CORGI 0 552 10022 6

New dimensions in SF with stories by
Michael Moorcock, Keith Roberts,
Joanna Russ and many others . . .

NEW WORLDS NINE

Edited by HILARY BAILEY

NEW WORLDS 9

is a collection of stories, illustrations, and criticisms from the world of science fiction. Talented newcomers and well-known established authors are published side by side in this exciting and fascinating forum for the s.f. media.

Edited by HILARY BAILEY

Also in the NEW WORLDS series

NEW WORLDS 10

to be published by Corgi Books

New Worlds 9

Editor: Hilary Bailey

Art Editor: Richard Glyn Jones

Literary Editor: M. John Harrison

CORGI BOOKS
A DIVISION OF TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS LTD

NEW WORLDS 9

A CORGI BOOK 0 552 10022 6

First publication in Great Britain

PRINTING HISTORY
Corgi edition published 1975

Corgi Books are published by
Transworld Publishers Ltd.,
Century House, 61–63 Uxbridge Road,
Ealing, London W5 5SA
Made and printed in Great Britain by
Cox & Wyman Ltd., London, Reading and Fakenham

CONTENTS

New Worlds 9

THE MINISTRY OF CHILDREN

by KEITH ROBERTS

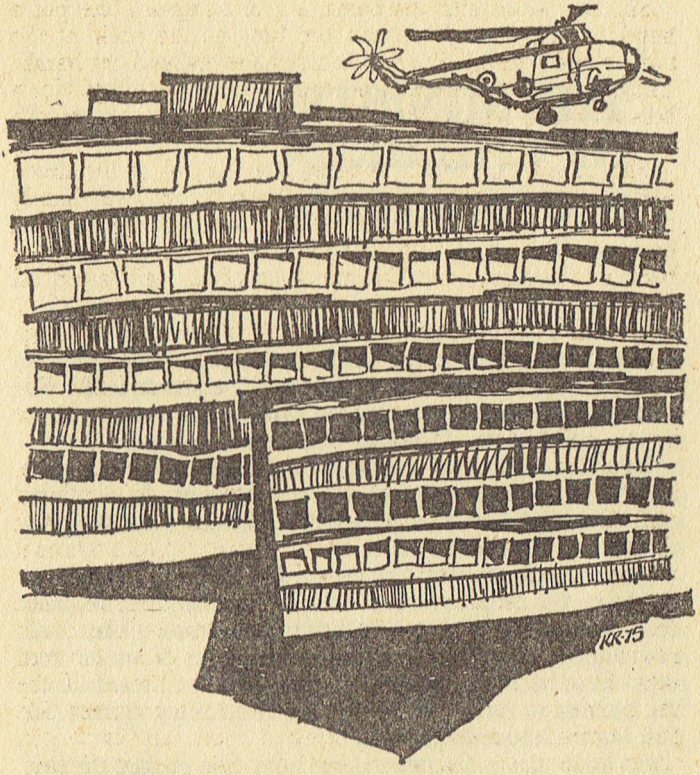
1

PAMELA WAS WASHING her hands in a bowl of soapy water and broken glass, and didn't seem to understand; and Liz's voice had gone so that the harder she tried to shout to stop, the less sound came. The water had turned from pink to scarlet before she managed to speak; then it was only a whisper, but Pamela smiled and turned. 'It's all right, bunny,' she said. 'It doesn't hurt a bit. Honest . . .' She held out dripping red paws; and Liz shrieked.

The dream flicked off; and she sat up shaking. Light was in the room; the calm cool light of early morning. Somewhere close, from the lilac or one of the big pear trees, a blackbird was singing; and there was a far-off whisper of sound that might have been a tractor, fields away. The rest was silence. She listened to the quiet, feeling her heart bang against her ribs; but the house stayed still.

She knew she had screamed out loud. She pushed the hair from her eyes, sat a moment with her face in her hands trying to make the dream go away. She was still shivering; and her nightdress, no longer sweet-smelling, clung to her stickily. It was a pretty dress, ribboned and with cheeky matching pants. She'd run it up herself a year ago, from a simplicity pattern. She had been pleased with it then; now, she thought it made her look a fool.

She rubbed her face and swung her legs from the bed. She stood up, leaning fingertips lightly against the wall. She felt giddy; and her head was starting to throb. She opened the door and walked to the bathroom, steps muffled by the thick carpet. The bathroom was carpeted too. It was a big room, tricked out in blue and gold. An air of decadence always hung about Pamela's wilder flights of interior fancy.


