"But where could he have gone?" David asked.

"I can't imagine. Back through the transmitter perhaps, or overland to New Harbour or some other town."

David was disappointed and a little insulted. Hemskir had been insistent that his help was essential. He had felt for the first time in his life a necessary and wanted ally. Not

that he had lived up to the trust Hemskir had put in him. He still remembered keenly his failure to do what he had been asked. But to have been sent on a fool's errand was intolerable.

"Are you sure he's gone?" David asked.

Penn sat down heavily and reached for his knife to cut more meat.

"There isn't a registration on the meter any more," he replied. "Obviously he must have disconnected the transmitter and left."

David considered. Something nagged at his mind, some irritating element. It was all too easy.

"But what about the other equipment?" he said. "He couldn't have carried all that equipment—the helmet and . . ."

"Helmet?" Lewis asked quickly. Penn put down his knife.

"What sort of helmet?" he asked.

"You put it on and it shows pictures," David said.

"Did he connect it to the transmitter?" Penn asked. He seemed nervous. The slices of meat he had cut lay discarded on the box they used as a table.

"No."

"Self-sufficient," Lewis said. "That should have registered."

"It should still be registering," Penn said. He went to the machine again and moved the controls. Then he turned back to them.

"Nothing."

Lewis looked at David. "When did you leave him?"

"About eight o'clock."

"And he was all right then?"

"He had a broken arm but that's all," David said. "Do you think anything has happened to him?"

"I don't know," Lewis said. "The proctors surely couldn't know he is on Merryland. The chances of them checking this planet so early in the search are infinitesimal, unless he gave himself away somehow."

"Would it matter if he turned on the machine?" David asked. "While I was there he used it once to check the proctor broadcasts. He said they wouldn't be able to trace it."

Penn and Lewis exchanged a glance.

"How long did he have it on?" Lewis asked.

"A minute, maybe two."

"More than long enough," Penn said slowly.

"What do you mean?" David asked.

"In that time, the proctors could easily have fixed his location. He must have been mad to try it."

"But he said they wouldn't hear it," David said desperately.

"They'd hear it. He had no idea what the Earth proctors were capable of. They've been working on the monopolar machines for years. He was only guessing."

David couldn't understand for a moment. His mind seemed to be floating in a grey haze through which thoughts appeared only in scraps, to disappear again before he could grasp them. Then the full significance of what they had said came to him. While the three men talked excitedly among themselves he got up and left the boathouse. They didn't notice him leave.

It was full day outside. The sun was well up and the clearing crowded with people. Most of them were wandering about sleepily, putting on their clothes, eating a cold breakfast from the packs they had brought with them. David blundered among them, shouldering his way through the crowd. Curses were thrown at him and one man grabbed his coat. David turned. It was Martin Stoker.

"That's the second time . . ." Stoker began to say. David hit him very hard in the face and he fell to the ground. There was a shout but he was past them before he could be caught.

Samantha was sitting where he had left her. She was dressed now, but still half asleep. He hurried towards her, because behind her was the path that led out of the grove. She looked up at him sleepily and held out her hand.

He ignored her.

She represented everything he hated about the night before, and especially his betrayal of the earthman's trust. She stared after him astonished as he hurried past her and along the narrow path.

He blundered through the grove and out onto the fields. It was a cool dewy morning and the grass, ankle-high this late in spring, was wet. His shoes and trousers legs were soon soaked and the cloth flapped against his skin as he ran towards the big house. Farn's hands stopped and looked after him, puzzled, as he ran through the meadows, staring ahead, panting with exhaustion.

There was nobody in the home field or the kitchen garden. He ran up the steps, crashed through the front doors and raced along the corridors. Some unknown store of strength kept him going as he ran up the stairs, twisting up the spiral staircase towards the top of the house. On one of the landings he collapsed to the floor and gasped in air for a moment before staggering to his feet again. The upper landing came nearer as his vision began to blur. Then he was on the upper steps, looking again at the little stained-glass window. There was the landing. And there was the door. Open.

All urgency was gone now. He knew with diamond clarity what he would see. Slowly, lurching with fatigue, he staggered forward and, leaning against the edge of the panel, looked into the narrow room.

It was very much as he remembered it, though the stream of bright daylight through the door made it appear more dingy and desolate than it had been by the light of the lamp. The lamp, he noted with small surprise, was still burning, its glow weak and fitful in the sunlight. It illuminated the ruin of the room. Equipment that had merely been strewn about before was now shattered. He saw the helmet crushed and twisted, the blankets ripped to shreds. Panels had been blasted to splinters by blows of unimaginable ferocity. Even the matter transmitter was scarred by heat marks and the glow in its interior was gone. Before it, like a slaughtered sacrifice offered to some pagan god, lay the body of Hemskir.

seven

DAVID WAITED for a long time before entering the room, as if hoping that the shattered body before the transmitter would be drawn back into time and he would no longer have to face the fact that he was responsible for it being there. Finally, when it became clear that there was to be no miracle, no divine intervention, he walked slowly down the long chamber towards the crumpled heap at its end. Confused and dizzy, his mind played back with complete fidelity the last words he had said in this room.

"I'll be back as soon as I can."

But he hadn't come back. Even when he could have returned; earlier in the morning, when he talked with Penn and the others, he didn't come. Though surely it would have been too late then. Penn had said that the radiation traces had disappeared a long time before that. When he awoke, Hemskir had already been dead for hours. Some cog in his memory was jolted into conjunction with another and the whole erotic panorama of the night spilled back into his mind. He saw the events of that period not as actions but as divisions like the second-marks on a clock, and as each went by another instant in the man's life was irretrievably lost.

How brutish it seemed now. Yet that in itself was some sort of comfort. He had been diverted by his nature, not by any intellectual argument. Nobody had persuaded him from his mission. He had given in to Samantha's body, not to her reason. In his mind he remained still as committed to helping the fugitive as he had ever been. Something had merely prevented him from doing what he had promised, a physical thing that was as impossible to fight in its way as a brick wall. If there had been any betrayal, it had been a betrayal of his purpose by his emotions, and of his mission by Samantha. So he was not really to blame. Not really.

Then, looking down at the body, he knew how shallow all his temporising was. Hemskir was dead. Dead. A man that a few hours before had been talking to him, confiding,

trusting him. And he was dead because of his weakness. There was no escaping the fact. He examined the body carefully, forcing himself to absorb every detail. The story of his death was written clearly in the corpse's crushed sprawl. It had been quick. Hemskir's side arm was still holstered, and the blast of heat had fused the butt of it into the metal mesh of his belt. He had probably been standing near the transmitter when it happened. David could imagine the sudden hum of the machine, his eyes turning to it, his reaction to the appearing shape of the proctor in the block, quick but not quick enough. The first blast had hit him squarely in the chest, killing him instantly.

The ungainly sprawl of the body irritated David and he gently eased it over on its back, settling the limbs into a more natural position. It was one thing he could do for the man at least. As he did so, one question at least was answered. Among the debris under the body was a charred lump on which a few tufts of blue fur could still be seen. The proctors had missed little in their work—but they had forgotten one item. At Hemskir's belt, David saw the little mesh bag in which he had carried the stone amulet that meant so much to both he and Penn. It was still in the bag. Without really knowing why, David took the bag and put it into his pocket. He did not know yet why the stone was important, but some inner sense warned him to take it. Perhaps Penn could tell him more about it.

Penn—the stone. They were inextricably linked. Penn knew what the significance of the stone was, and perhaps more. Why had it been so important to both men? So important that one of them had died for it. Actual possession of the stone seemed less dangerous than knowledge of its existence. David held the tiny carving in his hand, looking into its depths. *He* knew about the stone. Was his life then in danger too? What would happen to him if the proctors came back? He began to see the situation more clearly now. It could be a very dangerous one for him if the proctors should discover his connection with Hemskir. He backed towards the door. So long as he was not found in the room and nobody else learned of its existence, he

was safe. The problem of the body would have to be solved later. For the moment, it would be enough to lock the room. Then he could go somewhere and think. At the door he paused for a moment, his hand on the panel.

And heard footsteps on the stairs, coming up towards him.

For a moment he nearly panicked. Then the same cold logic he had found in himself earlier began to reappear. He moved to close the door, then stopped. The rusty squeal of the pivot would alert whoever it was. There were no other visible doors anywhere nearby and they would be sure to suspect something. There was only one thing to do. If he moved quickly and quietly enough he could get down to one of the lower landings and intercept the climber before he reached the upper level and saw the open door. It was probably only a servant anyway. As silently as he could David padded across the landing and down the steps. On the lower landing he paused and glanced over, but could see nothing. The footsteps continued. Halfway down the next flight of stairs he began walking slower, casually, as if he had been strolling idly about on the upper levels. He listened. On the next landing he would meet whoever it was. He composed his face and turned the corner.

"Hello," Samantha said.

"What are you doing here?" he asked sharply. Samantha! Of all people!

"I was looking for you." Her tone was harsh, and now that David looked closely he could see she was angry. She was pale and her mouth was drawn into a thin line.

"How did you know I was up here?" The wood of the bannister under his hand felt greasy. Sweat.

Samantha looked down at the ground. There were regular dark patches on the dust-misted treads.

"Your feet are wet."

David looked at his sodden shoes. He knew without turning that his tracks were on the upper stairs also. He had to stop her from turning the corner and going on.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Why did you run away? I don't understand the way

you behaved at all. And what were you talking to those men for? You don't know them, do you?"

"I just wanted to discuss something with them. This Christianity thing interests me."

Her expression showed that he had lied clumsily. Then her eyes strayed over his shoulder.

"What's up there?"

"Nothing," he replied quickly. Too quickly.

"You've been coming up here a lot lately. What for?"

"Just looking around."

"Looking for what?" She took another step and peered upwards. "Are there rooms up there? I thought all this was closed off."

"It is," David said desperately. He reached out to take her arm. "Let's . . ."

She shook off his grasp irritably. "What are you hiding up there?"

"Nothing, I told you."

She glanced at him sharply, her green eyes piercing him again as they always did when she was excited or angry. Then, with a sudden movement, she was past him and running up the stairs.

"No."

He snatched at the retreating hem of her dress, then ran desperately after her, but she was too quick. When he reached the upper landing she was already halfway up the steps leading to the room. As he reached the lower step he heard her gasp of surprise and fear as she looked into the chamber where the body lay. He walked up the last few steps and stood behind her.

"Come away," he said.

She wouldn't move. For a long moment she stared into the room, taking it all in.

"Is he dead?"

David didn't answer. She must have known he was.

"What's that thing?"

"A matter transmitter."

She stiffened. "Did he come through it?"

"Yes. He was from off-world. What they call a proctor."

"And this is what you were talking to Penn about."

"Yes."

She turned suddenly. Her eyes, sharp before, were now as hard as cut stones, not with anger but with fear and panic. She started towards the steps. He grabbed her, and she struggled in his arms.

"Let go," she said wildly. "Let . . . me . . . go."

Her voice echoed in the narrow stairwell, reverberating down the passages and landings. David slapped his hand over her mouth and drew her hard to him so that her white face was only a few inches from his. Fear and anger gripped him in a frozen rage.

"Quiet," he said, his voice a metallic whisper. "If you tell your father, I'll . . ."

He could think of no apt threat to use in reprisal, so said nothing more. His tone must have been convincing for when he took his hand cautiously away she made no sound, though her mouth remained half-open, the unborn scream caught in her throat.

"You mustn't tell them," he said quickly. "You know we could be killed for having a machine like that in the house. You, me, your father, everybody. Do you want the Examiners here?"

He released her and watched cautiously as she turned and stared around the narrow chamber. If she ran, he was ready to grab her again, but she made no other attempt to escape.

"Did you find this place?" she asked.

As quickly as he could David told her about the room and the man he had found in it. All the time he listened for the sound of footsteps on the stairs, but there were none. Apparently he had been lucky and her scream had gone unheard. But the sooner they got away from there, the better. It was entirely too dangerous.

"We'd better go," he said, reaching for the door.

"Why?"

"Do you want to be caught near all this?"

He pushed the door and heard it click satisfactorily shut. They went down the stairs slowly, Samantha in front and David behind her.

"You won't tell anyone, will you?" he said.

"I don't know."

Her voice had none of the kittenish quality he was used to hearing with that phrase. Sudden fear gripped him, and he searched again for some weapon to use as a check against her. The willing partner of last night had been replaced by a threat against his life, a threat that he had to counter.

"If you do," he said suddenly, "I'll tell your father that you've gone Christian."

She stopped and looked around at him. She was furious.

"I think you would too."

"This is important," he said defensively.

She glared at him and walked quickly in front of him down the stairs. He didn't try to keep up with her. Something in her manner had told him that she would not mention this to anybody. She had never withheld any detail of her activities from David, but as long as he had been an outsider his knowledge was not important. Now that he had participated, seen her without her protective shell, she had made herself vulnerable to an attack by him. He knew she must hate herself for having made herself weak in this way, and hate him too for taking advantage of it. Nevertheless it was an adequate safeguard, and David felt justified in using it. Justified, but not happy.

When he got to the foot of the stairs, Samantha had gone. He wasted no time in looking for her, realising that it would be better not to aggravate her further. He paused in the corridor, wondering what to do. The only course with any real hope of success was the one he had followed the previous night ; blind faith in the man named Penn. He alone seemed to know what was going on. He had known about Hemskir and about his death, at least in part. Perhaps he would have some idea of what David should do next. In the middle of this discussion with himself, he stopped, surprised. Why should he do anything? Why not leave the door upstairs closed, trust Samantha to keep her mouth shut and forget the whole thing? But he dismissed the idea at once. This last night had catapulted him into a new world, a red and black landscape of action and violence. It both frightened and exhilarated him, but he

wanted to know more about it. The mud-crusted icons that lined the hall now seemed ridiculous, hopelessly out of date like everything on Merryland. The world was a stopped clock in which its people roamed like lost insects among the dusty cogs and stilled springs. And what if the clock was started again? He let the analogy stop there. Time to think of these things later.

He slipped out of the house and hurried through the fields towards the lake, the sun hot on his face. In the home paddock Garth and his father were supervising the stacking of hay, watching with proprietary interest as the indentured labourers sweated in the heat. They noticed David, and Isaac Padgett gave him a vague nod, but that was all the reaction he got. David was part of the furniture, as commonplace as some barnyard animal and just about as interesting. He hurried past them without looking back. It suited him to be ignored at that moment.

The grove that by night had been still and mysterious was less impressive in the sun. Needle points of birdsong punctured the eerie atmosphere and the sun transformed dark caverns into bright corridors. The wood that had seemed so impenetrable by night now became a screen through which the waters of the lake could be seen glinting in the sun. David was almost cheerful as he moved along the narrow path and into the clearing, now empty. The remains of the fire, he noticed, had been removed, probably thrown into the lake, and the ground around had been carefully cleaned to erase all traces of the night's orgy. Anybody stumbling on the place would have to look carefully to realise anything had happened here. He glanced around for Penn and the others, but the place seemed empty. They were probably in the boathouse. He walked over and looked in. It was empty. The boxes and equipment were gone, and dust covered everything. Panic seized him for the second time that morning. He turned quickly to the clearing.

"Penn?" he called.

There was no answer. They had gone.

He hurried out of the clearing and along the path. Could they have left so soon? And why would they? Penn

knew that David would need his help. He was depending on the man for advice at least. At the edge of the grove he cast around frantically for some sign. He found it quickly enough; the marks of a two-wheeled cart and of horses' hooves. Apparently they had hidden their transport among the trees. The tall dew soaked grass showed plainly where they had driven the cart up from the lake towards the road which skirted the edge of the Padgett farm. David followed the tracks, desperately trying to ignore the signs which told him they had been hurrying away from the place.

At the road he lost the tracks. The red clay surface was baked hard and showed no signs of their passing. He squinted up the road against the sun, hoping for a sign of them, but it was empty. Glancing at the sun, he computed how long they had been gone. An hour perhaps, not much more. A horse and cart carrying three men could not travel very fast. Resolutely he stepped onto the road and set out in pursuit of them.

He walked for two hours, trudging over the hard red road with energy that decreased a little at the sight of each new hill. This was rich green grazing country, but its cool verdancy did nothing to reduce the heat of the sun. His clothes were soon soaked with sweat and his feet painfully sore from their thudding on the road. At the top of one particularly steep rise he paused and, looking back, saw that he had reached the very lip of the valley. He could see the Padgett and Stoker farms miles behind and below him, looking like discarded toys among their patchwork of fields and meadows, Padgett backed against the cliff and Stoker facing it like an adversary. Ahead of him the country fell off steadily with the same green featurelessness of the fields around him. Rich, green, empty country, barren of people, bare but for the trees standing still and dream-like in the sun. The road wandered down into this landscape as deserted as the fields on either side. The vehicle he had been chasing seemed to have been swallowed up in the stillness. He couldn't imagine what Penn and the others had done to get away from there so fast, but at the moment he was too tired to care.

Up ahead of him a few hundred feet he saw a shelter of some kind. It provided a focus for his attention and wearily he closed the last short distance to see what it was. As he approached he recognised a roadside shrine. There was a life-sized, inverted crucifix, a weather-beaten roof above it supported by four rickety poles, and two or three rusty chain whips. The head-down image had that same expression of eerie reasonableness David had seen on every icon and statue. No matter how these ancient articles were perverted, no matter what bizarre or deformed moulds they were forced into, they retained this air of tranquil forgiveness. He stood for a while before the shrine, taking in its grotesqueness as he had that of the sprawled body in the upstairs room. The crucified figure, chipped and scarred by the pilgrims who, passing this way, paused in their journey to flay it with one of the chain whips, seemed to have something in common with the murdered man, though the pattern into which they fitted was one of which David could catch only glimpses.

To his surprise he found himself yawning. He had had little sleep that night and his long journey in the sun had made him tired. It was past noon and too hot to walk all the way back to the farm. The deep ditches along the roadside, dug long ago for cables and pipes but never used, gaped invitingly. He had to have time to think, to work this out. Finding a suitably shady spot, he lay down in the rank grass and tried to sort things out, but inside a few minutes he was asleep. Later he stirred but did not wake as a squad of horsemen went by, pounding down the hill towards the valley floor. He was to owe his life to that drowsiness which kept him in the ditch until they had disappeared.

When he awoke the sun was far in the west and the long slanting shadows betrayed the late hour. The angular arms of the crucifix were etched against the darkening sky like some symbol of doom. David straightened up stiffly and climbed out of the ditch. His joints ached and he felt sick. The euphoria of the noon was replaced by sickness and a raging thirst. Shakily he walked back across the brow of the hill and looked down into the valley.

The dying sun changed entirely the aspect of the land,

replacing the neat checkerboard of fields with an etched pattern of long shadows that cut grotesquely across natural boundaries. Night neutralised the life that day had injected into things, leaving them hard, sharp and angular. Geometry supplanted surface, form and colour ; edge was everything. One thing only marred this country of ruled precision, a trailing road of black shadow that whispered down the valley, spreading across fields and hollows, misting at the edges but hard and dark at its core. It was smoke shadow, the ghost image of a cataract of dark vapour that flowed down the valley on the night wind. At its source was the Padgett farm. David could see it quite clearly. The farmhouse was on fire, clothed from ground to roof in roaring red flames.

(Concluded next month)

EDITORIAL—*continued from page 3.*

for the purpose, is his *An Essay on Man* (Yale Paperbound, \$1.75 or 12s 6d). Clearly written, this stimulating book (which describes Cassirer's theories of man as *animal symbolicum*—a symbolising animal) will, apart from anything else, help the interested reader gain a clearer idea of what a certain school of modern science fiction writers are up to and add, perhaps, to his understanding and appreciation of a story like J. G. Ballard's *You: Coma: Marilyn Monroe* which can be found in this issue.

Michael Moorcock

J. G. BALLARD

He thinks of Max Ernst, Marilyn Monroe and the woman in the apartment; he conceives the "false" space and time of the apartment; he visits the deserted planetarium; he sees Coma, the psychiatrist and the dancer; his impressions of Africa; he meditates on the persistence of the beach, the individual as an aspect of landscape; he witnesses the assumption of the sand-dune; he conceives the "real" space and time of the apartment; he kills the woman when she occludes the interval between the "false" and "real"; he sees Marilyn Monroe, epiphany of this death; he leaves with Coma.