KR-75

She ran water into the basin, shivering again. She put a hand to her throat, touched the bow at the neck of the nightie and paused. She had decided she disliked her hands. They were short-fingered and square, almost stubby. Not a horsewoman's hands. Mrs. Properjohn had a horsewoman's hands; sinewy, and boyish.

She pulled the ribbon undone, stepped out of the dress. She washed herself to the waist, keeping her eyes lightly closed. The water was barely warm. The boiler fire must have gone out again. Pamela had overspent on fuel coupons back in February, and the knock-on effect had lasted till June.

She picked the nightie up, walked back. She got into bed, pulled the quilt to her chin. No sound had come from her mother's room; so perhaps she hadn't disturbed her. She listened again, holding her breath. The habit of secrecy, once begun, had become compulsive.

The sun had crept round to the window corner now, throwing a single spear of light across the white-painted wall. Often as a small child she had lain like this, watching the solitary shaft glow and brighten, steepening its angle as it changed from orange to yellow. That had been when her father had been alive, before they sold the farm. In those days the house had been thatched; so as she lay she could hear the secret scuttlings of mice and birds. Now, the roof was of corrugated plastic. They had torn the thatch off the same time they grubbed out all the hedgerows and trees. She still remembered how bitterly she had cried; but that was in the past, long ago. She was fifteen now, past the age of tears. Adults didn't cry; besides, it was dangerous.

The headache had not left her. She let her eyes drift closed, knowing she would not sleep. The church clock struck distantly from the village. Six fifteen. Forty five minutes to breakfast; an hour and three quarters to the bus, two and three quarters to School.

She found she was clenching her hands under the quilt; and her heart had begun to thud again. She tried to make herself relax, emptying her mind carefully, thinking of nothing at all. After all, she told herself, it was Friday; and Friday wasn't all that bad a day.

Soon, very soon now, she could tick off another week. Which left just four to end of term. She would be safe then, for two glorious months; and after that, only another year.

The short term to Christmas, the long drag in the spring – though there was a ten day break – then summer again, and finished. For ever. And perhaps then, if the Properjohns kept their word, she could go to them full time; work with the horses, and about the house. Maybe even – and her heart gave a positive bound – learn to ride.

She let her thoughts drift round, guardedly, to David Properjohn himself. He was in his second term now as MP for the area; it was that, and that alone, that gave him entitlement to the rations needed for horse ownership. Now the Properjohns owned not one horse but three; something nearly unheard-of. The big bay, Helen Properjohn's palomino – privately Liz thought all palominos idiots, but the creature was certainly glorious to behold – and the stocky, barrel-chested little pony shared by the children. She would ride the palomino, almost certainly; she'd sat him already once, in the privacy of the stable yard. And David Properjohn – but that was a thought to be closed off secretly, silent and firm as a tap. There. There was no thought.

Certainly he was good-looking, with his corn-coloured hair and keen blue eyes; even the people who didn't like him admitted that much. He'd kept his figure too, he looked about twenty-five.

She moved her legs in the bed. So much in her life that seemed wrong somehow, that she just couldn't understand. She thought bitterly of the fantasies she had once entertained, that had come to her unasked and that wouldn't be driven away. It had seemed at one time she couldn't look at Helen, or speak, without a hot little wave of resentment and jealousy; till the day in the kitchen when she caught the older woman watching her and saw the amusement and worse, the compassion. The storm that broke then was none the less shattering for its silence; now, she was an adult.

It seemed she must have dozed in spite of herself; for the clock on the bedside table had drifted round to seven. She heard the click of her mother's door and closed her eyes, simulating sleep. Not that Pamela would come into her room. Then the clitter-clitter of Sheba's claws on the kitchen tiles, squeak of the side door bolts; and from outside, a bark.

She called, in answer to her mother's shout; rose, and dressed. Blue skirt, white shirt and tie, white ankle socks, sandals. The safe, private time was over; this was the real

start of the day. She felt the faint fast trembling inside her, the sense of unreality; fingers numb on the buckles of the shoes, feet not quite touching the ground. And somewhere the growth of fear; like a little cold round white stone.

She tidied her hair, ran downstairs. Pamela was working already, poking absentmindedly at a bowl of grapefruit while she flicked over sheets from a pile of typescript on the corner of the kitchen table. She was wearing jeans and an old grey sweater, and the heavy hornrims she called her office glasses. A leaping thought almost made the girl plead to be allowed home for the day; Pam would probably give in. She resisted it. Absence was an abnormality; there must be no abnormalities of any kind. Instead she said, 'Can I have some codeine? I've got a bit of a head.'

Pamela looked over her glasses tops. She said, 'Were you up in the night?'

'I went to get a drink.'

Her mother said, 'I thought I heard you shout.'

Liz said, 'It was only a dream. It was silly.'

She made herself eat cornflakes and toast. She said, 'How's the book?'

Although they dealt with a way of life that had never existed – or maybe because of it – Pamela's books sold well. They kept her and Liz in what was these days the almost unheard-of luxury of a house of their own.

Pam lifted the filter from the coffee jug, poured. She said, 'It's going O.K.'

Liz said, 'I don't think the highwayman should be a foreign prince at all. I think he should be a frog in disguise.'

Pam laughed. She said, 'Funny bunny.' She smoothed her daughter's hair, looking at her sharply. She said, 'Are you all right, Liz?'

'Why?'

'You're a bit pale.'

Liz said, 'I'm O.K., honest. Got to dash. 'Bye.' And then it was her shoulderbag from the pegs, check for keys, season ticket; and Sheba running with her, down the path to the gate. She shoved the big dog in the chest, heard her bark as she skirmished back to the house. She thought, 'She loves me too. But she can't help me either.'

The bus came into sight as she neared the stop at the far end of the village; a white British National, well battered

about the side and with a star-shaped smash in one of the windows, still unfixed. She climbed aboard, seeing with relief that it was Ian on duty again. He sat up beside the driver, a moustached, thickset young man in blue uniform shirtsleeves, his pistol belt turned so that the holster sat comfortably in his lap. He grinned at her and she smiled back, nervous and quick, ducking her head at the instant storm of catcalls. She slid into the only vacant seat, kept her face down till the noise subsided fractionally. Somebody – one of the Fourths – shouted, 'Lizabeth Manley. Can't get a bloke.' Then, *sotto voce*, 'Has to rub herself off every night.' The noise peaked again, and the policeman glared round angrily. But the driver had crashed his gears, she doubted that he had really heard.

These country buses weren't too bad; most of the real trouble came from the town mob. But window-smashing had been on the increase again and a couple of drivers had been roughed up, necessitating the guard. She had had her hair filled with glass, and a girl she knew slightly had needed stitches in her cheek. Ian had been on for a week now; she guessed this would be his last day. It would be the other one next week, the sallow one with the bad skin. She fancied he looked at her oddly, and she never quite knew how to meet his eyes. Ian she liked. He owned an Alsatian too, a big cream bitch he'd saved from being put down because of her colour. He sometimes used to walk her over the Common of an evening, and Liz would talk to him by the gate; odd little conversations about obedience training, and why bullets spin. And once Angela had called him into the house to drink a glass of chilled beer. Then, she could chatter to him readily enough; here despite the smile he seemed remote. As if he too was acting a part he didn't understand.

She opened her bag. She had set herself to read Jefferies' *Bevis*, although the authorities rather frowned on the book for its middle class overtones, and had reached the mystical chapter on the zodiac. She read slowly, trying to close her mind to the din round her; she was unwilling to reach the end of the long novel, let the calm, golden nineteenth century slip away. The journey was uneventful. Once some missile bounced over the seatback, rapping her sharply on the shoulder; and once a metal pellet slapped viciously into the windowframe by her head. She shrank lower in the seat and

turned the page. They wouldn't chance too much; not with the policeman there.

She closed the book at a few minutes before nine. The coach was rolling through town centre now; she put her hair back and swallowed, waiting as ever for the first sight of the School. There it was now, shouldering over the new facades of office blocks that lined the High Street; a great slabsided box, tier on tier of windows flashing back the sun as the vehicle turned in alongside the main facade. Beyond were other high boxes and still more; Pre-Nine and Pre-Eleven Blocks, Lab Block, Admin, Sports Tower. Some, the nearer, were linked by airy corridors packed already with jostling black blobs of heads. All of it impersonal, vast; all of it the Duke's domain. The bus turned again, slowing, chasing its own cool oblong of shadow; and she jostled to the head of the steps, stood waiting for the doors to whiffle back. She jumped down, pushed free of the mob, turned left into the Main Quad, lost herself in the scurrying swarms of children. Then a quick dash for B Block lavatories, five precious minutes to herself inside one of the few cubicles that locked before First Bell pealed through the building and she headed out into B Concourse on her way to her Study Group.