The Robing of the Bride. At noon, when she awoke, Tallis was sitting on the metal chair beside the bed, his shoulders pressed to the wall as if trying to place the greatest possible distance between himself and the sunlight waiting on the balcony like a trap. In the three days since their meeting at the beach planetarium he had done nothing but pace out the dimensions of the apartment, constructing some labyrinth from within. She sat up, aware of the absence of any sounds or movement in the apartment. He had brought with him an immense quiet. Through this glaciated silence the white walls of the apartment fixed arbitrary planes. She began to dress, aware of his eyes staring at her body. Then she realised that she was standing in his way.

Fragmentation. For Tallis, this period in the apartment was a time of increasing fragmentation. A pointless vacation had led him by some kind of negative logic to the small resort on the sand-bar. In his faded cotton suit he had sat for hours at the tables of the closed cafés, but already his memories of the beach had faded. The adjacent apartment block screened the high wall of the dunes. The young woman slept for most of the day and the apartment was silent, the white volumes of the rooms extending themselves around him. Above all, the whiteness of the walls obsessed him.

The "Soft" Death of Marilyn Monroe. Standing in front of him as she dressed, Karen Novotny's body seemed as smooth and annealed as those frozen planes. Yet a displacement of time would drain away the soft interstices, leaving walls like scraped clinkers. He remembered Ernst's 'Robing . . .': Marilyn's pitted skin, breasts of carved pumice, volcanic thighs, a face of ash. The widowed bride of Vesuvius.

Indefinite Divisibility. At the beginning, when they had met in the deserted planetarium among the dunes, he had seized on Karen Novotny's presence. All day he had been wandering among the sand-hills, trying to escape the apartment houses which rose in the distance above the dissolving crests. The opposing slopes, inclined at all angles

to the sun like an immense Hindu yantra, were marked with the muffled ciphers left by his sliding feet. On the concrete terrace outside the planetarium the young woman in the white dress watched him approach with maternal eyes.

Enneper's Surface. Tallis was immediately struck by the unusual planes of her face, intersecting each other like the dunes around her. When she offered him a cigarette he involuntarily held her wrist, feeling the junction between the radial and ulna bones. He followed her across the dunes. The young woman was a geometric equation, the demonstration model of a landscape. Her breasts and buttocks illustrated Enneper's surface of negative constant curve, the differential coefficient of the pseudo-sphere.

False Space and Time of the Apartment. These planes found their rectilinear equivalent in the apartment. The right angles between the walls and ceiling were footholds in a valid system of time, unlike the suffocating dome of the planetarium, expressing its infinity of symmetrical boredom. He watched Karen Novotny walk through the rooms, relating the movements of her thighs and hips to the architectonics of floor and ceiling. This cool-limbed young woman was a modulus, by multiplying her into the space and time of the apartment he would obtain a valid unit of existence.

Suite Mentale. Conversely, Karen Novotny found in Tallis a kinetic expression of her own mood of abstraction, that growing entropy which had begun to occupy her life in the deserted beach resort since the season's end. She had been conscious for some days of an increasing sense of disembodiment, as if her limbs and musculature merely established the residential context of her body. She cooked for Tallis, and washed his suit, her eyes over the ironing board watching his tall limping figure interlocking with the dimensions and angles of the apartment. Later, the sexual act between them was a dual communion between themselves and the continuum of time and space which they occupied.

The Dead Planetarium. Under a bland, equinoctial sky, the morning light lay evenly over the white concrete outside the entrance to the planetarium. Nearby the hollow basins of cracked mud were inversions of the damaged dome of the planetarium, and of the eroded breasts of Marilyn Monroe. Almost hidden by the dunes, the distant apartment blocks showed no signs of activity. Tallis waited in the deserted café terrace beside the entrance, scraping with a burnt-out match at the gull droppings that had fallen through the tattered awning on to the green metal tables. He stood up when the helicopter appeared in the sky.

A Silent Tableau. Soundlessly the Sikorski circled the dunes, its fans driving the fine sand down the slopes. It landed in a shallow basin fifty yards from the planetarium. Tallis went forward. Dr. Nathan stepped from the aircraft, finding his feet uncertainly in the sand. The two men shook hands. After a pause, during which he scrutinised Tallis closely, the psychiatrist began to speak. His mouth worked silently, eyes fixed on Tallis. He stopped and then began again with an effort, lips and jaw moving in exaggerated spasms as if he were trying to extricate some gum-like residue from his teeth. After several intervals, when he had failed to make a single audible sound, he turned and went back to the helicopter. Without any noise it took off into the sky.

Appearance of Coma. She was waiting for him at the café terrace. As he took his seat she remarked: "Do you lip-read? I won't ask what he was saying." Tallis leaned back, hands in the pockets of his freshly pressed suit. "He accepts now that I'm quite sane—at least, as far as that term goes, these days its limits seem to be narrowing. The problem is one of geometry, what these slopes and planes mean." He glanced at Coma's broadcheeked face. More and more she resembled the dead film star. What code would fit both this face and body and Karen Novotny's apartment?

Dune Arabesque. Later, walking across the dunes, he saw the figure of the dancer. Her muscular body, clad in white

tights and sweater that made her almost invisible against the sloping sand, moved like a wraith up and down the crests. She lived in the apartment facing Karen Novotny's, and would come out each day to practise among the dunes. Tallis sat down on the roof of a car buried in the sand. He watched her dance, a random cipher drawing its signature across the time-slopes of this dissolving yantra, a symbol in a transcendental geometry.

Impressions of Africa. A low shoreline; air glazed like amber; derricks and jetties above brown water; the silver geometry of a petrochemical complex, a vorticist assemblage of cylinders and cubes superimposed upon the distant plateau of mountains; a single Horton sphere, enigmatic balloon tethered to the fused sand by its steel cradles; the unique clarity of the African light; fluted tablelands and jigsaw bastions; the limitless neural geometry of the landscape.

The Persistence of the Beach. The white flanks of the dunes reminded him of the endless promenades of Karen Novotny's body—diorama of flesh and hillock; the broad avenues of the thighs, piazzas of pelvis and abdomen, the closed arcades of the womb. This terracing of Karen's body in the landscape of the beach in some way diminished the identity of the young woman asleep in her apartment. He walked among the displaced contours of her pectoral girdle. What time could be read off the slopes and inclines of this inorganic musculature, the drifting planes of its face?

The Assumption of the Sand-dunes. This Venus of the dunes, virgin of the time-slopes, rose above Tallis into the meridian sky. The porous sand, reminiscent of the eroded walls of the apartment, and of the dead film star, with her breasts of carved pumice and thighs of ash, diffused along its crests into the wind.

The Apartment: Real Space and Time. The white rectilinear walls, Tallis realised, were aspects of that virgin of the sand-dunes whose assumption he had witnessed. The apartment was a box-clock, a cubicular extrapolation of the facial planes of the yantra, the cheekbones of Marilyn

Monroe. The annealed walls froze all the rigid grief of the actress. He had come to this apartment in a misguided attempt to prevent her suicide.

Murder. Tallis stood behind the door of the lounge, shielded from the sunlight on the balcony, and considered the white cube of the room. At intervals Karen Novotny moved across it, carrying out a sequence of apparently random acts. Already she was confusing the perspectives of the room, transforming it into a dislocated clock. She noticed Tallis behind the door and walked towards him. Tallis waited for her to leave. Her figure interrupted the junction between the walls in the corner on his right. After a few seconds her presence became an unbearable intrusion into the time-geometry of the room.

Epiphany of this death. Undisturbed, the walls of the apartment contained the serene face of the film star, the assuaged time of the dunes.

Departure. When Coma called at the apartment Tallis rose from his chair by Karen Novotny's body. "Are you ready?" she asked. Tallis began to lower the blinds over the windows. "I'll close these—no-one may come here for a year." Coma paced around the lounge. "I saw the helicopter this morning—it didn't land." Tallis disconnected the telephone behind the white leather desk. "Perhaps Dr. Nathan has given up." Coma sat down beside Karen Novotny's body. She glanced at Tallis, who pointed to the corner. "She was standing in the angle between the walls," he said. Coma lit a cigarette and then stood up. "What do you mean? Over here?"



Peter Tate

THE GLOOM PATTERN

THEY SLEPT on the run, ate between brainstorm, moved everywhere as though autumn was pushing.

Charlie and Nicholas were both at the eavesdropper age, and drawn like opposite poles to an idiosyncrasy or a hint of something that might be a challenge to 14 years' stock of credulity.

They looked to, listened at Gregory Birtle, but there was nothing to copy and nothing to ridicule. Just Birtle, moving his feet, inhaling his air, going his way with an expression of—detachment.

At night, when he emerged from his furnished mausoleum on the edge of town, they took to following him, hungry for a glimpse of some humanity lighting his eye or straightening his backbone.

Charlie kept always a little ahead, Nicholas always lagged a little. They shot like bunnies from cover to cover along the byways. They blew like conspiratorial paper wrappings along the neon thoroughfares, the breeze dropping miraculously when Gregory Birtle turned or stopped or looked like he might have guessed.

This night, they tumbled themselves into a doorway as Gregory Birtle paused to examine the still photographs outside the Roxy Manual Bioscope.

"If he goes in, he's got to laugh," said Charlie. "How's your pocket money?"

"Still there," said Nicholas. Saturday night. He was trying to make it last. At least, until Sunday.

"Two tickets?" queried Charlie. "You'll have it back. In the interests of science. Experiments cost money. Feel big about it."

Nicholas wavered before his friend's flood of rhetoric.

"What do we want him to do," he asked for the first time that hour.

"I keep telling you. . . ." Charlie was first impatient; then tolerant, remembering the pocket money. "We want to see his face move. We want to hear him be amused."

Charlie could feel a grandiose pronouncement coming. He squeezed back against the wall to make room for it.

"I crave that man's happiness more than I crave my own," he said. "Phew!"

"He's gone."

Charlie was up and out of the doorway, running desperately for the cinema.

"If he laughs and we're not there," he shouted, like no paper-bag should shout.

Nicholas loped a little way behind, fumbling for coins among the string and the dust-jammed, rust-jammed pen-knives and the year's bus tickets.

"Our uncle," Charlie panted at the woman in the glass box. "Just went in. Which way?"

"Two halves," added Nicholas, anxious to impress Charlie with his grasp of the urgency.

The slotted top of the woman's desk spat forth two tickets. The woman pointed, tore the tickets in half.

They scaled the stairs.

"She's another. . . ."

Nicholas, still trying to impress.

"Nah," said Charlie. "She's just working. No, gloom people don't sell tickets for entertainments. That's too hot."

"But Mr. Birtle came in here. . . ."

"Tactics. Subtilty."

Nicholas concentrated on the stairs. Charlie charged the door and went through, up into the darkness and the Mel Blanc voices.

Nicholas, spurting to catch the swing of the door, proffered the tickets, entered the darkness.

One man sat alone in the middle of a row in the middle of a block, his face occasionally illumined in the fitful sunshine from the moving technicolour window.

A small figure moved in the row behind him. A seat bounced. A small figure sat down.

Another figure. A second seat bouncing.

"Quiet," said Charlie. "Quiet."

"What's up, Doc?" said Nicholas, Bugs Bunny fashion.

Charlie screwed up his face.

"What's up, Doc?" said Bugs Bunny on the screen.

Nicholas laughed, but Charlie was watching the face in the row in front.

"Not a flicker," he said, in wonderment.

"Quiet," said Nicholas. "Quiet."

"Bum," said Charlie.

"Not a flicker," said Charlie at intervals throughout the evening.

They rustled after Gregory Birtle all the way to his angular house on the edge of town and retreated only when an inspection of the heavy drapes revealed no chink.

The town hall clock chimed as they sped home.

One . . . two . . . three. They paused to listen.

Four . . . five . . . six. A sudden compulsion sent them racing for home as though home on the chime was nowhere near as late as home ten seconds later.

Seven . . . eight . . . nine. They counted in flight, Nicholas getting mixed up with his paces, reaching 30 without realising.

Ten. No, never ten.

"Ten?" asked Charlie.

"Never," comforted Nicholas.

Boy choreography took them up their paths in matching strides, made them reach through the letter-boxes for keys, seize, turn in unison.

"See you," called Charlie.

"Hear you," called Nicholas, who had a premonition.

What if Gregory Birtle never smiles, wondered Nicholas, filing away the events of the day to make room for dreams. What does it mean except he's miserable? And why waste finance and experiments on a miserable man?

Down to 3½d. on a Saturday night, in the cause of science. Crazy. Boy-mad and stupid.

The battle-scarred radio telephone at his bedside buzzed like a glassed-in mosquito.

Charlie.

"They sent me to bed, too," he said. "Bloody vegetable parents. Listen, I had a thought."

Nicholas, receiver in hand, sat up in bed and peered across the width of two gardens to Charlie's window. No skinflash, no Charlie looking the other way.

"Get up," he said. "Look out of the window."

"Why?" asked Charlie. "Why, when we've got the RT?"

"I prefer to see you."

"Nit. Look, I've got a lot of talking to do. I'm lying down to be comfortable."

"A lot of talking?"

"Yes. I KNOW WHY GREGORY BIRTLE NEVER SMILES," Charlie said, in capital letters.

Nicholas settled his pillows behind him.

"All right, why?" he fed Charlie.

Charlie cleared his throat, trying to sound important. He said, "Listen. . . ."

Across town, a house with quaint turrets went blind in one eye, then another, then another, then altogether.

Niktar, Superremedial Agent to the Sad Sometimes, Joy made Animate, Prince of the Inner Smile, propped his great laughing belly in a more comfortable position and surveyed his minions.

"Chuckle some more," he ordered.

They shook to his request.

"More."

They bellowed. They howled.

"More."

They rolled about the terrazzo floors of the Tinkling Palace until the festoon ceilings rippled and sighed in the draught of their laughter.

Niktar flung out a hand. Silence fell as though he had thrown it.

"Remember," he said. "This is how we are now. We are a good place to be. We are the happy land, far, far away."

The happy land spun quietly in its sun-coloured universe, lazy and lovely among its hazy blue planets.

"We are sweetness and light," said Niktar. "You hear? You hear? It is an order."

His creatures beamed obediently.

"And now," said Niktar, "you are to witness the final briefing of our secret weapon."

The strangelings cackled.

"No laughter," snapped Niktar. "Definitely no laughter."

The cackling subsided.

"Our secret weapon, our aid to the import drive . . ."

The festoons fluttered in felicitous currents.

"Enough," screamed Niktar.

"But master," pleaded the Niebelung, "you are so funny. How can we contain ourselves?"

"You must try," said Niktar.

He amended the statement.

"You must do more than try. You must succeed. Otherwise . . ."

He let the sentence hang. The gathering was silent.

"Now. . ."

The girl came forward and he watched her come, marvelling at the work that had gone into her, the carefully-pendulumed swing of her hips, the precise detail of her figure, the mould of her features. Perfect.

"Master?"

Her voice was all marshmallow and moonlight, the lips framing it full and red as bursting poppies. He let her see he was pleased with her.

Behind the curled lashes, the china-blue eyes, the isotope mind felt the warmth and reacted accordingly, pumping blood into the cheeks, manufacturing a blush.

"Perfect." He spoke out loud this time, and then forced himself to become business-like.

"You have been fed your instructions?"

"They are fully digested," said the girl. "I am to. . ."

"Wait." Niktar stopped her with a gesture. "I want you to turn to face my populace. I want you to show them all how well we are prepared."

The girl turned and directed her gaze to the frondescent roof above the bobbing heads. She felt no fraternity with any of the varied life-forms who inhabited the mellow planet, united in the common bond of happy servitude.

She chanted:

"I am to take up residence at the Bay of Emotions and wait until our glorious technicians have located a sadness track. Then I am to descend the track, which will immediately be negatived and reversed.

"That, in fact, will be my first job, to begin cultivating the subject who put that track to ecstasy level.

"Meanwhile, the technicians will maintain the location and wait for the subject to attain sufficient ecstasy to reopen the track and allow progress in the opposite direction.

"Then, I am to bring subject to you."

"For what purpose?" prompted Niktar.

The girl paused. "For no bad purpose," she said.

"For what good purpose?"

"To examine the human reaction to a state where sorrow has been banished and happiness and its attendant joys are the order and the law."

"Precisely."

Niktat embraced his magnificent corporation lovingly. "You are indeed a credit to our body-builders."

The isotope recorded, the blood pumped, the cheeks reddened.

"Thank you," said the girl.

She began to walk away from the throne.

"Remember," called Niktar.

She turned back, the perfect brow furrowed. What else was there?

"You must keep him happy. Otherwise the track will fall apart and we cannot know what may happen to you."

Keep the subject happy. How?

She sorted among the carefully piled instructions she had been fed.

She remembered. On an alien impulse, her face reddened again. It kept reddening everytime she recalled what she might have to do.

Sometimes she wondered whether Niktar's proud creative process might not be without its faults. What was it after all but a mixture of seeds, a chemical preparation? He called it new. She knew he had copied it from his observations at the Bay of Emotions, moving from track to track, building up a knowledge of elsewhere life by its static electricity, its chameleon properties.

In her apartment, waiting until she felt enough like travelling to travel, she reflected on existence in the happy land and was saddened by the constancy, the monotony of fun.

It was a traitor feeling. She concentrated hard on the Bay of Emotions. And she was there.

"Are you prepared?" asked the senior trackman.

"I believe so," she said. "My mood is suitably pliable."

"The track has been fixed in place," said the man. "You merely have to become miserable."

She found it surprisingly easy.

She entered the track and let herself fall heels over head, immodestly. Who could see, anyhow? Revelling, but not too much, in the freedom of movement, spinning, twisting, assuming stop-still positions as she moved, almost laughing with the abandonment of it. Then, when she felt herself slowing because her ebullience hampered progress, making herself sad again, falling stiff and uninteresting. . . .

"It's bound to happen," said Niktar, watching the object that was the girl tacking across the radial screen. "Let's face it, falling without getting hurt is fun."

. . . Falling at attention, falling with hands flat against sides, dull, dull falling. . . .

Contact. Satina, undishevelled, shivered as grass tickled her unaccustomed legs and moved out of the woods towards a house with quaint turrets on the edge of a town.

"Charlie . . . Charlie," said Nicholas, unbelieving, into the radio-telephone. "Charlie, that's nuts. When did you dream up that fairy-story?"

Charlie fumed at the other end of the 20-yard line.

"It's no fairy-story. It's a fact. . . ."

"Come on, Charlie. . . ."

"I'm not kidding you, Nick. Suddenly, it was there. You know theories—you know the way they sneak up on you tasting of toothpaste and toilet paper, grammar-books and goodnight drinks. . . ."

"Sure, sure."

"You know they come in all sorts of unlikely places. Damn it, Nick, didn't you ever have a theory about anything?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Well, don't step on it, Nick."

Nicholas permitted himself a superior smile and was immediately ashamed because his friend could not see, could not argue.

"I'm sorry," he said and meant it. "Is there more?"

"Is there more? Nick, you'd better give your pillows a punch."

The house with quaint turrets did nothing. Absolutely nothing. What can a house do?

Satina had selected simplicity for her approach to her subject.

His name, she had been told, was Gregory Birtle. He was, to acknowledge Earth statistics, 29 years old, of serious visage, and unmarried.

His invalid mother had died a year earlier, leaving him too old to learn how to chase girls and too shy, anyhow, to try. He was tied to the house because he had gathered his scant ration of happiness in its dark, atmospheric rooms and in scenes of joy observed from the arrow-slit windows.

He was weighed down with a permanent sorrow, a bodily concoction of unhappiness.

His track was constant and unwaning. It had been simple for the sensorspecs of the happy land to locate his aura and to knit in the dimensions necessary for a composite picture.

Gregory Birtle, unpractised in mood camouflage and mental intrigue, was a wide-open, straight-forward, right-down-the-middle character who shouted the truth about himself every time he showed the world his face.