As ever, the noise hit her with almost physical force. Noise, and heat. Sun burning through the high glass sides of the building; and the crash and clatter of footsteps, shouting of hundreds of voices, unremitting screech of the trannies without which few of the pupils ever moved. She weaved and dodged, scurrying between the harassed knots of masters, avoiding the thirty and forty strong gangs of Fourths and Fifths with their jeans and sweatshirts, tank tops and straggling hair. Screeching girls clung to their arms, girls with eyeshadow of silver and gold, girls with lipstick of green and blue, girls with masses of frizzed-out hair, like insane busbies two feet and more across; black girls and white girls and brown, girls who showed their bellies, and girls who showed their boobs. She caught up at last, thankfully, with a dozen of her own Group, and joined the jostling mob of younger children pushing its way up the stairs.

Once more, the long shaft of sunlight lay across the wall; and once more she watched it from the bed through half-

closed eyes. Her hands lay at her sides. The palms were damp. She curled her fingers, gripping the counterpane.

She had been running, endlessly it seemed, through the endless corridors of the School. And always as she ran she could hear the patter and whisper of pursuit, the rising snatches of laughter and excitement. Escape was the one thought in her mind; but it seemed that try as she might, each passage traversed, each corner turned, merely led her deeper into the place. Till finally, against her will, feet dragging, she reached the vast Main Concourse with its radiating web of walkways. And they were all full, each corridor, each gallery; full of folk she could scarcely see, but who rustled and lisped and hooted. The noise, the laughter, grew worse, ringing inside her head; till she looked down and saw she was wearing nothing but the silly floral pants. She crouched then, sobbing with shame; and silence fell.

In the quiet, his footsteps sounded very clear. She tried not to look up, but her eyes were drawn. He seemed taller even than his six feet two. She saw his hair, the pale high coxcomb so blond it was nearly white; the creased leather he wore winter and summer; and his eyes, bright and pale and quite, quite dead. In his hand he carried a pair of shiny cutting pliers. He stooped over her; and gently, very gently, reached with the pliers for her fingers.

She sat up and pressed her knuckles to her mouth. She was remembering the other thing again.

It was night. Six months ago now. The night the terror started. She had been walking back to B Block library with an armful of books, and had taken what was for her an unusual route. It led through a little-frequented Stores Section to a Link that ran beneath the roof of one of the machine shops. She had thought at the last moment that the doors to it might be locked; but they eased open when she pushed them with her back. Beyond, the glass-sided gallery was in near darkness. One lamp, burning below, cast funny upside-down shadows across the panes; and a machine was running, with a high thin whine.

She stared down, at the group struggling beneath her. At the black leather jackets, the stocking masks that turned heads to grotesque turnips, the Technician in his white smock, blood-spattered already down the front. She heard the blows fall with faint flat thuds; then his hand was pulled forward, knuckle thrust to the edge of the grinder. A white

vee opened instantly where bone had been; then it was the back of the hand, the whole hand, hard down, and her own scream mingled with the noise that came from below. She saw them cut and run, Macanulty, Osgood, Kolaszynski and the rest, she knew them easily despite the silly masks; but of them all, only the Duke looked back. She was sure she saw the glitter of his eyes.

She couldn't look over the gallery edge any more. She crawled away from it panting, on hands and knees.

Pamela called from the kitchen, 'Bunny, it's half past eight.' She answered mechanically, reaching for sweater and jeans. She angled the dressing-table mirror, started working at her hair. It was nice hair, lustrous, brown and long.

She didn't mind her face as much as her body. She might, she supposed, even be called pretty. Brows level and not too thick; cheekbones broad, eyes big and dark blue. Old-fashioned somehow, like a toy. David had once called her his little Dutch doll; and pleasure had warred with resentment.

She rubbed her eyes, the corners of the lower lids. She decided she was looking drawn. She wondered if sleeping tabs would help; but she daren't ask. Pamela would want to know too much.

She told herself it was all nonsense really. He was only a Fifth Former after all, just a Fifth Former. Dave Duquemin. French name, she supposed. Only natural for him to be called the Duke. And Osgood and Kolaszynski, the strong-arm men. They weren't too bad, they'd never bothered her. Anyway, they didn't beat up females. They knew, *he* knew, someone had seen. But it had been dark; and she had crouched down, out of sight. They couldn't suspect her. Why her, out of over two thousand girls?