It was no miracle that Niktar's trackers had managed such a rapid and easy fix. In the second any person took to pass Gregory Birtle on the street, that person knew it was suddenly October and as suddenly July again.

Birtle attracted Charlie and Nicholas like a scatter of russet leaves, to be built into a mountain shape and flattened by falling boy bodies tougher than diamond.

Most of this, Satina sensed as she stepped on to the cold sidewalk and winced. Cold elements beneath her feet were unfamiliar. Not frightening, but uncomfortable.

Satina's own personality was hyperstyled to catch moods and match them.

She was the first of her kind—the empathy set—very much an unknown quantity except to herself. And in the happy land, where nothing was ever too perfect because being meticulous meant a furrowed brow, she had early learned to say no more about herself than her makers and her masters already knew.

She left stone, mounted boards. They were warmer beneath her feet, better retaining the heat of the sun.

She approached the flaking iron gate which gave on to the path leading up to the Gregory Birtle door.

Then something sharp thrust itself into the ball of her foot. She screamed with the shock of it.

Perched on her right leg, leaning against the gate, she examined the base of her left foot and found a splinter protruding.

Discomfort aside, it was something of a phenomenon. Wood, she knew from her study of basic Earth elements. But wood that came up out of the ground—was it some kind of weapon?

Seeing it there, knowing it should not be there, watching the area turn pink and then red as the blood navigated the broken skin, she felt sick. It—well, it did something she had not been taught to expect, caused an unpleasant sensation in her foot—she could only describe it in such general terms.

When, with her stomach churning, she forced her attention away from her foot, she saw Gregory Birtle was advancing cautiously, slightly stooping, down the path.

"Did you scream?" he asked, though nobody else moved on the teatime street.

"I—cried out," she said.

He paused at the gate without opening it.

"A piece of wood in my foot. . . ."

Still he paused, indecisive. Then his eyes were attracted, by virtue of the slightly raised skirt hem, to the foot she cradled. He unlatched the gate, passed through it and took the foot gently in his hand.

"A splinter," he said. "Nasty. Does it hurt a great deal?"

Hurt—was that the word?

"Yes," she said, playing safe, shuffling the words, "it hurts a great deal."

"I have some bandages and iodine in the house," he said. "I'll . . ."

Again, he faltered.

"No," he said. "You'd better come in. I mean . . . I'd like you to . . . I mean. . . . Please come in."

He held back the gate and waited for her to pass.

Balancing on one leg, Satina tried to hop on to the path, using the wrought iron for support.

But up the path, there was no support. She felt light-headed and close to nausea. She stumbled and had to put down the injured foot to keep from falling. Again she cried out with the . . . the hurt of it.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm not very gallant. But . . ."

He scooped her up in an impulsive, clumsy movement and carried her none too steadily up the path.

He was aware of her closeness, aware that she seemed to mould into his arms and that, as a woman, she was heavier than he thought women weighed, trained on the empty, sadly-verbose husk that had been his mother.

Borne waist-high, Satina crossed the threshold and was instantly aware of the drop in temperature. First contact with the dark interior of the house struck her momentarily blind.

She blinked the carefully curled lashes, trying to get used to the gloom, but her irises were slow expanding, new to the process.

The man was meandering along passages. She could hear his slippers slapping on bare stone and once a beaded curtain brushed her bare arm and face.

He set her down finally on a heavily-brocaded settle and placed a pillow for her back.

She met dust for the first time and it tickled her throat. She coughed.

The chestnut staining of the ancient furniture, the intense wall-covering, the absence of direct sunlight, all combined in an almost physical impact. She felt she had been dropped

into a vacuous shaft and a cover screwed on. She must have moved involuntarily, fighting the feeling.

Gregory Birtle said, "Probably it's not what you're used to."

Smothered as she had been, she had forgotten his presence.

"Forgive me." She smiled to cover the pause. "No, it . . . isn't quite what I am used to."

"I can't seem to make it bright," he said. And then, in mitigation, "Something to do with the architecture. A century ago, they thought gloom was indivisible with respectability. Sunshine was a red light."

She was not following the conversation. He was talking of time she did not know, could not know. Niktar, and she through Niktar, had heard references to Victoriana in his observations. But the word seemed in general badinage, with no specific meaning and every convenient meaning.

She did not want him to get too deep into the subject or she would be expected to answer in context. Besides, her foot. . . .

"It seems. . . ." She searched for a word. "It seems lived-in."

He laughed hollowly as he plundered the drawers for bandages.

"It's been that all right," he said. "The iodine's upstairs. Will you be all right while I fetch it?"

"I will be," she said.

He left her. She could hear him pattering back along the passage, his hurried ascent of the stairs.

Now he had gone, the room seemed to close in unashamedly, snatching at her breath, betraying murderous intentions. Or it could have been fever.

She cried out again.

An avalanche down the stairs. Gregory Birtle clutching a bottle.

"What happened?"

She was very pale. Strands of auburn hair clung to her brow.

"Not thinking, I put my foot down," she said, aware that

the excuse was weak but confident he would accept it because he had no cause to think her deceiving.

He wondered if she could genuinely have been so careless. A young woman who came walking, barefoot, out of the woods—he had watched her progress before she stumbled and screamed, from one of the slit windows. He had heard of the sensual effect of grass among toes. He had read about it in his mother's H. E. Bates collection and in his own concealed D. H. Lawrence.

But usually such woodland nymphs carried their shows. Always sandals, always over the right shoulder. Dangling from fingers by the straps.

Perhaps she had dropped her shoes. He would go to the gate and look when when he had tended her foot.

"It wasn't the room, was it?" he asked, anxious to continue the conversation in logical vein. "It is a bit dreary but there's nothing to fear."

How do you know what I fear? she wondered.

She saw the tweezers in his hand with sudden alarm. He caught her gaze.

"It's all right," he said. "This won't take a second."

"What do they—do?" she asked, forgetting caution.

He paused in the midst of his activity and searched her face for meaning.

Puzzled, he opened his palm to show her the complete instrument.

"Tweezers," he said. "You know—*tweezers*."

"Oh, yes. Of course. Silly of me."

But it was another little point that raised a question. First, the scream, then the shoes, then the tweezers.

"You're not from around here," he ventured, dabbing at the wound with a flannel.

"No."

"From away?"

"Far, far away," she said.

"A happy land?"

She wondered how he knew.

"There is a happy land, far, far away," he sang. "Like the song we learned in school. Remember?"

She looked blank.

"Well, maybe you didn't," he said.

Point four.

"I was wondering about your shoes," he said. "Now this may hurt a little."

He caught the splinter in the tweezers and pulled. Her stomach somersaulted. Her face felt clammy. She moaned.

"There we are," he said, and dropped the piece of wood into the bowl of warm water. "You look a little grey. I'll fix you a drink before I put the iodine on. You should feel better."

He crossed the room to an ornate sideboard, opened a bevelled cupboard, took out a bottle and poured tawny liquid into a glass.

The liquid lighted the way to her stomach and then some. Tiny needles pricked her cheeks.

He saw the colour returning, the grey giving way to peach.

"Are you better?" he asked, when it was clear there had been some improvement.

She smiled wryly. "I'm sorry," she said.

It was like a recurring theme right back to those first words over the gate.

Why are you sorry? he wondered. Why am I sorry? Why do people spend so much time saying sorry and so little time doing things they ought to be sorry for?

He saw she was watching him.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It is really quite simple," she said, with apparent irrelevance.

"What?"

"Humans have this attendant uncertainty. Whatever they do, they wonder about alternatives. So they are always ready to be apologetic, always half-suspecting that they have done the wrong thing."

Had he said what he was thinking?

"Confucius he say . . ." he said, while he tried to remember.

Now the girl was looking puzzled.

"I'm sorry?" She caught her tongue. They laughed, uneasily.

"What did you mean?"

"You seem quite the philosopher," he said. "But—detached."

She shuffled the revelation into sentences and made ready to lay them before him. She had vowed simplicity before the—the splinter.

"I am detached because," she said. She wriggled to make herself comfortable.

Gregory, despite his interest, slotted the movement away as kittenish, and wondered why it bothered him. He had never cared much for cats.

"Because," he prompted.

"I don't expect you to believe this first time round," she said. "Or second time. Or at all, really."

Niktar returned the chief trackman's warm greeting. The currents of the Bay of Emotions ebbed and flowed around them in a water melody that turned all living into a pleasing song.

Niktar took the proffered couch and closed his eyes.

"Tap in," he said. "Just to get my serene observations on record for immortality." The trackman adjusted the self-sensors accordingly.

Seaside, thought Niktar, with his eyes closed. Ebb, flow, ebb, flow. Candy floss, Coney rides, cocoa complexions. Foreign data. Unscramble later.

He repeated the instruction out loud. The trackman hummed approval.

"Ruler," he said. "I sometimes feel that without your unique imagination, there would be no sunshine."

That was, after all, how he had landed this soft job among the psychostats and the thinkpiles.

Niktar was inwardly unimpressed, but he saw no harm in the man's compliments.

"Just a random thought," he said modestly. "It might come in handy sometime. Add it to the pile. Now—your report."

"The track has been successfully up-ended," said the trackman. "At any time now, the girl can return with her. . . . With her what? Her catch? Her mate? Her . . ."

"Let me worry about that," cut in Niktar. "I shall send out a vocabulatum when I have decided. There must be some humour in his designation."

The trackman tried for an innuendo. Laughter at any price, he thought. Niktar must be kept amused. But his mind failed him.

"Through Satina to the stars," he mumbled. He bowed his head.

Niktat made a noise with his nose.

"We just have to wait until the appropriate ecstasy level is reached, then," he said.

The trackman nodded.

"I'm not much of a traveller myself," said Niktar.

The trackman craned forward, poised for the punch-line.

"But that's a route I could get used to. . . ."

The trackman guffawed.

They both guffawed, like sea-lions shouting in the surf.

"Stay there," said Charlie. "I'm going down for a drink of water."

Nicholas stared at the receiver in his hand. Charlie surely didn't expect him to believe all this "happy land" crap.

He found himself muttering, "There is a happy land, far far away. . . . Where all the . . ."

The rest of the kindergarten song evaded him. He tried to improvise, making ridiculous rhymes, finding them getting more and more coloured as time went on and Charlie, presumably, filled the sink and sucked at it.

"There is a crappy land. . . . Where all the. . . . Ten times a day. . . ."

"Okay," said Charlie suddenly in his ear.

"Listen," said Nicholas in his best no-nonsense tone. "I've been trying to work this thing out. I mean. . . . I believe most of what you say to me most of the time. But this is ridiculous. It's a great story, mind, for NEW WORLDS SF or somebody. . . ."

Charlie pressed his lips against the mouth-piece and spat cuss-words into it.

"I hope they wet your ear," he said.

"Impressive," said Nicholas, hurt that his suspicion

should have brought such a violent reaction from his friend.

"Then believe me."

"I'm sorry, Charlie. But keep talking. I never said I wasn't entertained. . . ."

"—you, Nick. It's the truth I'm telling you."

Something about Charlie's volubility, his reluctance to admit he had been fooling, struck a chord that jarred.

"All right," Nicholas said. "I'm with you, Charlie. But you've got to admit it's a bit way-out."

Charlie crowed with satisfaction.

"Now listen to the rest of it," he said.

"I don't want to go back," said Satina, thoughtful in one corner of the settee.

Birtle watched her. The whole concept was a little beyond him. He wanted to know before he tried to be constructive.

But Satina had become silent. She gazed into the middle distance, the purple eyes clouded with carefully-sustained worry.

"If you should move," said Birtle.

Satina looked up.

"If you should be somewhere else, could they track you down?"

Satina pondered.

"Not right now," she said finally. "They are too busy waiting for me to be happy. They could follow me, certainly, visually, but they couldn't get a track to me. Not yet awhile. Not while I don't know how I feel."

Birtle waited patiently for her to explain. If he could make no practical suggestion, he could at least let her proceed at her own pace.

With his eyes on her, she reddened.

"I want to stay," she said simply. "With you."

"With me?" Birtle couldn't accept the fact. There had been too much misery for the joy the pronouncement really meant to him to come instantly. The pause saved him.

Satina, who could read his every thought, uncurled from the settee, hopped to his side, rested a hand on his arm.

"Remember," she said. "It is too dangerous for us to be happy here."

"But how can I help it?"

"By keeping in mind that as soon as you get too happy, you're transported."

"And what about you?"

"The prospect of returning to the happy land makes me very unhappy. So I can't go, unless I find happiness with you."

"It's too much. I can't believe . . ."

"Don't try. Just try to stave off joy until we get away from this place. And be natural. Keep to your routine. Otherwise, suspicion."

"Perhaps, then," he started to say. . . . "Perhaps in the Mediterranean, or the Paraguayan pampas, or the Asiatic steppes, I could—kiss you?"

He hovered. "There's something I ought to do, then," he said eventually, discarding his slippers.

* * *

The importunity bulb on Niktar's vanilla control panel glowed like a strawberry. He slapped at a switch.

"Proceed."

"Emotions," said a strangled voice.

"Emote," ordered Niktar and chuckled to himself. He had little faith in his minions' interpretation of an emergency.

"I hardly know how to tell you. . . ."

"Use words," said Niktar, short on patience. "Wiggle your tongue."

He settled back in his swivel chair and propelled himself first this way then that way.

"Our earth contact seems to be behaving oddly."

"In what way oddly?"

"Her motivation-charts seem to be going haywire. She is neither one thing nor the other, neither sad nor happy. When she impacted, we recorded a flicker of—relief."

"Safe landing," said Niktar. "Successful transportation. It's natural."

These benighted technicians. They lived their lives by machine. There was no room for creature consideration. Any inconsistencies, go panic with panic. Buzz the Ruler...

"And another thing," he said. The trackman, on the verge of speaking, was silent. "That phrase 'earth contact'—I don't like it. It is ambiguous. One could more accurately call friend Birtle the earth contact. Satina is our . . . courier."

"Noted," said the trackman. "There was something else."

He paused dramatically. Niktar spun his chair once to the left, once to the right.

"There is an animosity build-up."

Niktat wished himself at the Bay of Emotions and was immediately there.

"Show me," he commanded the trackman.

The man led him to the manner-scanner and fed him the chart a fold at a time.

Niktat traced the erratic course of the marker. At intervals, it veered alarmingly close to the edge of the roll.

He pointed the meanderings out to the trackman.

"What are they?"

"An urge to get away from us altogether, I should imagine," translated the trackman. "I don't know for sure because we have never had anything like it."

"Why not?" Niktar demanded unreasonably.

"Should we have?" asked the trackman.

"Surely. . . ."

"Up to now," said the trackman, "with the greatest respect, Ruler, we have worked only on minds ignorant of the process. They did not know it was happening and were therefore not hostile to it."

"We did not suspect our own people would react any differently. We are, after all, of one accord, are we not?"

"We are not." Niktar flung the man to one side and looked for a seat. "Obviously we are not or I wouldn't be here doing your job for you and you wouldn't be whining. The thing is—what can we do? How do we get her back?"

The trackman looked uneasy.

"Her continued stay on earth is governed by several considerations," he began.

"Wait." Niktar did not enjoy having anyone answer his questions for him. The answer should be common sense. It should therefore be accessible to him.

The man made to continue when he saw Niktar was not speaking.

"Be still," snapped Niktar. "Find me a seat."

The trackman pushed a stool towards Niktar and the Ruler collapsed gratefully on to its meagre surface, his bulk overlapping on every side. He shrugged into the least uncomfortable position. He settled into thought.

"If she gets happy, she comes straight back here," he said. "Right?"

The trackman nodded. "We have reversed the track as you know," he said. "Everything is ready for her return. . . ."

Niktat was again deep in thought. The considerations were all creature here. Why was she hostile? Or was she? Could it not be that she had reached an extreme in sorrow and that this, related to the manner-scanner, in conjunction with the existing happy track, had somehow created a freak circumstance?

The theory seemed reasonable.

Then again, why should she be sad? Because she found it impossible to satisfy her subject? Because, that being so, she was now stranded on Earth with no hope of returning while the track was tuned to ecstasy level?

That, too, seemed feasible.

In any event, she was not happy. The apparatus showed that clearly and definitely.

If the track were reversed again, the way would be open for her. It could do no harm. If there were no reaction in an hour—a fair time for a compass of emotions—the track would be ecstasised again.

If she still evaded the trackers, they would operate the free selections element and could suck up anybody who might be of the right mind.

"Up-end the track," he said, decisively.

"But. . . ."

"Do it," said Niktar. "That is the Ruler's decision. If that shows no reaction in an hour, reverse it again. Still

no reaction, bring into play the selectomag. Snatch up any happy person."

He wished himself back to his apartment, well satisfied.

"Then I'll sell up and we'll go," said Gregory, springing to his feet, anxious to make some move in the instant, heading for the door until he saw the clock and the darkness outside.

Satina remained sceptical.

"How long would it take?"

"I'd have to contact the agent. I don't know how much you appreciate of this world, but it is a galactic fact that you cannot do much without the power to buy. We need money. I shall have to put this house on the market. I have a little money. I never had cause to spend it. And an old Rolls-Royce that runs on love. . . ."

"I don't know how long it will be before they decide to send someone after me, or switch in the selectomag."

Gregory sat down, stood up, sat down again.

"Selectomag?" he queried.

"A disturbing little element that sucks up anyone at correct frequency who happens to be at track bottom."

"And where's that?"

"Out there on the fringe of the woods. A pretty wild area, I would say. I don't suppose many people go there. A very poor landing space. I was going to lodge a complaint when I got back. . . ."

"Do me a favour, Charlie," said Nick patronisingly.

The line went dead.

"Charlie?"

Nicholas swung his legs clear of the bed and peered out of the window. The moon, late-risen, hung heavy. The sky bowed to take the weight of it.

On the opposite wall, a four-feet-ten-and-a-half inch lizard clung, then dropped.

"Charlie!"

The lizard stopped in its tracks.

"Charlie, let me get my pants on and I'm with you."

Nicholas struggled. Foot in wrong leg, foot in right, foot

in seat jerking trouser-tops from his fingers. Nicholas fumed.

Up zip. Down drain-pipe.

They ran, Charlie a little ahead, Nicholas slightly behind.

"They'll be in bed," said Nicholas.

Charlie chuckled. Nicholas flushed. He hadn't meant it like that.

They turned the corner, bouncing like tennis-balls away from their houses. The street, the roofs were washed silver with the moonlight.

The sun bakes, the moon washes, noted Nicholas. Just Him up there doing His housework.

Charlie, his eyes set purposefully ahead, was lengthening the distance between them, unconcerned with his friend's wanderings.

But Nicholas liked to get a composite picture of mystery. Here they went to witness something barely credible. Nicholas wanted to savour the tilt of the sky, the mood of the trees, the sound of the silence.

The strawberry glowed, the communi-part cleared its throat and began, the alarm wave broke and creamed across the Bay of Emotions. Niktar flicked a switch with one hand and cleaned out an ear to listen with the other.

"Sir!"

"Sir!"

"Sir!"

"Use one medium," he ordered. "There is only one of you, and you have only one message, presumably."

The communi-part went dumb. The alarm wave went into ebb.

"Sir," said the strawberry voice.

"So you said."

"The girl's track has run off the roll altogether."

"And what does that mean that we don't already have provisions for?" Niktar was growing ever more intolerant of the trackman's easy panic.

"It must mean. . . . It means something . . . well . . . in between. Not sorrow, not ecstasy, nor any degree of either. . . ."

"But surely to Bacchus she must be feeling something."

"It could be indecision of some sort or—apprehension."

"What's that?"

"A sort of scared happiness. Sick-in-the-stomach excitement."

"Don't struggle any more. It is an unnecessary emotional complication. Why were we not prepared for it?"

"Because it is nothing we have explored in great detail before. If our observers have come up against this, it has shown up as atmospheric. This is the first time anyone on a line from us has shown it."

"In other words, we've lost her."

"No. Only while she feels this way. As soon as her pattern settles, we shall have her."

"And suppose she moves geographically in the meanwhile. We have the track nailed down."

"Well. . . ."

"Exactly. I'm not pleased. I'm not . . . happy."

"Oh, mercy, Master." The chief trackman's voice rose in throbbing appeal.