It was no use. She knew, and the School knew, that the Duke had his methods. He was different. He wasn't like the rest, he never *did* anything. You never saw. But you knew. If you found a kitten dying in the yard with its claws torn out by pliers, then the Duke had been at pleasure. If a store-room burned or a lab was smashed, the word went out like ripples; the Duke had been displeased. If a master was beaten or the windows smashed through a hundred yards of Links or a library fouled with shit, then the Duke had exacted a revenge. Because the School wasn't run by its hundred teachers, or its twenty Block Controllers or its four headmasters. He had spies, they said, in every Group and

Grade; nothing went unremarked. She had seen, and he would find out. Maybe not yet; but in time. Till now, she had been left alone; but he would be in no hurry.

Pamela called, 'You'll be late at the Properjohns'.'

She said, 'I'm coming.' She parted her hair, twined it swiftly into two dark plaits. She hurried downstairs, ate cornflakes and an apple, put on a light jacket and walked round to fetch her bike from the shed.

The morning was fine and warm, the sky cloudless, promising a day of heat. Cycling the three or four miles to the Properjohns' spread she felt her spirits lift fractionally. After all you couldn't worry all the time, on and on for ever; nobody could. After a certain point the mind stopped, just shut off. And she had a weekend ahead of her, a whole weekend.

The house was big, one of the biggest in the district; a farmhouse and its adjoining barns, skilfully converted a few years before when all the separate farmers in the area sold out to the State, turned their lands into one great Collective. Now, in high summer, the place was looking at its best; lush green lawns, blue of ceanothus by the porch, yellow and red of roses against the white walls. Helen had laid out a rose garden a few years before; she could see the tall trellises topping the screening hedge, each with its mass of bloom. It was a place she loved to sit in, at lunch times and when the day's work was through. There were sundials, neat little gravelled walks; and a statue in real lead, a fisherboy casting a net.

The horses were out; Gaylord, the palomino, watched her quizzzically over the paddock fence. Helen waved from the house; she waved back, rode across the stable yard. She leaned the bike against the wall, turned the corner to the tack room and the store where the garden tools were kept; the spades and rakes, mowers and hoses and scythes.

She stopped quite still. The yard looked as it always looked, cobbles swept and shiny, neat white walls. The old cart stood under its lean-to roof; next it, the windows of the tack room were a dark, opaque red.

She walked to the door, slowly, not feeling the sun on her back. The latch was undone; she pushed it, and stepped forward.

She supposed, later, her cry must have been heard from the house. Certainly Helen met her half-way across the yard;

Helen with her swinging copper hair and strong, lean hands. She was trying to speak, but could not; the shock of what she had seen was still too immediate. The piles of harness fragments, cut and hacked; saddles scattered and slashed, the broken bottles of liniment and oil; round walls and windows the sprays of crimson paint and everywhere long stinking smears, on which the flies were already working.

David was on the phone. She heard him distantly. He said, 'Yes, Properjohn. Yes, at once. I would be obliged.' She heard the tinkle as he put the handset down.

She was sitting, in the kitchen. She couldn't stop the shaking in her legs and hands. Helen said, 'Here now. It's all right.' She tried to push the glass away, but the firm hands were insistent. The liquid stung her throat. She choked but she couldn't stop the crying. She said, 'It was me, it was me. Oh God, it was me.'

There were tyres on gravel. The kitchen door was ajar; she saw the big lamp on the car's roof, the cream and pale blue sides. A door slammed; footsteps crunched, receding. A handkerchief was in her hand; she supposed it was Helen's. She snuffled, tried to blow her nose. The footsteps came back, and voices. Helen was standing close, one hand still pressed to her shoulder.

The figures bulked at the door. Ian and another policeman, a fair-haired man she didn't know. Both were looking grim. David Properjohn said, 'I don't know what she meant. We couldn't get anything else out of her.'

She was sobbing again. She wanted them to go away. Ian squatted in front of her. His voice was very gentle. He said, 'Liz, I want you to listen to me. Then I want you to answer, carefully. Do you understand?'

She shook her head, crammed the handkerchief against her mouth. He caught her wrists, pulled them down. He said, 'Liz, you said, "It was me, it was me." What did you mean?'