"You have ruined my mood."

"Please, Master, it was not my fault. . . ."

"Then you'll want to restore my good humour."

"Anything, Master. Anything at all."

Niktar settled back in his chair and built an earthly cathedral with his fifteen fingers.

"First," he said quietly, whispering his instructions along the fleshy nave, "adjust the selectomag. We must not dwell too long on our failures."

There was a grumble of shifting kinetics, a wet-dry sound as the channel began its permanent swallow.

The chief trackman came panting back to the console.

"It's done, Ruler," he breathed. "The selectomag stream functions perfectly."

"Good. Now, do you still want to please me?"

"Eternally, Ruler."

"Then die. . . ."

They slowed to a walk as they drew near the wrought-

iron gate, retrieving their breath and scanning the house for lights.

Robbed of perspective, the house had flattened itself against the night. No chink showed. No shutter moved.

The gate was a lone voice as they passed through it and considered their next move, squatting beside the path.

"We'll have to knock," said Charlie.

"Don't be so daft. It's the middle of the night. They'll go bloody spare."

Nicholas watched Charlie's face for a faltering of resolution, an indication of deception.

But Charlie was watching the front door, willing it to open and the whole house to spring into illumination.

"We'll have to knock," he said again. "We've come this far."

"You knock," said Nicholas.

"You still don't believe me," countered Charlie. "You reckon I'm fooling you. Some friend. All right, I'll . . ."

He moved towards the door.

"No," Nicholas called after him. He ran to catch up.

"If being believed means that much to you, I'll knock."

Charlie looked momentarily relieved. Or perhaps he did not. Nicholas could not be sure in the gloom.

They stood together in the porch, trying to peer through the ancient stained-glass panels. They prised open the letter-box, but the darkness was like dust on their eye-balls and the stale odour of the yesterday world filled their nostrils.

They let the flap fall.

"Well," said Charlie, straight-faced, sincerity beaming darkly from his eyes. "There's always the sportsman's way. . . ."

"My coin," said Nicholas. "We'll use my coin."

"Is it—all right?"

The question stung Nicholas until he realised his insistence had expressed a similar suspicion. Charlie was only taking payment.

Nicholas placed the coin carefully and flicked it in the air.

"Tails," he shouted.

He caught the coin in his right palm, slapped it on to the back of his left wrist. Then he took away his right hand.

A woman's head.

"Tails it is," he said, and struck the door a mighty blow.

Gregory Birtle scoured the house for something to put in the suitcase he carried open and empty in his hand. But there was nothing he wanted to take anywhere with him.

"Perhaps I ought to take it empty," he said when he returned to Satina. "A symbol of complete divorce."

She eyed him curiously. "Symbols?" she asked.

"Then again, perhaps a symbol is a connection," he said decisively. "Forget it. I'll scribble a note to the estate agent and we'll stick it through his door as we pass, running."

Satina rose from the settle and tested her weight on her foot. Instantly he was at her side.

"Do you need support?"

"I think I can manage."

He registered regret, propelled himself wordily away from it.

"Whom would they send?"

"Anybody," she said. "Anything, so long as it has the emotional power to travel."

"Have moods, will travel," he said, nonsensically.

And the front door shivered under a mighty blow.

When he turned back to Charlie, the boy had gone. Not down the path. Somewhere. Into the undergrowth. Lost in the garden shapes, not breathing, not touching the crackling ground.

It was as though Charlie had never been there.

Nicholas was poised to flee when Gregory Birtle opened the door, with his hair tousled and his eyes half-lidded.

"Did you knock?"

Nicholas wondered momentarily whether he could get away with saying, "No." Then he decided even Gregory Birtle was not that deeply immersed in autumn.

But what else could he say? He did not know why he was here. Only Charlie knew why they were here.

"Why did you knock? Who are you?"

"We . . . I . . . we . . ."

"Is there somebody else with you?"

"Yes . . . there was. . . . No. . . ."

"Where are you from?"

Gregory Birtle used the question like a whip. Not only miserable, thought Nicholas, but nasty with it. And then . . . It was, after all, the middle of the night and Birtle had looked as though he had been sleeping.

Now, the tight set of the features, the furrowed brow showed something more than anger. More like caution. Didn't it?

Nicholas posed the question and knew he could not give the answer. How the hell can I think straight now, here, in the middle of . . . He cursed himself roundly and silently.

"I asked where you came from?"

"Across town," said Nicholas, hurriedly. "My friend and I. . . ."

"Then there is somebody with you."

"He's gone now. Don't ask me where. He left me."

"Some friend."

"That's what he said."

"Why? Why should he say that?"

"No reason. Something else. . . ."

Gregory Birtle opened the door wide and came out on to the porch. He ran his eyes over the garden.

Charlie, away in a distant corner, bellying down behind an azalea bush, began to perspire.

"You see . . ." began Nicholas.

"You'd better come in if you've something to say."

"It can wait till morning," said Nicholas in a forlorn hope.

"No. Come in."

Gregory Birtle stood back and waited for the boy to pass him and enter the house. Nicholas made no move.

"Charlie had this—theory," he said instead, lamely.

"Charlie?"

Gregory Birtle folded his arms and considered the night temperature. Then he sat down in the porch rocking chair.

"He ran away," said Nicholas.

"This theory," Birtle prompted him.

The theory was unutterable in its stupidity. How could he ever have been taken in? It was taxing friendship too

highly. That was the end of it, Charlie. Humiliation laid a latch on Nicholas's lips.

"About me?" Gregory Birtle was prodding again, rocking slowly in the chair, observing the boy's discomfort.

"Yes. . . ." The latch was holding.

"Well, go on."

"It seems so stupid now."

"Nevertheless, tell it. I think I have a right to hear it. And ridicule it."

"We were wondering why you never smiled," said Nicholas. Birtle stopped rocking, but said nothing.

"Charlie had this idea that you might have a reason for keeping your face just so."

Birtle stood up suddenly and stepped to the top of the path.

"Charlie," he shouted. "Come on up here. Don't leave your idea fatherless."

Charlie lay paralysed. Only the wind moved among the bushes.

Birtle returned to his chair.

"There was this girl," said Nicholas.

"Girl? Another one of you?"

"No, not us. You. She came from the Happy Land to see you."

"The Happy Land?" Birtle forced a chuckle. He looked hard at Nicholas.

"You look a bit old for fairies," he said.

"Space travel," said Nicholas. "There was this chief called Niktar and this Happy Land was a planet."

Birtle grunted under the paling sky. "Space travel," he reminded himself. "Go on. . . ."

"It's too . . ." Nicholas stumbled again, and then the latch lifted and the words flooded out like a kitchen light.

"This girl," he said, "descended in a sadness track from this Happy Land place. She was to take you back with her as soon as she made you happy. It was an experiment. The idea is these people tap in to your emotions and make them some kind of transport. Sadness brought her down. Happiness will take you up. The track is out there near the woods, waiting for you. . . ."

"It figures," said Birtle, straight-faced.

Nicholas wondered at the reply.

"But tell me," said Gregory Birtle, "what was my reason for keeping my face—just so?"

"The girl. You love her and if you look too happy, you'll be transported."

"How long has she been here?"

"I don't know. This afternoon. . . ."

"I went to the pictures tonight. . . ."

"I know," cut in Nicholas. "We followed you. . . ."

He hesitated. "We want to see if you would laugh," he added.

"I went to the pictures," Birtle said. "Would I go to the pictures?"

Nicholas thought for a moment.

"To keep things normal," he said. "You go to the pictures every Saturday night. Someone might have noticed a change in routine. You didn't stay long. . . ."

"Wasn't much of a laugh. Cartoons bore me. . . . And you think I would have left her with a splinter in her foot."

Nicholas bent his head and watched his battered shoe scuffing at the wood of the porch.

"I told you it would sound stupid," he said.

Birtle's laughter was prolonged, but as hollow as an echo. He made it last.

He should have stopped, thought Nicholas. It isn't that funny. . . .

"Whoops." Birtle cautioned himself suddenly. "Mustn't get too amused or Satina will whip me off to the Happy Land, far, far away."

The laughter grew more restrained, changed its rhythm. It was a while before Nicholas recognised sobs.

Birtle was leaning forward in the rocking chair, with his head cupped in his hands. Nicholas looked with some panic on his shaking shoulders.

"I'm sorry," he said at last, aware of the words' inadequacy. "It was—cruel. We should have minded our own business. If you're lonely, perhaps we could. . . ."

"Get the hell out of here. . . ."

Birtle pushed himself up viciously from the chair and

flung himself through his front door, slamming it hard behind him.

Nicholas could hear the slap of his slippers down the long, dark corridors for an age. The rocking chair slowed its tempo and fell still as Nicholas watched it.

He could still hear the dry flutter of the slippers like a butterfly trapped in a tomb, like a tattered flag a long way behind a procession.

Charlie bobbed up beside him.

"Hobo!" said Nicholas, succinctly.

Charlie giggled. "Serves you," he said.

"Serves me," countered Nicholas. "There are always times close, never too far away, when tomfoolery turns cruel. We made him cry. . . ."

"You lie." Charlie stopped him. "I heard him laughing. We finally made him laugh."

"Yes. Then we made him cry, in payment for the privilege. Why are we so bloody cruel?"

He turned and walked quickly down the path and into the woods to relieve himself. The incident had loosened his bowels.

Charlie followed him, chuckling.

Nicholas finished what he was doing, zipped himself up. Something tugged at his memory.

"Now laugh," Charlie challenged. "Now you feel better, laugh."

"Little round things," said Nicholas, suddenly thoughtful.

Charlie guffawed.

"Take it, Nick," he shouted. "Confess it was a great story. You said so yourself. Good enough for a science fiction magazine, you said."

He screamed, he jabbered, he took great gulps of air. He fell about laughing.

The memory heeded the tugging.

"Who said splinter?" asked Nicholas suddenly. "Who called her Satina? . . . Charlie, he did. He must know something. . . ."

Charlie was exultant. He rolled in the grass on the edge of the wood, howling until pain sewed a stitch in his side.

"Charlie. . . ." Nicholas, of an instant desperate, tried to

get a hold on the wriggling Charlie, but the boy kicked him away, went on laughing.

"Charlie. . . ." Nicholas, winded, begged from the brambles where he had fallen. "Charlie, he knows. . . ."

And then.

Flattened grass but no rolling Charlie. A sound like last bath-water.

"Charlie. . . ." Nicholas called hesitantly. "Charlie, where are you? Come on, enough's enough."

He heaved himself out of the brambles and battered through the undergrowth, unmindful of the roots which tripped his feet and the branches which flicked at his face. He reached the pavement, still shouting, and broke into a run.

"Charlie, don't fool me any more. . . ."

The old Rolls-Royce passed him at the bottom of the street.

The mournful face of Gregory Birtle peered at him through the driver's side-window and then the car spun round the corner, braking hard.

With the dust from its exhaust stinging his face, Nicholas slowed to a walk, broke his pace, stumbled and collapsed. Weeping like no paper-bag should weep.

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ERNEST HILL

THE SUB-LIMINAL

WETHERINGTON, VENABLES, QUANTOCK and Partners. By a series of amalgamations and take-ins—once known as take-overs—the biggest. The greatest. The epitome, acme, zenith, azimuth, tops. The doyens of the profession. It.

By a series of deaths, retirements, dismissals, transfers, demotions, a run down of board strength to one. Hemsley Quantock. Known as Spike. Spike the chairman, president, managing director, sole executive; the guide, motivator and mentor of Wetherington, Venables, Quantock and Parts. Him.

In the corridors of power men met at the crossways of their several ambitions and whispered. "Spike," they murmured. "Spike" on the lips of the minister of state for foreign affairs. "Spike" traced on the dusty desk in Tory House where the leader of the Opposition held court and council among the shadow heads of the right wing in permanent and inconsolable minority. "Spike!" groaned the Shadow Head. "Spike" shouted, muttered, lauded, vilified, condemned, proclaimed in the noisy gatherings of Transport House, in the docks, the meat market, Fleet Street, Sauchiehall Street and behind the wings of Drury Lane and in the lobbies of the National Theatre, white and shoe-box shaped on the south bank of the Thames. The Establishment without Spike was a quadrosyllabic absurdity. A paradox like a short nailed Mandarin or a beardless intellectual. Spike was the voice of the people, the mass articulate, the breath huffing and puffing in the trumpets of power. Only Spike spoke. The prime mover, activator, the secret heart of Wetherington, Venables, Quantock and Parts. Spike, their total staff of one.

Feet on a square world pivoted around its vertical axis,

Spike pared his nails with a paper knife. Coaxed the cuticles downwards in a faint-hearted search for half moons. Spike yawned. Outside men scurried, urging the pedalators to greater speed by brisk jostling along their clanking sections of chain belting; running up the fly overs; diving like rabbits into the mole holes of the underways. Men surged. Spike sighed.

"Ten-thirty," Sandra announced. "Coffee, amphetamine and your second cigar."

"Ta!" Spike set down the paper knife and lifted the coffee cup from the conveyor belting travelling the surface of his desk top. He swallowed a tablet and puffed at the self-igniting cigar. It ignited.

"Appointment 1045. Sir Jocelyn Diddimous."

"Yeah," Spike considered, "He's the— isn't he?"

Spike thought and spoke in unformulated half-sentences. The privilege of his profession. The thought inhibition of disuse. Sandra understood. Others, higher in degree but less well endowed with Underling perspicacity found contact more tenuous. No matter. Between Spike and the others stood Sandra.

"Member of Shadow Presidium. Newly appointed motivator of party machine."

"He'll want—I expect," Spike mused.

"Engage our services."

"Yeah. Give me a low-down, love!"

"Born 28th January 2165, Hackney. Educated Wapping Comprehensive—'A' stream. Graduate Camberwell University 2185. Honours in political theory. Author of 'The Rise of Ethiopia' and 'The Predominance of Baffin Island in the Northern Federation.' Joined Tory Party 2187. Appointed Shadow Adviser on Political Indoctrination, 2188. Motivator of Party machine 2189. Is now 25, unmarried. Appointment is in ten minutes."

"You're a—Sandra."

"Thank you!"

He looked at her with affection, admiration; reverent, humble before her infallibility. Gratitude for the indispensable. Even in quiescence she was beautiful. Immobile, unemotional, inscrutable. Utterly faultless. Utterly soundless,

but always alert. The all-seeing eye scanning in light or shade, gloom to total darkness. The pin-fall sensitive ear attentive. The perfect Underling. The joy of his heart.

The voice of a receptionist interrupted his mental panegyric. She spoke, visible on the screen of the desk relay.

"A black-suited person, 1 metre 80 in height. Tending to corpulence. He has no card." How like a pesky politician to keep an appointment without a card. What did he expect a photo-electric cell to do?—Talk to him? No consideration.

"I'm busy, Nora," he said. "Keep the—in the—waiting."

"Very good, Spike!"

Spike returned to the paperknife, prodding abstractly in the grime. Hot water, soap and a nail brush glided across the desk on the conveyor belt and stopped by his hand. Sandra had noticed.

"Ta!" he said. The sliding door shook as Jocelyn Diddimus attempted an unheralded entry.

"Televisé him?" Sandra asked.

"Nope, they all look alike."

"20th century suitings," Sandra relayed from her external viewer. "Black and pin-striped. Petty and podgy."

"They all are." He applied the nail brush testily, scrubbing at the short, nibbled spatulae of his finger tips. Grime removed, he transferred his attention to his front teeth, rubbing ruminatively with the brush end. A toothbrush was whisked beside him with paste and water.

"When were the Tories last—?" he asked.

"140 years ago in 2050 for a brief spell of six months."

"They got any—?"

"The last published figures showed the kitty down to 102,000 dollars. There are hidden assets and rumours of industrial support."

"Thought the Liberals had that?"

"Only in art. Liberals have Aluminium and Cybernetics. Nuclear and steel are switching."

"How's the—?"

"Parliamentary strength? 320 Antitory, 6 Liberal, 4 Tory. As usual."

"He'll need some boodle," Spike reflected.

"He is biting his nails and stabbing at Nora with his boot."

"Show the—in!"

"Will you come this way, please?" Sandra intoned as the doors slid silently open. Jocelyn Diddimous entered briskly, tap, tap, tapping with his umbrella. He laid his bowler hat and white Univinyl gloves on the desk top. The conveyor whisked them into Sandra's keeping. Spike considered his visitor sleepily through the V shape of his parted feet. Spike did not like what he saw. He returned to his cuticles and the paper knife.

"I am Sir Jocelyn Diddimous!"

"Yeah?"

"I have an appointment with a Mr. Quantock. Kindly inform him I am not accustomed to waiting."

"S'me," said Spike, a slow smile relaxing the creases of his furrowed cheeks as a crescent moon appeared above the cracking cuticle of the fourth finger of his left hand.

"I beg your pardon?"

"S'me. I'm Spike."

"You are Mr. Quantock?"

"Spike," Jocelyn Diddimous walked slowly round the reclining chair, the square world, the feet. He considered his finger-tips with thoughtful distaste.

"Since I am here in the capacity of client. A very large client in a monetary sense, apart from being what many would consider an exceptional—a prestige client, entailing a certain moral obligation."

"Cut it!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"The cackle.—Cut!"

Sir Jocelyn Diddimous hung his umbrella carefully in the crook of his left arm. He straightened the two bows of his white-spotted blue tie, the Tory obbligator. With consummate diaphragm control, he reduced the distension of his waist by two inches and extended his chest by one. He turned on his heel and strode to the door. It closed.

"Sit down!" It was Sandra who spoke.

The refining influence of the "A" stream at Wapping Comprehensive and the deportment studies at Camberwell

prevailed. Jocelyn Diddimous sat with dignity. Spike picked his teeth with a sliver split from a matchbox.

"Your business?" Sandra asked.

"I refuse," Sir Jocelyn addressed himself to Spike. "I refuse to discuss my business with a machine."

"And I refuse—be rude to Sandra!" Spike stabbed the paper knife savagely into the desk top. He glared at his visitor.

"It's nothing," Sandra conceded.

"I am amazed at your attitude," Jocelyn modulated his voice into the careful enunciation of the 'A' stream. "A machine is a machine and I am a client."

"I forbid that word!" In his anger, Spike achieved a complete sentence. "Sandra is sensitive. She is an Underling. Your business is unimportant."

"My business," Sir Jocelyn propounded in the voice of a 20th-century monarch at knight-dubbing, "is to consider the advisability of retaining your services. My decision is already swaying to the adverse."

"Five mill." Spike grunted.

"Again, I beg your pardon?"

"I said five million. Dollars. Would have been four but you insulted Sandra."

"Good day to you!" Sir Jocelyn rose, extending himself to his full height of 1 metre 80.

"140 years out of office," Sandra reminded him.

"I hardly think," Sir Jocelyn hesitated. "I hardly think that this—this oaf, is of the calibre necessary to our cause."

"You do not have to like Spike," Sandra pointed out. "You are engaging not Spike himself. You are engaging the services of his . . ." she hesitated. "His machines," she completed, her lens reddening to a faint blush.

"Are you telling me . . ." In his perplexity Sir Jocelyn descended from the citadel of his dignity far enough to acknowledge her presence as an animate intellect. "Are you telling me that—that Underlings are capable of returning my party to power?"

"What else?" Spike grunted.

"Even if this were so," Sir Jocelyn argued. "Wethering,

Venables, Quantock are not the only advertising agents utilising the services of mach. . . . Underlings."

"Who else?"

"Margrave, Millington and Urquhard."

Sandra laughed. Her laugh was bell-like, musical silver. Soprano. No trace of electronic accent. Carefully selected harmonics. Like her voice. Cultured, modulated, gentle.

"They have only pre 2150 Slogameters," she said.

"Ebury, Jessop, Willard, Van Dyke and Spiel."

"One Slogameter, 2130 vintage and a versificator. So called. It is known in the trade as a doggerel-emitter."

"I see."

"Five mill." Spike interrupted.

"My dear sir," Sir Jocelyn smiled with the forebearing unction of the minority politician accustomed to the defensive. "Even if my party were prepared to consider this ludicrous quotation, there could be no guarantee that we should gain a single extra vote. You must admit that for the problematical benefits of a national pre-election campaign, a figure of these proportions would be quite preposterous."

"Take the Liberals," said Spike. Sir Jocelyn was at once on his guard. Rumour had already reached him. He looked from Sandra to her chief and back again at Sandra. Her eye was inscrutable. Spike kicked off his shoes. There was a hole in his sock.

"You have been approached by the Liberals?"

"Could be."

"I have seen the Liberal manifesto. It contains nothing that could possibly gain them a single seat. On the other hand, I confidently predict that the electorate is at last aware of the need for change. Too long have they remained complacent. The day of awakening is at hand. The policy of the Tory Party contained in our latest booklet 'Britain awake!' is the answer to the fundamental desires and beliefs of everyman. On this foundation we shall build a new and classless society. No longer subservient to a government composed—though I say it myself—almost entirely of the products of the 'A' stream. No longer shall an 'A' stream accent open every door in commerce, in banking,

and Branch B of the Foreign Office. We are the party also of the 'B' stream, the polytechnics, the champions and mentors of the 'C's. From us shall come . . ."

"Cut it!"

"As you wish!"

"The point is," Sandra murmured, "Do we support your cause, or do we plump for the Liberals?"

"But five million dollars. . ."

"For five million, we shall put you in office. We should charge the Liberals four."

"Polite to Sandra!" Spike explained.

"You say you would put us in office?"

"Certainly!"

"You cannot be sure of that."

"We have the only Underlings capable of such a campaign. No other agency could compete. You would thus be elected."

"But our manifesto!"

"Codswallop!" Spike explained.

"Let us assume," Sir Jocelyn whispered, "let us just assume for the sake of argument that what you say is correct. What in that case would happen if you accepted both ourselves and the Liberals as clients?"

"We should not do that!" Sandra was horrified. "Professional ethics you know. If we did there would be no election. The voter, like the donkey placed at equidistance between two carrots, would be unable to move either way and the electoral response would be nil."

"Not a vote!" said Spike.

"May I," Sir Jocelyn whispered, "See the Underlings that will perpetrate these wonders?"

"Sure!" Spike rose to his full height of 2 metres 10 in his stockinged feet. "My account executive. Sid. A Bergmaster 85. Infallible. Come!"

"Watch your personal pronouns," Sandra whispered confidentially. "You said 'that' instead of 'who' for an Underling. Spike is very particular about our status in pronouns."

Sid gleamed and sparkled. Sid was chrome and silver and gold. Sid had dials and tapes and lights and keys—tradi-

tional decoration from the old days of Slogameters. Sid was also voice sensitive. He hummed softly to himself.

"Hiya, Sid!" Spike greeted him.

"Solace!" Sid replied. He was switched to erudition.

"The principle," Sandra had followed them into the client process laboratory, "is the human need and desire. A universal human want may be expressed crudely in a slogan or a simple word. Analysed it resolves itself into a sentence. THE sentence. The universal wish fulfilment. The Sid sentence."

Outside a hundred million faceless voters surged on subways, flyovers, monorails and pedalators. A hundred million bodies with a single wish, yearning towards articulation and ultimate Sid-fulfilment. The single hair-trigger of vote ordinance.

"If there were such a wish, how could a single machine . . ." Sir Jocelyn trembled before the bushy upraised eyebrow of Spike displeasure and the prospect of an augmented 6 million dollar fee. "How could Sid determine the nature of such a wish?"

"Wherever people congregate," Sandra explained, "in subway cars, bingo halls and public bars ; at baseball games, bull baiting, and sessions of solo-whist ; concealed at transistorised medium seances, in the two tiers of suburban trains ; in prisons, schools and kindergartens, everywhere, in all places, are the emissaries of Sid. The listening ears, the scanning eyes, the all-absorbing sensors of Sid. Minute, microscopic transmitters. Relays between the wants of men and Sid appraisal. Programmed, analysed, computed, the whisperings, the sighs, the muttered asides, are collated with the half-raised eyebrows and twitching hands, the cries of anguish and the shouts of joy. The whole emerges as the expression of desires. A thousand thousand desires each with its own recorded strength and urge, intensity and goad. One desire is always stronger than all others. THE wish. The Ultimate. The Sid wish.

"My party might possibly consider. . . ."

"Five mill.!"

". . . On the understanding that our case will be truly and accurately presented to the electorate and that the

overwhelming mass of voters will in consequence recognize the inevitability of the policy contained in our manifesto. . . .”

“Five mill. Not ‘overwhelming’—all.”

“My party might possibly agree.”

Sir Jocelyn stepped from the pedalator on to the subway descalator, regretting the Antitory Act banning all automobiles from the London area. His hair raised, or seemed to bristle at the skull base. He turned his head from side to side, looking upwards and downwards, searching for the ubiquitous, omnipresent eyes and ears of Sid. Invisibly he felt their probe and silent scrutiny, the penetration of the sensor rays. His own wish was for party, party in power, active and executive government. Further than this, something more fundamental. The discovery of an identity among the statistics of analysis. The more one analysed, the more completely a thing, a state, a product, a belief, was known in parts, the less one understood the whole. Sir Jocelyn was a man of parts, catalogued, labelled and coaxed into part-awareness by a host of analysts and tutors. He had never found himself. He was an amalgam of mutually opposed determinates.

The party with the backing of Nuclear, Steel, Transistorised Analysts and Auto Comprehensive Schoolmasters raised the five million dollars required by Spike. Sir Jocelyn personally presented the ten centimeter square metallic strip, signed personally by the Leader of the Opposition, a Winston III, 2035 vintage. Spike tossed it on the belt and Sandra scrutinized the bank’s imprint.

“O.K.!” she said.

“Didn’t think you’d . . .” Spike grunted.

“Now that your services are officially engaged,” Sir Jocelyn murmured, “I should be grateful for a demonstration of the infallibility of your Account Executive.”

“O.K.!” Spike led the way to the process room, Sandra following on six noiseless wheels.

“How do you want it?—Classic, verse, erudite or vulgar?”

“May I, in the first instance hear the nature of the

universal wish, the Sid wish, and decide the form later of its expression?"

"How can you hear it," Sandra asked, "If you do not specify the form the concept should take. A concept is not a concept until it becomes verbal."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"They never do."

"Erudite!"

"Erudite, Sid!" Spike ordered. "Vote compulsion concept for Tory Party." Sid did not hesitate. He had already processed the Sid wish.

"Meritocracy out of Mediocrity," he said.

"Pungent!" Sandra breathed.

"That," asked Sir Jocelyn, "is five million dollars' worth?"

"Want it in verse?" Spike asked.

"I had expected a little more. . . ."

"Verse, Sid!"

"To end the mediocre story,
a meretricious vote for Tory!"

"It's out of this world!" Sandra murmured.

"Surely," Sir Jocelyn protested, "the word is not meretricious, which, if my memory serves me correctly has something to do with harlots. The word is 'meritorious'."

"Sid?" Spike asked.

"Impact!" said Sid.

"See?" said Spike.

"I suppose so!"

"Impact is everything," Sandra explained.

"That will win us the election?" Sir Jocelyn asked.

"Sid's infallible." Spike nodded to Sid, who switched himself into quiescence.

"How will you present it?" Sir Jocelyn asked.

"Only one way in the eight figure class.—Sub-lim."

"Sub-liminal? But that's illegal!" Spike smiled a rare, face-creasing grimace. He winked at Sandra who lowered her lens shutter a fraction.

"Antitutory legislation—You bound by that?"

"But how. . . ."

"Get me Les," Spike ordered. In a trice, Les appeared

beaming on Sandra's breast. He wore headphones and chewed the end of a black cheroot. Due to the Sandra contours, he was three-dimensional and life-like in tri-chromatic process.

"Hi-ya!" he said.

"Get me a sub-lim—election a.m.!"

"200,000?"

"Done!"

"O.K.!" Les faded.

"Sub-lim organised!" said Spike.

"But if the government should learn we used sub-liminal. . . ."

"The great advantage of sub-lim," Sandra explained, "is the impossibility of its detection. If you see it, it isn't sub-lim. Les is the only—er—well—human—programme controller on National T.V. At 200,000 dollars, Les won't talk."

"But is it effective?" Sir Jocelyn asked.

"Give him a sub-lim, love!" Spike scribbled on a notepad and held the message for Sandra alone. Sir Jocelyn studied her carefully. Her screen showed no trace of a visible flicker. She was tranquil, serene, unemotional as ever. Waiting, Sir Jocelyn thoughtfully unscrewed the ferrule from his umbrella and placed it behind his ear. Sandra flashed an oscillographic flicker of a smile. Spike passed him the pad.

"This gink—ferrule behind ear," he read. He was convinced.

The election day dawned on an apathetic world. The poll was 100% as decreed by law. By midday the results were computed from the polling stations and televised on every screen for those who cared to notice.

Antitories 320. Liberals 6. Tories 4. As usual.

Nora gave evasive answers to the callers. The sliding doors remained closed on a Spike temporarily incomunicado.

"Jocelyn Diddimous has forgotten his 'A' stream education," Sandra reported. "He's fairly pounding at the door."

"Yeah?" Sid yawned. He tossed a metal strip on to the desk conveyor. Six million dollars from the Antitories, the usual donation.

"O.K.?" he asked.

"O.K." Sandra confirmed, checking the bank's imprint and the signature of the P.M.—a 2025 Kier Hardie Mark IV. Les appeared on her screen.

"Hi-ya!" he said.

"Go all right?" Spike asked.

"Sure," Les yawned. Sub-lim at 0915—"Vote Anti-tory."

"Sure is the slogan to bring 'em in."

"All except the odds and ends."

"Always an odd one sub-lim proof."

"Yeah."

"Will that be all?" Sandra asked.

"Sure, doll!" He looked at her affectionately.

"I love you Sandra," he said. She coloured.



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WHAT PASSING BELLS?

PARR AND WALKER took their time burying the farmer and his wife. They swung the bodies steadily between them, carrying them in turn down to the end of the field, well away from the farm house. Neither man released a hold on his rifle until the two of them had begun to dig; even then were the two guns within a rapid and easy reach. The two graves were dug without ceremony and the couple interred with a practised lack of feeling.

"You ever feel like saying a prayer for them, Greg?" Walker asked as they trundled their rifles back to the house.

"In the beginning I used to pray," Parr said. He looked up at a sky in which the sun was setting in multi-coloured glory, the green and red streaks trailing behind as the tired disc began its long descent in the west.

"But not now, huh?" asked Walker.

"No, not now," said Parr.

They entered the farmhouse to find Danby waiting for them. "Walker," he ordered, "into the backroom and help the girls clear out some bed space. Parr, the Leader wants a word with you."

He led the way along a rapidly darkening corridor and knocked at a heavy oak door. Parr found himself thinking over the events of the day, wondering where he had made any slip which might have displeased Myler. Nothing immediately occurred to him, but his heartbeat quickened. When had anyone been able to guess what might displease Myler?

Danby opened the door and ushered Parr in brusquely. Someone had found an oil lamp and some oil and the lamp was now flickering on the right hand side of the table, illuminating the maps over which Myler was poring, his round bulbous body casting a grotesque shadow on the left hand wall.

"Thank you, Danby. That will be all." As the door closed behind the curtly dismissed second-in-command Parr tried to assess the tone of the Leader's voice in relation to the reason behind the interview. "Now then, Gregory," the Leader continued, "come and sit down round here, next to me." Parr relaxed and took the indicated chair.

"I'm very pleased with you, Gregory," said the Leader, gazing evenly across the maps on the table. "I've been keeping my eye on you ever since you first joined us. You've been doing well." He paused as though to lend emphasis to his next words, then said, "I'm thinking of rewarding you."

Parr tried to keep his face composed. Whilst he did not think that he had done anything to merit any particular praise the thought of the reward pleased him. He thought of the three girls. He hoped that it would be Shelagh, the youngest.

"Have a look at this." Myler indicated the topmost map. "We are here, about four miles north of Dalegate, here. The problem, Gregory, is whether to go round the town or to go through it."

Parr looked at the map and considered the size of the town and the surrounding countryside. The problem was a real one. Ever since the bombs had dropped a prime consideration in the struggle for survival had been the avoidance of former settlements of any particular size. Unless any town had been remarkably well sheltered from westerly winds it could have suffered a high build up of radioactivity. Whilst the members of the Group must by now be considered to be immune to radiation, there was a little need in taking senseless risks. Also, in any town there was a decided risk of disease from the decaying humanity. The larger the town, the more considerable the risk. Avoiding all centres of former habitation was, however, impossible and through experience the Group had learned to compromise. Cities and the larger towns were avoided, small towns and villages approached with care.

"Hmm, I see what you mean, Leader," Parr said. "It's the sort of market town that's just on the borderline, neither too big nor too small. I'm just trying to think what I would do if I was on my own."

The Leader nodded. A man of quick temper and violent moods, he could be the most patient of men when the safety of the Group was at stake. He took out a packet of cigarettes, lit one and pushed the packet along the table towards Parr. "This will help you to think," he said. "Think aloud if that helps, too."

Parr lit a cigarette and blew the smoke into the shadows away from the table. "I'm a novice in survival tactics," he said. "When the bombs dropped I was up in Scotland studying an ancient Gaelic battle site near Inverness. I'd transport arranged to come out from the nearby village and collect me. It didn't turn up. I gave it a couple of days then picked up my gear and walked the twenty miles back to the village. I was half dead when I got there."

"But not as dead as everyone else, hmm?"

"Very true, Leader. You don't need to be told the horror of finding that you're alive and everyone else is dead. What I've never understood though is why didn't I die too?"

"Who can answer that?" The Leader dropped his cigarette on to the floor and stamped on it. "You're a freak. We're all freaks. It might be that you were in a low radiation zone, a sheltered pocket, when the bombs dropped and that you built up a gradual resistance while you were walking back to the village."

"It could be," Parr said, dropping his cigarette. "Anyway, I picked out a car and came south. It was the same everywhere of course." The same everywhere, with rotting corpses in the streets and in the houses. Comparatively few, he had noticed, had been out of doors, as though the bombs had dropped late at night or early in the morning. He had begun to avoid all but the smallest villages, constantly aware of the floodtide of disease that must follow the holocaust. Eventually, near Ambleside in the Lake District, he had stumbled upon Myler and his twenty-strong group. Here was organisation. Here was someone else to make the decisions vital to survival. Here was security. He had joined the Group quite happily. He often wondered what would have happened to him had he not agreed to do so. He might even have been shot then

and there. He was glad, though, that he had joined them. Every man had a chance of insuring his own individual survival and there was always the thought of a Myler approved reward to consider.

"Well?" asked the Leader. There was a slight change in his tone. He was becoming impatient. The thought struck Parr that Myler wanted reassurance, that he had already decided to go into the town.

"I'd be inclined to go into the town, Leader," Parr announced.

"You would? Why?"

Why indeed, thought Parr. The size of the town was large enough to deter him in the normal course of events but the map showed the buildings in certain districts to be well spaced out. Also, the Group had not stored up any supplies for three days now and some of the men would be becoming impatient as their own backward-reaching lifeline was becoming thin.

Parr pointed to the southern edge of the map, indicating Leeds and Bradford. "This will be our last chance of hiding supplies until we're through this heavy industrial belt down here. I think our best bet is not to go along the road, straight into town. If we did that we'd be going through this residential district, here. We'd do best to skirt the town, along the side of the viaduct, here, cutting across this farm land and just keeping to the outside of the town centre, round here. That should minimise all risks."

"You're right." Myler stood up suddenly and banged his fist on the map. "That fool, Danby. The town's too big, he said. We can't get into the town without going through this built-up district, he said. A second in command. A *second* in command. Where would he be without me? Where would the whole lot of you be with someone like Danby leading you?"

Parr rose. When Myler stood, everyone stood. "Oh, Danby's all right, Leader," he said. "He's very loyal." He had learned the lesson early during his time with the Group. Never criticise anyone behind his back. Friendships were made easily and broken even more easily. Loyalties shifted.

The man you criticised yesterday could stick a knife in your back tomorrow.

"Loyal, yes, but a thoughtless clown all the same," Myler said, clapping his thick arm round Parr's shoulders and ushering him out. "You've done well, Gregory. I'll be rewarding you yet. Who do you fancy, huh?"

A dangerous question, thought Parr. Any reward would obviously depend upon whether his guess about the approach to the town centre along the side of the viaduct should prove to be a good one. It would not be politic to start coveting any of the girls too soon. Besides, a known desire could be used against him if the need ever arose. Supposing the viaduct was not safe and Myler's temper flared?

"The matter is entirely in your hands," Parr told him, smoothly. "I'm only too pleased to be of some use to the Group, as you know."

Myler clapped him on the back vigorously. "Good, good. Well, I must get to bed. The haul today has worn me out. The heat, you know, Gregory. When you're my size the heat makes all the difference." He half shuffled, half waddled up the stairs which led to the farmhouse bedrooms.

It's not only the thought of sleep that's got him away early, Parr thought as he went to join the others. He looked round the room which was well lighted from the lamps scattered around the various pieces of furniture. A dozen or so men, bearded, ragged and dirty, were sitting round the table, silently concentrating on a pile of cards turned over by the dealer. These men could be noisy, violently so, but not whilst gambling. Lives could depend on what was lost or won. Two of the Group were sitting in the far corner of the room sharpening the knives they wore at their waists. The girls were missing, Parr noticed. He looked round the room again, working out by elimination who would be with them. Meredith and Illingworth were on guard outside. Myler would be with Elaine. That meant . . . Danby and Cowan. Danby or Cowan with Shelagh! How could Myler put them in line before him! He seized a bottle of beer from the sideboard top and angrily dashed

the neck against the heavy oak edge. Nobody even looked up from the card game. He pulled up a spare chair and joined the players.

His vitriolic manner of play matched his mood. Luck smiled on his heady rashness and by the time the game had broken up and the players fallen asleep where they sat, he had won seventy bullets and almost fifteen thousand pounds.

The following morning the Group moved out of the farmhouse and walked slowly and carefully along the sides of the road leading into the town. A short-lived early morning shower had settled the dust which had given so much discomfort during the previous three days' marches.

Parr kept his eyes on the viaduct about a mile and a half away. This is a good lesson for some of the Group, he thought. When he had first joined up with Myler he had been surprised that the Leader would not allow him to keep his car, the third he had used during his long ride south through Scotland. He had agreed with Myler the moment the reasoning had been made clear. If the Group was used to travelling by foot then in the face of sudden danger a retreat could be made through countryside known to be safe. Also, the Group would have left some sort of defensive position that same morning, so that use could be made of travel. Travel by car could spread lines of communication through the Group too thinly. And besides, no man in the entire Group was more than a weekend mechanic. For long-term thinking in the battle against survival, travel on foot was undoubtedly best, Parr realised. Some of the Group did not agree, but argued that travelling by car would enable the Group to escape from danger quickly. This, thought Parr as they walked along, was superficial reasoning. Myler had thought out the problem well, giving the Group the maximum chance of survival in the widest variety of possible danger patterns. Dependence upon travel by car could make the Group careless. They had already had one brush, near Gateshead, with a small band of totally unorganised brigands, an immature and badly planned ambush they had avoided all too easily.

The viaduct was looming up about a half mile to the

right. The Group left the road and took a path across the fields by the side of the railway track. The bushes, clumps of trees and thick, tangled grass caused the going to be slow.

"Glad it's my turn away from the front of the line," Illingworth said over his shoulder.

Parr regarded the broad back of the man before him. "Hmm, good spot for an ambush," he said.

"The boys up front'll be sweating some," Illingworth observed.

Constantly alert, the Group passed the viaduct towering overhead, edged along the side of a small wood and skirted an ugly, broken quarry. They came out on to a road lined with pleasantly-spaced detached houses. The grass verges were overgrown and the gardens abounded with weeds and fallen, decaying leaves. Myler signalled everyone around him. They sat or squatted against the low stone wall at the side of the road and surveyed the scene.

"A good district to have lived in, eh?" said Myler. "We must see what it yields. Who are the scouts today?" Ashby, Boston and Davies got to their feet and started out up the road. They walked with guns at the ready, spaced out about forty yards apart. The remainder of the Group watched them fade away along the road, becoming gradually smaller until they disappeared round a bend.