She tried to pull away; but he wouldn't let her go. He said, 'Look, I want to try and make you understand. We know you didn't do it. But if you know anything, anything at all, I want you to tell us. Nobody's going to hurt you.'

She wrenched back. *They* knew, the Duke knew. It was her they were after. She pressed her face to Helen's hip. It seemed the room was starting to spin.

He said. 'Lizabeth, you know you can trust me. Don't you?'

She hadn't known what she was saying. It was seeing it . . . the shock . . . she hadn't known what she was saying, *she didn't know, she didn't know, she didn't know . . .*

He said, 'All right girlie, all right. It's all right.' He stood up; and she heard both men talking to David Properjohn. The M.P. said, 'O.K., I'll see to it. Yes, she'll be O.K.' They moved to the door. He said, 'Yes, thanks indeed. I hope you can.' The tyres scrunched again. The doorway lightened.

She sat up. Helen was putting the jacket round her shoulders. She said, 'I'm sorry. Can I wash my face?'

Helen said, 'David's getting the car out. He's going to take you home.'

She said, 'Please. No, please . . .'

The redhaired woman smiled. She said, 'It's all right. It was a terrible shock, we know that. You'll be best at home. Honest.'

She felt her eyes stinging again. She said, 'I'll clean it up.' But Helen shook her head. She said, 'Tommy will see to it. Look, the car's here now. Come along.'

It was a big car, low and wide and sleek. Her bicycle was strapped to the luggage grid on the back. She sat silently inside, hands in her lap. The interior smelled of leather. The door clicked shut; David Properjohn moved a lever, and the dark green bonnet slid out through the gate. He looked across at her, and smiled. He said, 'Better now?'

She said, 'I've never been in a private car before.'

He smiled again, and accelerated. When he reached the main road he didn't turn left for the village. Instead he swung right, on to the long road that climbed the downs. Ten minutes later he slowed to a halt and set the brake. He pressed a button, and her window whispered down.

They had parked on the crest of the hills. Below, farmland stretched in great swathes of yellow and green. Beyond were more hills; beyond again, dimly visible, the silver line of the sea. The air was sweet and keen, and a lark was singing.

Her head had begun to pound. She closed her eyes, lay back listening to the bird. She heard the little scrape of a match as David lit a cigarette. He smoked quietly, not speaking again; and she was grateful. When he had finished he said, 'O.K.?' She nodded, felt the faint vibration as he started the engine. He turned the car quickly, headed back the way they had come.

She was lying in her bed, watching the sky. The blue was deepening now, she guessed it was quite late. The blackbird was singing again; and from downstairs came a murmer of voices.

Her head was better. The doctor had been; a nearly unheard-of thing. G.P.'s didn't visit ordinary people in their homes, not any more. She remembered how strange it had seemed to see him standing there. She thought that maybe David Properjohn had sent him. Members of Parliament could do a lot of things other people couldn't; and he was her friend. She snuggled dreamily, thinking about Ian. She wished she could have told him what he wanted to know; but it all seemed unimportant now. Remote.

She listened to the voices from the lounge. One was David's. He sounded angry and tired. With both doors open and the house so still, she could make out most of the words.

'I don't think it was just vandalism. Not ordinary vandalism anyway. Neither do the police.'

She couldn't hear Pamela's voice so well. She guessed she was sitting on the far settee. She asked some question and David said, 'No, not for me. And Helen can take care of herself. But for the time being I really think . . .'

She was drifting off to sleep; and that wouldn't do. The conversation somehow concerned her, she was sure of that. She pushed herself up a little on the pillows; and Pamela's voice came clearer. She said, 'No, it's kind, but I wouldn't disturb her. She was sleeping a few minutes ago. The Doc gave her some real knockout drops.'

She thought, 'He's come to see me, of course.' She opened her mouth to call; but somehow it was just too much effort. She fell to dreaming about riding, and how it would be to be married to a person like David. She nearly slipped over the edge of consciousness but a sentence roused her. Pamela said, 'Well, I don't. I don't think it's anything to do with school.'

More murmuring, then her mother said, still sharp, "We all hear tales. But it would take more than that to convince me. After all, it's one of the best equipped in the country.'

She wished she could hear David better. He must be pacing about. She strained; but she missed his answer.

When her mother spoke again she sounded less sure. She said, 'Well, there was that of course. It was the night it

happened. She was dreaming, I don't think she knew. She kept shouting, about her hands. Not to hurt her hands.'