"Well," said Myler, "All we have to do now is wait." He broke open a bottle of beer and downed the cool liquid in one long draught. Two or three of the others also produced bottles. A pack of cards appeared from someone's pocket and a game started.

"Start dealing," Cowan said. "I've lost time to make up."

There was some raucous laughter. Parr settled back against the wall. He did not join the game but contented himself watching Shelagh. She was sitting on the grass talking to Elaine and Karen. Occasionally, they would glance over at the card players. After a while Parr got to his feet and strolled over to them.

"And what the hell do *you* want?" asked Karen, abruptly.

"You know damn well what he wants," Elaine said pointedly.

Parr ignored these remarks. "What do you think of this place?" he asked.

Karen regarded him scornfully. "What do we think of this place? What do we think of any place? Why do we have to wander around like lost people?"

"We *are* lost people," Parr said. "How could we live in any one place?"

"There must be someone somewhere who is trying to rebuild without all this wandering," Elaine said.

"If there is anyone he'll have to belong to a group that's better organised than we are," Parr said. "It would take skilled men."

"But we haven't even *tried*!" Shelagh said. Parr thought that the look she gave him seemed encouraging. "I know this area," she continued. "The Daleford estate is only three or four miles away. Why can't we settle down there? A large country house like that would be an ideal place."

"And how long would the food last us?" Parr asked. "We're not farmers. We'd starve before we could even begin to grow anything. You know this countryside, you say? Why haven't you mentioned it to Myler?"

"And when did The Leader, our great father figure, ever listen to what a woman might tell him?" Elaine said. "We're just property, didn't you know? He's too busy playing God."

There was some noisy bantering from the card players. "... And each pack had two ten of clubs," came floating across to them, accompanied by obvious amusement.

"Oh, Myler's all right," Parr said. "He's done us pretty proud so far."

"Obviously," Karen said, "a matter of opinion. Tell us, worshipper at the feet of the almighty, why is the great white chief herding us all south?" She did not attempt to hide the scorn in her voice.

"I'm not sure," Parr admitted. "I've heard he's got a brother down in Middlesex. He's got some land down there. I think the idea is that we shall be able to settle down once we find him."

"Very concise!" Karen spat at him. "He's certainly got you well brain-washed, hasn't he!"

There was a shout from Meredith whose outstretched arm showed that Ashby, Boston and Davies were walking along the road towards them. Parr took the opportunity to turn his back on Karen. "These damn know-all women!" he muttered to himself as the three scouts came up to the Group.

"Quite a few shops up there," Ashby announced.

"Twenty-three," Davies said proudly. "I counted them."

"Yeh," said Boston. "And a pub."

"Good," Myler said. "We'll go and have a look at them."

The cards were put away. The Group hauled themselves to their feet and moved up the road. They found themselves in what had once been a small but adequate shopping centre on the town's outskirts. They were pleased to see that the shops had not been rifled.

"Right," said Myler, "we'll get to work. I want a week's supplies for the entire group moved into that house over there. Use the back room, away from the road. Any that's out of sight of the garage here. Stick to the essentials in canned meats, from the grocery stores there and there. You, Cowan, half a dozen tin openers from the hardware store. You two, Meredith and Webb, take that place across there, the New Inn, and get to work shifting bottled beer over to the house. No spirits, mind. Danby, you stay here with me. Parr, Walker, two comfortable chairs. Right, let's get on with it."

Parr joined Walker and together they went over to the nearest house not wishing to impede the members of the Group who were storing supplies in the house Myler had indicated. They picked out two well-padded armchairs and dragged them out into the street, setting them up in the middle of the road, facing each other about fifty yards apart. Myler took one and Danby the other.

More good planning, thought Parr as he and Walker sent across to join the others. Safety precautions at all times. Any sneak attack on Myer would be seen by Danby and vice versa. Neither of the men would rush to the other's aid, but would immediately fire his rifle, warning the

remainder of the Group. Should any concealed marksman shoot one of them he would have to shoot the other also, and at the same time. Two snipers, shooting simultaneously, would be unlikely. Myler was once again giving the Group the best possible coverage of safety and security against the most possible danger patterns. Parr wondered about the wisdom of Myler, as the Leader, exposing *himself* to possible danger in this way, but realised that Myler was too fat to be of much use moving heavy crates and boxes. Even the women, who seemed to be biased against Myler, would have to admit that he did his share of work for the Group. It was a good move psychologically, too, Parr realised. Myler was proving his courage to the rest of them by sitting out there in such an unconcealed fashion.

The boxes of tins and crates of beer were stacked high within the hour. Myler inspected the roomful of stores and announced his satisfaction. As well he might, thought Parr. This was looking to the future. Some day the Group might pass this way again. They might even be pursued this way. Whatever the reason for visiting here in the future, the Group would have supplies on which to fall back. Other surviving people might have rifled the shops by then but it would be unlikely that this cache would have been found. And if by some chance it had been stumbled across then there were always the individual supplies. And now that this little lot has been approved, thought Parr, we can get to work on those.

"You've done well." Myler was obviously pleased. "You're on your own then. Back here in two hours."

The Group left the house and busied itself around the grocery stores. At any time in the future, Myler had told them in their early days, any one of them might find himself on his own. It was even possible that he might be trying to survive, not because of the Group, but in spite of it. Therefore, Myler had explained, it was only right that each member of the Group made his own cache of hidden supplies as the Group moved along. The whereabouts of each of these hidden supplies was jealously guarded from the other members of the Group.

Parr looked inside the nearest grocery shop and quickly

estimated that plenty of food remained, certainly more than could be moved by all members of the Group inside the allotted two hours. He left and walked over to the hardware store. He found a drawer containing half a dozen tin openers and stuck one of them in his pocket. There would be fights later over the few remaining.

On impulse he picked up another opener. If Myler was himself lacking one it would be a point in his favour to provide an opener for him. On the other hand, Parr thought, when was Myler going to reward him? Hadn't he done enough already to deserve one of the girls? Yet Myler had rewarded Cowan and Danby before him! Angrily he threw the opener back into its compartment and pushed in the drawer. Let Myler look out for himself!

Parr looked round the store. Was there anything else of use to him? A display of gardening tools and equipment stood in the window. Parr pushed aside the display, the now obsolete forks, spades and rakes and pulled out the wheelbarrow that was behind them. He wheeled it out of the store and headed back towards the grocery shop.

"Hey, Greg!" It was Meredith. Parr stopped as the burly Welshman came over to him. "Here you are, Greg bach. How much is it I owe you? Three hundred and fifty pounds? Here you are." He held out a bundle of notes.

"Where . . .?"

"The bank over there. I've done rather well. Cleaned up about a thousand. Not bad for a brahch bank, eh?"

Parr looked at him. It was typical of this fool, he thought, that he should waste his time on something as useless as money. He said, "I'd rather have the bullets."

"Yeh, I bet you would. I'm short on them myself just now. And I have plenty of money. Here you are." Parr took the bundle of notes and pushed past the Welshman.

"Here," Meredith shouted. "The barrow. Where did you get it? The hardware store? Are there any left?"

"I didn't see any."

"No? Well, how much do you want for that one?"

"You're joking," Parr said, coldly. He picked up the barrow and moved on.

"No, I'm not. I'll give you five hundred for it." Parr

ignored him and entered the grocery shop. Outside Meredith was increasing his offer for the barrow. Parr got down to work. He still had almost an hour and a half left. He calculated that he could fill the barrow with essentials without overloading it, wheel it fairly quickly to a hiding place not too far away and then return to make at least two more trips, an amount of thought and labour that would yield him a larger store than anyone else in the Group could muster by depending only upon carrying crates and boxes manually. He loaded the barrow and pushed it out of the store. He decided upon a direction parallel to the town centre, away from the route the Group had taken to reach the shops.

He found a house well set back in its own grounds and surrounded by a high greystone wall. A bundle of rags and bleached white bone lay crumpled in the middle of the gravel drive. Parr skirted it without a glance, a callousness developed by frequent contact. The house was deserted, though the general state of chaos inside showed all too plainly that it had suffered a thorough looting. He picked a thickly carpeted upper room which had, if the gay wallpaper was to be believed, once served as a children's nursery. He piled up his boxes of tins against an inner wall and pushed his barrow back to the shopping centre. He saw Webb and Illingworth carrying a couple of heavy crates out of the New Inn but, there was no one in the grocery stores and he set to work reloading the barrow. The shop was becoming somewhat depleted but there still looked to be enough for the members of the Group to make use of in the time remaining to them. He wheeled the barrow back to the house he had chosen as a hiding place.

He had made his third journey to the house and was occupied with carrying his load upstairs when he heard a movement outside. He put the box he was carrying down quickly and moved to the side of the window overlooking the front lawn and the drive. Meredith was walking slowly and carefully along the drive towards the house. His feet were scuffing the gravel and he was making no attempt to hide himself. His right hand held a gun.

The fact that Meredith was here at his own hiding place,

thought Parr, could be sheer coincidence. He doubted it, however. It was far more likely that the Welshman had followed him deliberately. But why? For Parr's own stock of supplies? It seemed likely to Parr that Meredith had wasted some little time looting the bank. Perhaps he had taken too much time. Now he was coming to take Parr's own stock of supplies away from him. This seemed to Parr the logical explanation of Meredith's presence. He dismissed the idea of Meredith merely stalking him with the idea of harming him but without any thought for the provisions. Meredith would have had his chance for that without ever waiting until Parr reached the house.

Certain that Meredith meant him no good, Parr watched as the Welshman came closer to the house and disappeared from his line of vision. He removed his own gun from its holster and moved silently until he was behind the bedroom door. He listened carefully to the sounds from the floor below, hearing Meredith gently open the outside door and enter the building, hearing him slowly tread his way about the rooms, searching. Eventually, Meredith began to climb the stairs.

As he opened the bedroom door Parr stepped behind him, prodding him sharply in the back with his gun. Meredith swore loudly and began to turn.

"Drop it!" Parr spat at him. "If I have to use this, I will." He emphasised the threat by digging the gun further into Meredith's back.

The Welshman hesitated for a moment and then dropped the gun. Parr pushed him roughly into the centre of the room and bent to pick up the Welshman's weapon, carefully keeping his own gun trained on Meredith as he did so. His captive sank back to sit on the edge of the bed.

"Well, what have you to say?" asked Parr. "What are you doing here, following me?"

Meredith said nothing, but gazed morosely at the floor.

"Perhaps I should just shoot you in the leg and leave you here," Parr suggested.

Meredith looked up. "You wouldn't do that," he asserted. "How would you explain it to the others?" His speech was

slightly slurred and Parr realised for the first time that the man was drunk.

"No, I wouldn't," he agreed, "but I know what I am going to do." A quick glance at his wrist watch revealed that there was still some twenty minutes to go before the two hour storage period expired. "On your feet!" he ordered Meredith. "And start walking! If I have to shoot you I will. I'll take the chance that Myler will believe my story."

He held his gun trained on Meredith and walked him back to the shops. Danby and the three girls were sitting on the low wall of the garage forecourt. Danby drew his gun as the two men approached, laying it unobtrusively along his knee.

"What's the trouble?" he asked, rising as the two men came close. The gun dangled at his side.

"This swine . . ." began Meredith. Parr pushed the gun into his back, cutting him short. "Where's Myler?" he asked.

"There he is now," Danby indicated with his chin. Myler was coming up the hill towards them.

"What's going on here?" the Group's leader demanded as he came up to them, looking from man to man, from gun to gun.

"Leader," began Meredith hurriedly, "Parr jumped me as I was storing supplies. He would have killed me if Danby hadn't stopped him."

"This true?" Myler asked.

"No," Parr said, abruptly.

Myler looked at him. "The gun." He held out his hand. Parr reversed his hold and handed Myler the weapon. He took Meredith's revolver from where he had stuck it in his belt and gave that to Myler, also.

"Come over here," Myler ordered. He led Parr away from the small group. "Well?" he asked. He listened intently, without interruption, as Parr told his story. "That it?" he asked when Parr had finished. Parr nodded.

Myler led him back to the group which had now grown larger as others, who had completed their hiding of supplies, had joined it. "Quite a story Parr has here," he told

them. "Now you," he said to Meredith. He led the Welshman away from the group.

Danby kept his gun trained on Parr. It was interesting to note, thought Parr, that although no one spoke to him it was possible to pick out Meredith's supporters from the manner of the glances they gave him. Webb, he noticed, had moved closer to him and had his fists bunched. Parr casually took out a packet of cigarettes, put one in his mouth and lighted it slowly and deliberately.

Myler returned, the Welshman erect and brazen beside him. "Meredith and Parr have had a little disagreement," he told the group. "They both tell much the same story, how one was hiding his supplies when the other jumped him. This is serious. As you know, I've maintained all along that while we're a fairly unified group right now there's no telling what might happen in a year or two's time. The life of any one of us may well depend on the supplies we hide away. This needs looking into. Parr, Meredith, come and show me where you've hidden your little load."

He began to move off. Meredith followed him. Parr thought for a moment about refusing to go with Myler. He could object on the grounds that the cache was supposed to be secret, but Meredith would show Myler the house anyway. Also, such a move would hardly stand him in good stead with the Leader. He flicked his cigarette away from him and moved after the two men.

At the house Myler wasted no time examining the boxes which Parr had stacked in the nursery bedroom. One glance seemed to satisfy him. Without a word he led the two men back to the Group at the cross roads.

"Now listen to me," Myler said. "The two stories differed in just one small aspect. Parr told me that he had made three journeys to his hide-away, with a wheelbarrow he'd taken from the hardware store there. Meredith here only mentioned two trips. There were more supplies there than could have been moved in two journeys." He turned suddenly and without warning hit the Welshman hard in the face. "This rat here," Myler told the Group, "tried to take away what was rightfully Parr's. He could have tried the same trick with any of you."

The Group's anger was directed against Meredith. Parr noticed that Danby had to hold back Webb's arm to prevent him from hitting Meredith. I'm lucky, he thought. Had Meredith not made such a small slip in his story. . . . He hesitated to think what might have happened to him.

"He's drunk," Myler was telling the Group. "He thinks more about drinking his fill now than preparing for what might happen in the future. And then he's willing to try and take what someone else has worked for. I know just the place for him. Bring him along." He turned and walked towards the New Inn. Angry arms seized Meredith and dragged the luckless Welshman after Myler. Parr followed on at the end of the Group.

They took Meredith down into the cellar of the public house and threw him bodily into one of the vaults. He turned with a howl of rage and fear and tried to throw himself upon Myler. Danby hit him in the face with his pistol butt, sending him sprawling backwards. The Group left him moaning on the cellar floor. The heavy door was slammed into place and a rusting key forced round in the lock. The Group fell silent as they left the cellar.

"Now that we've stored up," Myler announced as they emerged into the sunlight, "we can skirt the town in that direction. There's a village of sorts about five miles away, where the road crosses the river. We'll rest up there for the night. I dare say that some of you would enjoy splashing about at the ford."

Meredith was forgotten. The Group, spurred on by thoughts of a welcome bathe, began to move away.

"One moment," Parr said, looking round at them. "Walker's missing."

The Group stopped. There was some quick looking round, from face to face.

"You're right," Myler said. There was more than a trace of annoyance in his voice. "He's had plenty of time. Something must have happened to him. Anybody see him go off? Where? Towards the town centre? We'll have to go and find him."

There was no argument at this decision. Whilst some of the Group would obviously have preferred to move on

towards the river, Parr realised that what had happened to Walker was of prime importance to them. Either he had deserted the Group or he had run into some misfortune. Desertion was simply not permitted. The safety of the Group might well depend upon its combined strength and a delinquent member could not be tolerated. Also a deserter could threaten the future safety of the Group by his knowledge of the supplies the Group had previously hidden. If on the other hand something untoward had befallen Walker then the Group had also to know what might it be. Whilst they had had no previous encounter with any other group of survivors in this area this did not necessarily mean that there were no other survivors.

The Group moved off towards the town centre, walking in single file, each member well spaced from the others, each member watchful and alert, guns at the ready.

They found Walker without difficulty. It had been arranged that they should.

He was hanging by the neck from one of the trees which lined the road. Parr did not need to be told that he was dead.

"I'll cut him down, Leader," Danby said.

"Wait!" Myler said. They were on the very edge of the town centre. A stretch of grassland, a tangled belt of overgrown parkland, lay between them and the buildings some hundred and twenty yards away. "Keep behind the trees," Myler warned them. "We've already made one mistake. Let's not make another."

"Walker wasn't a mistake, Leader," said Danby. "It could have happened to anyone."

"I didn't mean that," Myler said wearily. "It's obvious that whoever did this to Walker is watching us. They're probably in one of those office blocks over there. They'll know now just how strong our Group is."

"What are we waiting for then?" Illingworth asked, angrily. "Let's get over there and root them out."

"Get back behind that tree," Myler said. "How are you going to get across there?" He indicated the belt of grassland. "You'd be picked off like a clay pigeon."

"What do we do then?" Danby asked. "Walker's death

is obviously a warning to us to keep out. Perhaps we should just go back the way we came."

Myler ignored him. "What's that?" he asked, sharply. In the distance could be heard the drone of an engine.

The Group turned towards the buildings as the car emerged from a street, a mere dot in the distance. Some of them covered it with their rifles as it drove out towards them, a small black saloon which grew steadily larger as it approached, a vague symbol of an intangible fear.

"Don't fire!" Myler ordered. "They're flying a white flag." The car window was wound down. A white cloth of some description was being waved frantically at them.

The car drew up to the Group and stopped. Two men got out, tall, lean men with gaunt, severe faces. Dressed in neatly-pressed grey slacks and green shirts, they stood out in marked contrast to Myler's Group of dusty wanderers. The obvious elder of the two men wore a large cloth star on his shirt sleeve.

"Your leader?" he asked without ceremony.

The men around Myler stepped aside.

The uniformed man handed him a roll of paper. Myler unfolded it and began to read. "The Emergency Government of the Grand Duchy of Dalegate. . . ." He paused and looked up. The two men watched him coldly, without expression. Myler looked down at the paper. His face grew white. He crumpled the paper and threw it to the ground. "I won't do it," he declared. "I can't!"

"You have no choice," said the emissary, without emotion. "You're surrounded."

"I . . . I . . ." Myler faltered.

"Thirty minutes," the messenger said. The two men returned to the car, backed it away from the Group, turned round and drove back along the road.

The Group gathered round Myler. He looked older. His large frame had sagged and he had become merely a fat man, hot and tired in the mid-day sun.

"They want the girls," Myler said. "They'll allow us safe passage through the town if we leave the girls behind. "We're to send them across in half an hour."

There was angry discussion at this announcement. Parr

felt sick with rage. Myler had been constantly promising him his reward and now the girls would be abandoned. It was obvious from their comments that the other members of the Group felt much the same way.

"We can't do it," declared Cowan.

"What about what they've done to Walker?" Illingworth wanted to know.

"Look," Myler said. "No one wants to leave the girls here. But what are we to do? They say that we're surrounded. How are we going to get out of here if we don't do as they say?"

"We'll fight our way out," said Illingworth. Several of the others shouted their agreement.

"Just a minute," Myler said. "What do the girls feel about being left?"

Parr's heart sank. What was Myler thinking of? How could he maintain discipline and order without the reward system that the girls typified? The Group would degenerate into indecisive rabble. Besides, without the girls, what would the future hold for him?

"Wait!" he said. "It's not up to the girls to decide. We can't let them make this sacrifice for the rest of us," he rationalised. "We can't just leave them behind with the sort of people who would do this." He waved an arm in the direction of Walker's body.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the three girls bunched together and regarding him curiously. None of them spoke.

"You're right," Illingworth agreed. "We'll show these rats they can't do this to us."

"We're surrounded," Myler said, simply. "What alternative do we have?"

"We can fight our way out," Illingworth insisted.

Parr looked round him. "We don't know that there isn't an alternative," he said. "Let someone go over there to them and see what they say. At the same time we can learn something about the sort of life they lead and what their strength is. For all we know, this talk of having us surrounded could well be a bluff."

"That's a good idea." Myler seized eagerly at the straw

Parr had offered him. "Danby, Cowan, take this white handkerchief and get over there. See what you can do." He paused and then added, "Tell them that we'll shoot the girls ourselves before we give them up."

"What!" yelled Cowan. "You can't mean that."

"No, of course not," Myler said, "but what else can we say? Do we have any other bargaining power?"

"They'll know we're bluffing," Danby said. "I don't think I can carry it off."

"You'll manage it," Myler said. "You'll have to manage it. Just get over there. We haven't much time left."

The two men put down their guns and set off on the lonely march towards the line of buildings on the far side of the open grassland. The Group watched as Danby periodically waved his handkerchief in a slow and deliberate arc.

The gunfire came suddenly and decisively. Danby and Cowan fell down as though their legs had been scythed from beneath them.

"The bastards!" swore Myler. "Let's get out of here."

Even as he spoke all hell was let loose. Rifle fire behind them was reinforced by a shell which exploded some twenty yards away. Webb sagged to his knees as his neck and chest became a welter of red.

"Quick! *Quick!*" urged Myler. "Take cover! The house there!"

The Group turned and ran. Parr felt the raw heat of some missile pass close behind him and he heard someone gasp with pain. He ran on and dived into the doorway of the house.

Myler was speedily organising his defence. The Group split up, covering each of the front windows. Parr found himself kneeling beside Shelagh, both their guns covering the road. From the direction of the crossroads came the enemy, dodging from tree to tree, hiding behind garden walls and gate posts. The firing continued from both sides. "God!" Parr muttered to himself. "How do we get out of this?" For a moment the thought of desertion crossed his mind. "I could change sides," he thought. "I'll surrender. Living with these people will be better than dying with

the Group." The idea was wiped from his mind as Ashby, who was in the doorway, suddenly threw down his rifle and ran out into the road, his hands above his head.

"I give up!" he shouted. "Let me join you." There was a burst of gunfire and he fell into the gutter and lay still.

"Hell," said Parr. "We've let ourselves in for something here." He fired as something moved behind a bush in the garden. The movement stopped.

Myler crawled into the room behind him. "Gregory," he said, "Take these men out through the back door and see if you can circle round behind them. We'll give you cover until you get clear." He disappeared again, shouting an order to someone in another room.

"Come on," Parr said. "Let's go." Davies and Illingworth crawled out towards the back of the house. Shelagh looked at Parr, questioningly. "Yes," he said. "You too."

The back of the house opened on to a narrow high walled alley. Lester was crouching by the high garden gate.

"There's nobody showed up back here yet," he told Parr. "You'll be able to cut through the line of houses there and get round at the back of them."

Parr surveyed the alley. It was quiet, perhaps too quiet. Still, Lester controlled its approaches completely and any risk of danger would be better than being trapped inside the house.

"O.K.," he said. "Let's go."

The four of them ran across the alley and ducked into the gateway of the garden opposite. They cut through the house. Facing them was a thin bank of trees drawn out in a long line which stretched several hundred yards. They ran out across the street and threw themselves into the thick grass beneath the trees.

There was a sudden explosion of shell fire behind them. Above the houses they had come through billowed a wave of acrid smoke.

"Oh, my God!" yelled Davies. "Myler!"

Shouts of triumph permeated the clouds of smoke.

"I must get back and help," Illingworth said. He jumped to his feet.

Parr grabbed at his ankle and dragged him down.

"There's no sense in that," he said, holding his weight against the struggling form. "We'd be going back straight into the middle of them. We stand a better chance circling behind them like Myler told us."

The four of them wriggled through the long grass until they were parallel to the end of the line of houses. A crescent-shaped avenue sloped back towards the enemy's lines. The row of small houses, once-neat lawns and low garden walls afforded no cover.

We're beaten, thought Parr. We stand no chance at all of coming up on them unnoticed. There's only one way out of this mess and I'm taking care of myself. "Quick," he told Davies and Illingworth. "You two down here. Do what damage you can." It wouldn't be much, he thought, but he might as well give them a little hope. "If you can draw their fire I'll get round on the outside of this crescent and we'll have them between us. Shelagh, you come with me. Keep your gun ready."

Without waiting for an answer he jumped up and, crouching forward, ran round the corner. He heard Shelagh's feet clatter behind him. He stopped and took her arm as she drew abreast. "Quick," he said. "Down here." He began to run, half guiding her, half pulling as he forced her to quicken her pace. He turned a corner, ran down a street, rounded another corner. Anywhere, he thought, anywhere away from the fighting, away from the green shirts. Myler was gone, the Group had been destroyed. He could look after himself. He was better without the quick-tempered Illingworth and the apathetic, hang-dog Davies. Let them do what they could to hold back those green shirts. And Shelagh! He had Shelagh for himself!

He pulled her towards him. "I'll look after you," he said. "We don't need to go south. We can go back over the ground we've already covered. We'll be safe. And we know there's food enough to last us for years. Come on, let's get away from here."

"But, Myler . . ." she began.

"Myler nothing," he said. "Myler led us into this mess. We can get away. Come on, there's no time to lose."

"But Karen, Elaine and the others. . ."

"They're probably dead by now," Parr said. "We're together. Isn't that enough? We can be safe *together*."

He took hold of her arm again but she shook him away.

"Shelagh," he said. "Don't you *understand*?"

She didn't answer. Instead, she raised her rifle. He looked on without understanding.

With comprehension came horror, the horror of stark death facing him from the wide black hole of the rifle she held.

"No!" he shrieked. "*Shelagh!* Together. . . . We can be . . ."

She fired. She shot him in the head and in the chest. And as he fell she shot him again.

Then, weary of the nomadic slavery she had suffered, tired beyond endurance of the empty, insecure wandering she had experienced and he had promised, she turned away and walked back to the town centre and the green-shirted men.

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Sydney J. Bounds

WORLD OF SHADOWS

FATSO TATE CUT the motors and braced his three-hundred pounds for impact. His cocoon pendulated, then hung motionless. He unzipped, swung enormous flat feet to the deck and waddled across the cabin to a translucent port. He gazed outside, beaming satisfaction. He had hit the valley just right and the ship's hull was already half-submerged in fine golden sand. He watched a light breeze ripple the surface and thought: enough to cover his tracks.

He checked the atmosphere analyser; breathable. As he stood considering, one plump pink hand dipped into a plastic container and conveyed a candied fruit to his

mouth. He sucked noisily, enjoying the sound almost as much as the flavour.

It was working out. He had set down, undetected by the hunters, and soon there would be no visible trace of his planetfall.

He had everything in readiness. Operating the lock, he towed his lightweight sled outside, closed the lock again. He studied the slowly-sinking ship that had brought him halfway across the galaxy; in an hour, it would be gone.

He turned his attention to his new home. The valley was a shallow bowl reaching to tufted foothills backed by bone-white cliffs. The silence was disturbed only by a faint rustle of shifting sand, stirred into motion by a furnace-hot breeze.

High overhead, twin suns arced.

Fatso tossed another candied fruit into his mouth and champed. The two suns were the only snag he could see. This planet was the centre of a binary system, and he could expect no dark period. He caught up the sled-reins, draped them over his shoulders and set off for the hills.

He moved slowly, ponderously, stopping halfway across the bowl to look back. The ship had sunk, leaving no sign to show he had landed there; and already a ripple in the sand was erasing his footprints.

Fatso smirked. Now let the Patrol hunt him! Once he had put the valley behind him and made his hide-away, no-one would ever find him. He could lie low till the heat came off—though even then he would need to be careful where he started up again. They had long memories for a cop-killer . . .

That was the moment he first noticed his twin shadows. They sprawled across the sand, flat cut-out men in faint grey, imitating his slightest movement. He glanced up at the pearl-coloured sky, diverted by the notion: two suns, two shadows.

He hauled up the slack of his reins and plodded on, dragging the sled after him. The vegetation was sparse and stunted, a few cacti-like plants amid the projecting tips of buried rocks. And each had its own double shadow.

The enormous suns blazed and roasted his bare, greying

head. He wiped sweat-beads from his quivering double-chin and popped another candy into his mouth.

For some unidentifiable reason, the shadows of rocks and plants appeared denser, blacker than his own. And they moved, performing a kind of primitive jig.

Fatso stopped again, astonished, and the runners of his sled sank gently into the sand. The breeze might sway the plants, but never the rocks he thought uneasily; their shadows had no right to move like that. Even here, shadows must obey natural laws.

Then he noticed that they lay in more than the two directions ordained by the twin suns of this world. Shadow-shapes shifted and merged and reformed like ranks of dancers in the sand as he pulled his sled free and climbed towards the foothills.

He shrugged off a feeling of unease; he had something more important on his mind than refractory shadows. He had to find a hide-away before the Patrol arrived.

As he hauled his sled, he mentally reviewed the packs it held. He had plenty of food, so he had only to locate running water and he could hold out.

He imagined a gentle tugging at his ankle, glanced down and saw nothing to account for it. Then he frowned, his attention drawn to one of his own twin shadows. He watched it out of the corner of his eye.

It writhed, not following his own movements at all.

His glance darted sharply to his second shadow. This one was not even the right shape, but long and thin: and despite the heat, a chill shivered through his massive body. The sight was unnerving.

He took a sip of water from his canteen before moving on again.

Now he was nearly out of the bowl, toiling up an incline with the reins cutting his shoulders, breathing heavily. His shadows darted before him, weaving patterns that had no connection with his own movements, rippling like black surf over the dunes.

He wet his lips and looked up, ahead to the gaunt line of cliffs. There he would find shade and a cave—water too, he hoped.

He halted once more to chew a candy, stood rigidly motionless, yet still his twin shadows roved restlessly. Some freak effect of the binary system, he argued ; after all, this was an alien world.

Finally he reached low-lying foothills and glanced across them. Solid jet-black shadows stretched from certain prominences, adumbrations that seemed to project haphazardly in all directions.

Again, his attention was drawn to his own twins. They were darker now, stronger, almost as solid as the native shadows of this strange planet. They loitered behind him so he had to turn his head to watch them. He spied on them as if they were his enemies.

An idea exploded in his brain: as they gained strength, so they gained a life of their own. Fatso sweated, shook his head to clear it ; must have a touch of the sun, he thought.

He began to look for a cave, but his imagination could not easily be switched off. He pictured his shadows creeping up on him with tiny secret movements. Then he felt the tugging at his ankles again, stronger now, insistent.

He swung round. His shadow-hands clutched at outcrops of rock, striving to halt his progress, to drag him back. They were firmly anchored, stretched taut like black elastic, pulling, pulling. Suddenly they let go, snapped back at him like rubbery things.

Fatso screamed. Panic fermented in his brain, preventing coherent thought. He broke into a clumsy run, dragging the sled after him.

He could no longer ignore the shadows and the jerking at his ankles. He ran faster, faster, but they were joined indissolubly to him and he could not escape. He could never lose them. Never.

Their grip on him tightened. Native shadows reached out to join them and they seemed to gain new strength as if some unholy transfusion took place. Like leeches they clung, black and solid and straining harder, harder . . .

Ahead, sunlight glittered on water rippling over a pebbly bed. He saw the shade cast by a cliff wall, a dark opening. He dragged his sled into it and subsided, quivering.

Gradually, his pulse and heart-beat slowed. He wiped sweat from his hands and face. Now that he was in the shade, his night-dark twins ceased to exist and fear left him. He broke open a food pack and ate greedily, washed it down with the remaining water from his canteen.

When he had rested, he decided, he would move deeper into the cave out of sight. He had what he wanted now: shelter, and water within easy reach. Just a short walk in the sunlight.

He sat watching the suns move across a cloudless sky. Damned planet with no night, he brooded, and began a study of the shadows cast by cliff and rock and plant.

They weren't right.

As he looked, some seemed to break away, detach themselves, so he could not be sure what they were shadows of. They gathered in the sunlight beyond the opening of his cave, bloated distorted things from a nightmare. They writhed and changed shape and danced in wild abandon, mocking him.

Well, he didn't have to go out there . . .

Then he sensed the infernal tugging at his ankles and formed the idea that the dancing shapes were inviting his own shadows to join them. He tucked his legs under him and sat on them.

Heat-stroke, he thought ; he would be all right after he had slept.

The living shadows skimmed the ground, grew limbs that reached out for him. He stared in horror, shuddered, and closed his eyes.

Fatso slept, and when he woke, the obscene things were still there, dancing in the sunlight. He reached for his canteen—and found it empty.

He broke off a stem of cactus and sucked it. The taste was bitter and he spat out the juice. Nothing for it but to step outside to the stream.

He rose and picked up the empty canteen, cast a wary glance at the sky. No sign of a Patrol ship.

Then his gaze dropped to the sun-drenched sand and the shadows dancing there in silent mockery. They *were* living things ; he could doubt no longer. And his own

shadows . . . he blotted the remainder of the thought from his mind.

Panic welled through him. He had to get off this planet. To hell with the Patrol! Cops were something he could understand, and fight. He had to make a break for it—if he stayed here he would go insane.

And all the time, the shadows danced, waiting. Evil things of darkness they waited for him to break down, for his own two to join them. They reached out tentacles for him and he shuddered again.

Nothing he could do would ever drive them away—and there was no night on this world.

He felt desperate. The ship, get back to the ship and blast off. That, now, was his only hope. He left the sled. He did not want anything holding him back.

He gathered his strength for a burst of speed and ran out into the sunlight. A vicious jerking at his ankles almost pulled him over. His own two shadows were immensely stronger. They linked with the juicy-black adumbrations of rocks and plants, anchored like stout hawsers from which he must break free. He must!

He plummeted on while the shadows swooped in wild frenzy all about him. They circled him, black limbs joined to his own twins. He felt himself jerked this way and that and cried out in terror, "No . . . No!"

He was a puppet on strings.

His two black demons sped away from him, each in an opposite direction, straining to be free. Tears streamed down Fatso's cheeks as he was dragged to a halt.

The native shadows merged with his own dark extensions and helped them pull. They pulled in opposite directions so that he became the centre-piece of a terrible tug-of-war.

Fatso Tate knew what his end would be. He had time to scream once—a bone snapped, a tendon tore—before he was split in two.

A SURFEIT—A SURFEIT!

James Colvin



EVEN MY JADED old palate couldn't fail to be whetted by the great profusion of sf novels and collections under review this month, though by the time I had finished the batch I had suffered disappointments as well as pleasant surprises.

Samuel R. Delany, Ace Books' talented new "find", is not one of my favourites. His penchant for purple prose is off-putting, but there are definite indications that he is already learning restraint and will develop into an extremely good imaginative writer in time. *Empire Star* (Ace, 40c) is one half of an Ace Double (*The Tree Lord of Imeten* by Tom Purdom on the other side seems to be an attempt to cash in on the Tarzan boom, but that could be unfair). The opening is ruined by Delany's use of a technique borrowed from the worst kind of pulp writing and advertising copy writing, but ignoring this we find a lot worthwhile in this story of a young man on a bleak planet who is contacted by the mysterious, dying occupants of a spaceship that crashes on his world and told to take a message to *Empire Star*, hub-world of the galactic civilization of which he's a part. There are three kinds of mental "castes" in this civilization—simplex, complex and multiplex minds. The hero, Comet Jo, starts out as simplex. He sets off for *Empire Star* and there is someone ready to help him on every stage of his journey. This is mysterious, too, for even he doesn't know what his message is. There are lots of colourful, romantic characters who stick in the mind—including non-human ones like The Lump and Jewel (the multiplex narrator) and the plot is a complex one turning

on countless paradoxes. There are overtones of the Orpheus myth which I found hard to pin down, a leit-motif involving slaves called the Lll, who fill their owners with unbearable sadness, and, given more time, I think something very interesting could have been mined from this book. I felt it definitely could reward a second reading. If you want rich, baroque backgrounds combined with, on the surface at least, good, simple story-telling, *Empire Star* is for you. If Delany can be encouraged to tone down a bit on the adjectives we should soon have a young writer in America capable of equalling Roger Zelazny, whose own stylistic discipline should be a lesson to many of us, including Delany.

Philip K. Dick's *The Crack in Space* (Ace, 40c) is very disappointing Dick indeed. It is hard to believe that this is the author of *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (Cape, 21s). The world is overcrowded, large sections of the population are being put into suspended animation, a strange parallel Earth is discovered through a "crack in space", plans are afoot to shift the overflow there—but the world is already populated by a "Peking man" civilization who decide they want to invade our Earth.

The Worlds of Robert A. Heinlein (Ace 40c) is a collection of well-known Heinlein stories spanning a period from 1940 to 1962. They are *Free Men*, *Blowups Happen*, *Searchlight*, *Life-Line* and *Solution Unsatisfactory*. Essentially detection/crossword-puzzle sf, with technical problems substituted for locked room murders, these are well-told pieces by science fiction's answer to Agatha Christie.

The Atom Conspiracy by Jeff Sutton (Ace 40c) gives us a character sure to be one of many due to appear in a certain kind of sf—Max Krull "secret agent of the future". As the James Bond thing fades thankfully away up come the change-ringers who always exist in pulp fiction. Is there no end to the permutations? Atomic research banned—a plot discovered which involves illegal research. You've read it all before.

A thoroughly recommended, superb collection of stories edited by Christopher Cerf is *The Vintage Anthology of Science Fantasy* (Vintage Books, U.S.A., \$1.65). Twenty

short stories from Roald Dahl, Idris Seabright, Ray Bradbury, Theodore Sturgeon, Martin Gardner, John Wyndham, C. M. Kornbluth, Robert Sheckley, Jose Maria Gironella, John C. M. Brust, William Styron, Damon Knight, Fredric Brown, Clifford Simak, J. G. Ballard, Avram Davidson, Arthur C. Clarke, Alfred Bester, Walter Miller, representative of their best work. You will be familiar with a number of the stories, but here's your chance to get them all in one volume. Other stories will not be familiar to you—the Styron appears there for the first time—and are worth getting the book for, too. A solid, well-selected collection that deserves to become a "standard" reprinted many times.

Another good collection is Frederik Pohl's *Alternating Currents* (Penguin, 3/6). I'm inclined to disagree with the extravagant claims of the cover blurb that Pohl is "the Einstein of science fiction", etc. Pohl is a talented, fairly sophisticated science fiction writer who tends to specialise in social satire and is very good at extending a trend into farce or nightmare. The things he satirises, on the whole, are the things people grumble about on the commuter special. Pohl has an inventive but not really original imagination, however, and would be incapable of equalling the lyrical imagination of Einstein (who was a poet). Pohl is not a poet, and there's no reason why he should be. All that aside, I heartily recommend *Alternating Currents*. The style is good, the approach intelligent, and the construction generally faultless. *Children of the Night* is plainly inspired by Pohl's active interest in U.S. politics and is partially an indictment of American electioneering practices. *The Ghost Maker* is a much-collected fantasy about a supernatural experiment that goes wrong. *Let The Ants Try* is an sf horror story involving a time machine—another familiar story to habitual readers. The rest of this thoroughly entertaining collection consists of *Pythias*, *The Mapmakers*, *Rafferty's Reasons*, *Target One*, *Grandy Devil*, *The Tunnel Under the World*, and *What To Do Until The Analyst Comes*. Of this kind of smoothly told science fiction, there is little doubt that Pohl is probably producing some of the best there is nowadays.

Certainly at his best a much more emotionally powerful writer than Pohl, is Algis Budrys, whose *The Furious Future* has recently been published by Panther (3/6). My favourite is perhaps the least ambitious in its choice of subject matter. A story reminiscent of Graham Green, about a cashiered diplomat who is contacted by aliens planning to take over the world. He does the first decent thing he's done in his life and thinks this is enough to save him—it isn't. That's *The Man Who Tasted Ashes*. *Silent Brother* is, I think, the best "alien parasite intelligence" story I have ever read, and the others are all slightly sour stories covering a wide range—*Between the Dark and the Daylight* (people mutate to meet alien conditions), *And Then She Found Him* (people "invisible" to normal people), *The Skirmisher* (a man from the future stops the overcrowding problem at source), *Lower Than Angels* (over-lengthy story of a man trying to convince simple aliens he isn't a god), *Contact Between Equals* (a new twist on the eternal triangle), *Dream of Victory* (an android desperately wants to be wholly human), *The Peasant Girl* (supermutants rule world by kindness). This collection doesn't have the power of Budrys's best novels, but it's well worth reading.