Something from David; and the tinkle of a glass. Pamela said, 'It's impossible though. It must have been a horrible accident, a wheel or something, wasn't it? But nobody saw it, the man himself said nobody else was there. And he admitted it was his own fault.'

She heard David quite clearly, all at once. He said, 'People will admit a lot for ten thousand pounds. And maybe he wanted to keep his other hand.'

Something else from Pamela, and he laughed. He said, 'Of course it's in their interest to keep it quiet. Ours too, if you like. That's the state we've got to.'

Pamela said defensively, 'I still think she'd have told me. She wouldn't keep it to herself. Not a thing like that.'

A silence. She almost imagined David smiling, slowly shaking his head. Then he said, 'You're a good Party worker, Pam, you know that? One of the best. Once you get your teeth in, you never let go . . .'

Her mother snapped an answer; and he said, 'I call it facing facts. And bending if you have to. That's what politics is all about.'

Pamela said bitterly, 'Bend, not break.'

The voices sank again. She heard her mother say, 'No, I'm not. She's been upset enough already.' Her eyes were slipping closed when the M.P. said more briskly, 'That's what next week's going to be all about. It's not "getting out of hand", it's out of hand already. It's been out of hand for years.'

Something from Pamela; and David said angrily, 'No, I haven't been a plaster saint. None of us have. But I can see where it's got to stop. And I'll stop it, if I have to tear that damned place open. One fact, just one hard fact. That's all I need.

Pamela said, 'You'll tear a lot more open if you do that.'

A pause; then he said, 'So be it.'

Her mother laughed. She sounded strained. She said, 'Then I wish you luck. Now I think we both need another drink . . .'

She was getting confused again. He was going to tear something apart, she didn't know what. She hoped he wouldn't hurt the horses. She closed her eyes, in the near-dark; and sleep claimed her.

She did dream, towards morning, but the dreams were harmless enough. They were of her mother, and the campaign she helped to run when David was re-elected. She remembered the cheering and the placards, the Party song roaring from loudspeakers; and herself with a great badge pinned to her lapel, handing out broadsheets from the rostrum while the microphones boomed. Later she remembered drowsing and waking, on and on through the long night while the votes were being counted; and the Returning Officer shouting the results and the whole place going wild, Pamela hurling papers in the air and running to where he stood on the Town Hall steps with Helen, planting a great kiss on his face while he raised his arms to the crowd, hair tousled and laughing, and she thought her heart would burst and couldn't understand why.

Somebody was shaking the foot of the bed, gently. She opened her eyes, saw the sunlight streaming in. She asked fuzzily what day it was, and Pamela laughed. She said, 'It's Sunday, and it's nearly twelve o'clock. How do you feel?'

She said, 'I'm all right.' She pushed herself up a little. She said, 'Pamela, I've got something to tell you.' But Pam laughed, saying, 'And I've got something to tell *you*.' She flicked the tip of her nose, playfully. She said, 'David came last night, while you were asleep. He left you a present.'

'What is it?'

Pamela said, 'Come on lazybones, find out for yourself.' She handed her a gay-wrapped parcel. '*Careful* . . .' Liz picked at the string, then the packing of the square cardboard box. She lifted out a model of a horse. A palomino. His harness was of real leather.

She turned her face away quickly, and Pamela said '*Ohh* . . .' She plucked the thing away, and kissed her cheek. She said, 'Come on silly bunny, no need for that. He's really very fond of you.'

But Pamela was wrong. The drug had left her; the tears were not of gratitude, but grief. She could never go back to the horses, not now. Everything, in the life she had hoped to lead, was ruined. The Duke had taken it, all of it, in his hands; and made it foul.

2

THE DOCTOR HAD given her a week's leave from School. She spent it mostly in the house and about the garden, walking Sheba in the mornings while her mother worked. Pamela asked no further questions, and Liz realized she was studiously being a Wise Parent. On Wednesday Pam took the midmorning shopping bus to the town. She wanted her daughter along, but Liz demurred. She wanted to go with Sheba, up through the woods. She would be all right.

She sat awhile after her mother had left, staring at the little horse in its place of honour on the sitting-room mantel. Then she got up, walked to the outhouse. She came back with the carton in which the model had been packed, still with its filling of creamy woodwool. She took the palomino down, put him away carefully. Later to her mother she merely said, 'It'll be all right. I'll put him back soon. But not now.'