The Squares of the City will doubtless get a longer review when it appears in a British edition. It's by John Brunner (Ballantine Books, 75c) and much longer than the average science fiction novel. Like *Alice Through the Looking Glass* it is a dramatised chess game but unlike *Alice* the book is not a fantasy—neither is it science fiction—it is a story of political intrigue set a short distance in the future. As such, it succeeds pretty well—although realism is sometimes sacrificed to "moves" in the game. A good, adequate novel that shows what Brunner can do when he sets his mind to it. More of it later.

Thoroughly recommended are the Penguin popular science surveys which can form the basis for any layman's or student's reference library. Three recent titles are *Penguin Science Survey B 1966* (7/6) which concentrates almost wholly on biology this time, with particular emphasis on experiments involving the effects of temperature

on human and animal life, *Penguin Technology Survey 1966* (7/6) which has a section on advances in industry (electrical engineering, oil and chemicals, electronic telephone systems, new methods of printing) and new processes and techniques (pressure shaping of metals, vacuum technology, computers in the control of industrial processes, digital computers used for design, value engineering) and a look into the future by H. Hurwitz called *Power from Fusion*; Brian M. Foss's *New Horizons in Psychology* (Penguin 7/6) is a collection of articles from a number of sources, some of them even slightly obvious to the lay reader, but most of them extremely interesting. They cover the whole spectrum of modern psychology, grouped under five general headings—Perception, Thinking and Communication, Origins of Behaviour, Physiological and Psychological states, Learning and Training, and Personality and Social Psychology. Professor Foss's linking commentary fills in the background where necessary. These three volumes are invaluable to the student and the layman who wants to be kept up-to-date—and to the science fiction writer, whether he is just beginning or well established. The last book mentioned has an exciting air about it which communicates itself well.

Polished, often funny and sometimes rather precious, the short stories in *The Worlds of Robert F. Young* (Gollancz, 18s) are on the whole good, imaginative entertainment with plenty of atmosphere that could to some extent be Bradbury influenced and bearing, though in nothing like the same degree, the same wish-fulfilling false note of *essential* unreality that spoils so much of Bradbury, too. There's a good parody of Bradbury in *Hopsoil* (about the blue sands of Earth), and the sentimental stories involving true love and time machines, like *The Dandelion Girl*, are more convincing than most. There's one story I found hard to read, *Little Red Schoolhouse*, about yet another wide-eyed little boy. American fiction's full of them—or him, for there's really only one and he figures in innumerable stories by different writers—and the only one I've ever liked is the first who was called Tom Sawyer. A clever little satire,

Romance in a Twenty-first Century Used Car Lot, about a world where all decent people wear "car-dresses", live in garages and if caught naked (not wearing a car) are prosecuted. Young has a tendency to over-write (the last story suffers from the joke being extended just a bit too far in places) and this mars the best story in the collection *Goddess in Granite*, about a gigantic statue of a woman on a distant planet that a man falls in love with and must obsessively climb to reach its eyes. It has a good ending—if a slightly obvious one—and is reminiscent of Ballard, though it's a trifle cluttered with needless bits of standard sf imagery and jargon which tend to distract one from the essence of the story. There are plenty of other stories, all well written, that are absorbing without being world-shaking—intelligent, stylish entertainment, in short. The first deals with the devil story I've been able to read with pleasure for some time is also in here, *Added Inducement*, in which people literally trade their souls for a new TV set.

Clifford Simak's *All Flesh is Grass* (Gollancz, 18s) is something of a disappointment. It is competently handled, the characters are adequate (if latter-day cardboard) and the plot moves along well enough. An invisible "barrier" goes up around an ordinary U.S. town, there's panic while they wonder what caused it and why it's there, a gradual discovery, a happy end with a high note of hope for us all . . .

I'm not a fan of Zenna Henderson, as I've said before. Her brand of sentiment doesn't entertain me and her brand of horror doesn't horrify me. Her latest collection (Gollancz, 18s) is called *The Anything Box*. I'd call it the nothing box.

The Star Fox by Poul Anderson (Gollancz, 18s) could be a sound, thoroughly relaxing escapist adventure story—if it weren't spoiled by Anderson trying too hard to make it something more. He takes it from the wrong angle and it doesn't succeed as a serious book or an out and out adventure tale. Anderson can write very entertaining tales of high adventure. But there's something strained in the writing of his more recent work and I suspect that he would

do better to divide his talents (of which he has many) rather than attempt a marriage of them. The basic set-up of this one is the meeting between two races in space—our own and the Aleriona. In a climate reminiscent of the rivalry between expanding European nations bent on colonising Africa, Asia and the New World in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Captain Gunnar Heim becomes a privateer against the Aleriona. A perfect background for an unpretentious action novel—but the writing lacks zip, the mood lacks conviction, and, apart from a few good images like the Walking Forest and the Slaughter Machines, there's little that's fresh in the book, little to stimulate the imagination—little crude sensationalism, if you like.

Psychogeist by L. P. Davies (Herbert Jenkins, 15s) does succeed as an sf thriller of Davies's usual pattern. A sleepy village is "invaded" by "something" from space. Reminiscent of the sort of thing that's often done on television—an updated version of a certain kind of supernatural novel—the book has pace and suspense, but nothing new for the sf addict.

Come Back, Dr. Caligari by Donald Barthelme (Eyre and Spottiswoode, 18s) is, quite frankly, not science fiction or fantasy, but Barthelme's short stories are sufficiently far out and bizarre to appeal to the kind of imagination that likes sf. The stories are a bit frenetic, a trifle brittle, sardonic and amusing. But above all they are serious and intelligent and stylish stories that could teach the average sf short story writer a thing or two. Many of them are almost surrealistic and teem with original images. Many of them, too, would fit into a magazine like this one or FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION—particularly stories like *The Big Broadcast of 1938*, *Will you tell me?*, *For I'm the Boy whose only Joy is Loving You*, etc., etc. In their use of popular images, their ambiguous dialogues, their bizarre, corrupt and crazy characters, they are reminiscent of Ballard and Burroughs with a dash of Ronald Firbank. Enthusiastically recommended.

Best SF 6, edited by pioneer sf anthologist Edmund Crispin (Faber, 18s) contains, on the whole, a kind of science fiction story about which I am neutral—good

stories, but not my stuff ; stories that are the equivalents of clever English detective stories, intelligently written, adequately characterised, skilfully plotted, and all coming up to a standard. They are written by writers who know their limitations. They succeed admirably as light, intelligent entertainment, they are tasteful, but to me without flavour—they contain little to stimulate me either intellectually or emotionally. Kit Reed's *Judas Bomb* is about how American teenage gangs have taken over the country and a plot by the adults to regain their power, James Blish's *A Work of Art* is that disappointing story about how Richard Strauss is resurrected, all musicology and no feeling for music, *A Life and a Half* by Frederik Pohl, an ironic little story about a man who might have saved the world from its present troubles, Bill Brown's *The Star Ducks* about a couple who take a landing from outer space with untroubled, matter-of-fact practicality. Other stories include *The Waitabits* by Eric Frank Russell, *The Fly* by Arthur Porges, *Kaleidoscope* by Ray Bradbury, *The Nostalgia Gene* by Roy Hutchins, *Camouflage* by Henry Kuttner, *Letter to a Phoenix* by Fredric Brown, *Death March* by Algis Budrys, *Weapon* by John Christopher, *Billionium* by J. G. Ballard and *Old Hundredth* by Brian W. Aldiss. Ballard's *Billionium* is one of the few stories he has written which, in the treatment of the situation and the manner of the telling, could be called humorous—and black humour at that. *Old Hundredth* is that beautiful, lyrical tale of an old, old Earth and the new races who are beginning to populate her (written specially for the 100th edition of NEW WORLDS, it is sentimental without containing a single note of false sentiment). Not all the stories are in the same mould, by any means, but—with the exceptions of stories like the Aldiss and the Ballard—the stories are a trifle too slick and unadventurous for my taste. This is, however, one of the "soundest" collections you could buy—not uneven like so many—and you can be sure that Mr. Crispin has unerring judgment in his selection of stories. It just doesn't seem to range widely enough for my taste, that's all.

Definitely the best of this month's whole batch is the

re-issue of Brian Aldiss's early collection *The Canopy of Time*. There was little need for me to re-read the collection for purposes of review—I've done it so often in the past for purposes of pleasure. Every single story sticks in my mind. Every one has an atmosphere and emotional approach of its own—all unmistakably Aldiss. Without looking at the contents page I can list them. *Three's a Cloud* about instant rapport between three people, so evidently based on the author's own experiences, *Judas Danced* about a paranoid killer in a world that has abolished death by means of time manipulation (what an inadequate description that is!), *All The World's Tears* (a world strangled by its emphasis on logic), *Who Can Replace a Man?* (a world populated by robots searching for their lost masters), *Visiting Amoeba* (one of the few stories successfully written in the second person). The other stories are *Blighted Profile*, *Gene Hive*, *O Ishrail! Incentive*, *Secret of a Mighty City*, *They Shall Inherit*. This collection cannot be overpraised for its sensitivity, its style, its imagery and its story telling. Every story is charged with a force of emotion which is so exquisitely controlled it never becomes crude, never sentimental, never bathetic. There is a strength about them, a sharpness that is unequalled in contemporary fiction. Aldiss might have had his flops occasionally, but he can afford them. Short stories like these and novels like *Greybeard* (Faber, 18s) are so successful in anybody's terms that there is little doubt in my mind that at his best he is the finest exponent of formal science fiction alive today. If you missed *The Canopy of Time* when it first appeared, make quite sure you get it now.

James Colvin

DANDELION MOONSHINE

J. Cawthorn

PUBLISHERS OF SF paperbacks, whose material is largely drawn from the magazines, define the novel in fairly elastic terms. Two examples occur among the titles reviewed here, the first being Zenna Henderson's *Pilgrimage*, published by Panther Books at 3s. 6d. Described as an absorbing novel, it is actually a number of short stories linked by the character of Lea, who is saved from suicide by the mysterious inhabitants of Cougar Canyon. Survivors from a wrecked interstellar ship, possessed of a variety of esp-powers, they maintain the outward appearance of a backwater farming community in the American Southwest. Listening to the account of their struggle to exist in, and adjust to, Earthly civilization, Lea gradually begins to face the problem of her own future again. Written in a high emotional key, the book suffers from a kind of folksy sentimentality reminiscent of Ray Bradbury in his dandelion wine mood. Readers who notice such things may consider that the cover scene does not match the terrain described in the story. This is because the artist has lifted, lock, stock and wagon-ruts, a picture of a Main landscape by the contemporary American painter Andrew Wyeth.

The cover of Lan Wright's *THE CREEPING SHROUD* (Compact Books, 3s. 6d.) is decorative but promises yet another tale of World Catastrophe. For the first chapter or two this is exactly what we get, as Dr. Peter Benbow pilots his hovercraft over the mist-drowned continent of Africa, ruminating on the relentless spreading of the Weed—Water Hyacinth—that has smothered lakes, rivers and oceans, destroying the climatological balance of the world. With the abandonment of the African bases and the return to Britain of Benbow and his pregnant White African mistress, Drusilla, the story begins to gather strength. Benbow, asked

to volunteer his scientific services on a secret project, finds himself a member of a colony on Mars apparently devoted to the settlement of the planet. Gradually he uncovers the real motives behind the actions of Dr. Mueller, the Einstein/Schweitzer figure who is the guiding genius of the Mars project. His subsequent return to Earth, and the revelations that follow, have painful and bitter consequences for both worlds and for his personal life. A fair balance is maintained between the fortunes of the central characters and the panorama of catastrophe against which they move, and though mutual deception, the impermanence of relationships and the fact that pioneering begins at home may not be new themes, they are not often so well handled by the Disaster School of sf.

A minor disaster in its own way is *THE CAVES OF MARS* (Ace Double, 45 cents.) by Emil Petaja. With an overall atmosphere suggesting Van Vogt adapted by Disney, it tells of one-armed ex-spaceman Ric Coltor and the statuesque, green-eyed Dr. Candida Lucas-Long (who may, or may not, love Ric's best friend, Dr. Alan Tork) and how they tangle with the would-be benevolent dictator, Dr. Morton Krill. By the use of an illegal drug prepared from Martian fungi, which cures all ills and causes the addict to glow in the dark, Dr. Krill plans to take over just about everything. Suspension of disbelief is not facilitated by the author's peculiar brand of English. "The lead-man in the doorway spit blast-fire again" is a notable example, to be translated as, "The blaster of the leading man spat fire again." Oddly, the climax in the Caves of Mars has an intentionally farcical touch which suggests that Petaja might better have written the entire story in this vein. But then, perhaps he did.

In *Space Mercenaries*, the reverse half of this double, Bertram Chandler adds one more to the series of space adventure tales that could be said to have begun twenty years ago with *Special Knowledge* (now rehashed and served up in hard covers as *The Deep Reaches of Space*, Jenkins). Then it was a 20th Century Merchant Navy officer snatched into the future; now it is a space-navy veteran, but the tang of salt water still permeates Chandler's

writing, giving a feeling of familiarity to his scenes of space-borne life while the social background assures the reader, even as Britain staggers into the 'sixties shedding overseas possessions like dandruff, that the sun never sets on the British Galaxy. The girls are still beautiful, intelligent and sufficiently sharp-tongued to scare the average sf heroine out of her tiny wits. Only the aliens fail to convince this time. Although vividly drawn, their nature seems too unstable for a race capable of building an interstellar society.

Continuing the adventures of Irene, ex-Empress of Outer Space and her husband Benjamin Trafford, late of the Imperial Navy, the story tells of their enlistment as blockade runners by the subversive organization, GLASS. Within the Hallichek Hegemony, a volume of space controlled by a race of birdlike beings, is a solitary human colony on the planet Antrim. Pulmonary plague has broken out there and drugs are urgently needed. The Hallicheki resent the colony and class the drugs as prohibited imports. The resultant blockade running involves some neat juggling with time and space politics. *Space Mercenaries* offers no novelties, but it is briskly and humorously told.

Briskness is absent from Andre Norton's *Night of Masks* (Ace Books, 40 cents.). Will Nik Kolherne, scarred young survivor of a spaceship crash, escape from the criminal ghetto of the Dipple? Will he lose the handsome new face given him by the mysterious Gyna? Can he save the kidnapped son of the Warlord from the horrors of the inimical world of Dis? A great deal of running and hiding and chasing goes on, but in the end the answers don't seem to matter very much. Not one of Miss Norton's best.

First published in 1935, John W. Campbell's *The Mightiest Machine* (Ace Books, 40 cents.) inevitably invites comparison with the epics of E. E. Smith. A quintet of humans in the Sunbeam, a spaceship designed by Jupiter-born Aarn Munro, are accidentally thrown into a parallel universe. They were preceded, several millennia ago, by the Ma-jhay-anhu and the Teff-Hellani, who also originated on Earth. These people, hereditary enemies, have settled on the planets Magya and Teff-el orbiting the stupendous star, Anrel, and carry on a ferocious war with weapons of ever-

increasing power. The mind boggles at the respective economies of these worlds, an item which Campbell wisely ignores.

Back on Earth, as the Ma-jhay-anhu tell it, they were the lords of a fair continent, Mahu. Up from a hole in the ground one day came the Teff-Hellani with their red skins, horns and cloven hooves, and began to eat the lords of Mahu. One thing led to another, science progressed, and eventually the continent sprang a leak. The survivors of both races fled in spaceships, still fighting, and—Space being big enough to accommodate any coincidence—were thrown into their new universe by precisely the same sort of accident that overtook the Sunbeam. The Earthmen join in the fray and are soon destroying battleships, burning up moons, and cracking planets with gusto and many a merry quip. Campbell, however, largely avoids the juvenile excesses of E. E. Smith and gives hints of the writer who created such stories as *Forgetfulness* and *Dead Knowledge*. Overlaying the delirious historical foundation is a dense mass of physics which sounds remarkably convincing to a non-scientific reviewer, and uncomfortably similar to current developments in nuclear slaughter. The climactic scene of planetary destruction is understated with an effectiveness that reduces the majority of sf's world-wreckers to peddlers of adjectives. The cover is atrocious.

The cover of *Behold the Stars* (Ace Double, 45 cents) is far from atrocious. Like the story which it illustrates, it is merely uninspiring. Kenneth Bulmer writes competently yet fails really to hook the reader's interest. The style suggests an attempt at a mid-Atlantic accent, regrettably including the phrase "in back of". As treated here, the message that War is Hell but sometimes Necessary and that pacifists can be villains, is unlikely to arouse any passionate feelings for or against. Over the whole story, as with so many British chronicles of interstellar warfare with aliens, hangs the shadow of World War Two; under each spacesuited chest beats the heart of a Battle of Britain pilot. Admittedly this may not trouble the huge potential readership raised

in post-war years, but it would be refreshing to find, now and again, a change in outlook.

Hooking the reader is practised more successfully by Mack Reynolds in *Planetary Agent X*, the other half of the double, but he has considerably less to offer. This is the second example of a non-novel, being two long stories concerning the same central characters. The first, published in ANALOG as ULTIMA THULE, presents that favourite sf set-up of the unconventional Government bureau where a surface appearance of disorder conceals the workings of some Pretty Sharp Minds. Section G covers Interplanetary Security among the multiplying human colonies on extra-solar planets. The customary idealistic recruit is handed the task of finding Tommy Paine, legendary upsetter of governments and cultures. He rapidly uncovers the secret of Tommy Paine, displaying in the process an incredible naïvety regarding the current and past history of his own era, particularly for a supposedly educated man; a device which clears the way for a series of little lectures on the general cussedness of human civilization. As a substitute for characterisation, Reynolds has his puppets yell at each other, drink during office hours and put their feet upon the desks. Deep.

By sleight of pen he uses the framework established in *Ultima Thule* to put across *Pistolero*, which sounds like a Western, and is. A slightly-built young killer with buck teeth, a city kid called Billy—familiar? Turn him loose in a future version of Washington, give a slight twist to the old tale, and there you have it. That anyone should attempt to sell this to an sf magazine is mildly surprising; that it should be accepted is astounding.

What would be the consequences if five alien structures of colossal size and unimaginable purpose were placed upon Earth with total disregard for the safety or welfare of humanity? And if the aliens scattered rubbish with intriguing colours and shapes and possibilities where certain people might gather it? In *The Day of the Star Cities* (Ace Books, 40 cents) John Brunner tells with pace and force of the upheaval that might follow, and of its effect upon a group of people who are for the most part self-seeking

and somewhat unpleasant. The resolution of the situation makes it difficult not to sympathise with the ruthless aliens.

With a cover that complements perfectly the *fin de siècle* mood of the writing, *The King in Yellow* (Ace Books, 45 cents) offers nine stories by Robert W. Chambers, whose talents as author and artist flourished around the turn of the century. Ace Books are guilty of a misleading omission, to phrase it politely, for nowhere do they mention that only five of these stories are properly fantasies, and that of the five only four relate to the King in Yellow. The fantasy items occupy slightly more than half of the book and are undoubtedly worth the full price by themselves, ranging from the eccentric horror of *The Repairer of Reputations* through the superbly evoked emotional and physical corruption of *The Yellow Sign* to a slightly disappointing account of displacement in time, *The Demoiselle D'ys*. The balance of the stories deal with Americans in Paris, light-hearted and tragic, all skilfully handled and displaying a considerable talent for humour. Was 19th Century Paris really like this, or is it simply the most desirable of Chambers' fantasies?

J. Cawthorn

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. . . it is the pace, action and mystery of adventures on other planets as in **JOHN BAXTER's** novel

THE GOD KILLERS

. . . it is the moving fascination with strange states of mind in **PETER TATE's**

THE GLOOM PATTERN

. . . it is the atmosphere of R. M. Bennett's **WHAT PASSING BELLS?** the irony of Ernest Hill's **THE SUB-LIMINAL** . . . and it is much, much more besides, as you will discover.



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