The Properjohns had gone up to London and Pamela herself seemed prey to some inner excitement. Liz greeted her hintings with indifference; but on Friday evening she made an announcement. 'Bunny,' she said, 'I'd like you to watch TV with me this evening. At eight o'clock. Something rather special's going to happen. On B.B.I.'

Liz picked the paper up, and shrugged. She said, 'It's only a Party Political.'

Pamela said, 'I know. But it's an important one. And it's being given by a very special friend of yours.'

Liz stared at her. She thought dully, 'Not you, too.' But her mother's face remained bland.

At five to eight the set was turned on. At eight the time signal flashed up, and the British Broadcasting announcer introduced Mr. David Properjohn, M.P.

Television suited him. He looked, as ever, smart and at his ease. He sat in a lowbacked studio chair, a table at his side with water jug and glass; he stayed quiet, fingers steepled, while the Party song boomed into silence. Then he smiled.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said. 'Ladies and gentlemen and *children*, I'm not going to bore you tonight with all the good things my Party has done since we came back to power; or our record of successes over the last ten years. You already know most of it in any case. What I am going to do is tell you about something completely new.'

He leaned forward, seeming to stare at each of his audience individually. 'At our last election,' he said, 'we made a number of promises. Most of them we've kept. A few, unfortunately, we're still working on; because as you know, the last two years haven't been easy for the country – economically or any way. But one particular promise was very important to me personally; and I pledged, in my own campaign, to do everything in my power to see it was carried through. Tonight I'm able to tell you that I have succeeded.'

They were just words, and meaningless. This wasn't the person she knew, who owned horses and grew roses and had a red-haired wife. It was like watching a sort of talking mask. She would have risen, but Pamela laid a restraining hand on her arm.

David Properjohn was saying, 'It will come as a shock to most of you to realize that in this Welfare State of ours we still have a class of underprivileged people. A class many of whose members live – and this I know personally – in deprivation and misery, sometimes in fear. These people are the children of this country; maybe some of you listening to me tonight.'

She thought, 'What's he trying to do? What's he *saying*?' It was all so absurd. He knew nothing; as Ian knew nothing, and her mother. Nothing of what it was really like. What did any of them think they could do?

She had missed several sentences.

'I know,' he was saying, 'that you have your School Committees. I know that today you're taking a greater part than ever before in the management of your own affairs, but' – and he pursed his lips – 'this I also know, that it isn't enough.' He glanced down briefly. 'A year ago a girl called Susan Kilpatrick died, in greater Manchester, of malnutrition. She was nine. Six months ago – just at Christmas – a little boy called Jimmy Halloran was beaten so badly by his parents that he lost his sight. I could go on, and on.'

He took a sip of water. 'I'm not being alarmist,' he said. 'Neither am I criticizing the social services we already have,

because I think they're the finest in the world. What I am saying to all of you watching tonight is that mistakes can happen, errors can creep in. Because we're not perfect; and no system we set up, however careful we are, will ever be perfect either. We need something more. It's a need this Government has recognized for a long time; now, it has been fulfilled. From tonight, a new Ministry is coming into existence. It's been set up specially to deal with children's problems; their wants, their needs, their welfare. We're calling it the Ministry of Children; and I feel proud – and humble – that I have been asked to head it.'

Pamela said, 'It's splendid, isn't it, bunny? I'm so pleased for him.'

Liz turned, startled; and for a moment it seemed she saw her mother in a wholly new light. She thought, 'It doesn't matter what he *does*. What any of them do. Or what they're like.' Pam was basking, now, in reflected glory; she'd helped to install, not just a rank-and-file M.P., but a Minister.

David – she supposed she must get used to calling him The Minister as well – was winding up his speech. She knew he was nearly finished; she had listened to him, and watched, so many times before.

'In just a few moments,' he was saying, 'you'll see an address on the screen. I want you all – each one of you watching – to get a pencil and paper, and write it down. Then I want you to promise me something. If you're worried, or frightened, or in trouble; if there's something wrong, either big or small, and your parents can't help, or your school, I want you to write to me. And I'll make you a promise myself. I shall read every one of those letters. I maybe won't be able to see each of you in person; but I, and my Department, will do everything we can to help. That's what we'll be here for.'

He smiled again, and spread his hands. 'Write the address down now,' he said. 'Remember it; and remember what I've said. Good night; and God bless you all.'

Later that evening Pam said, 'You're looking a whole lot better now, Liz. I really think next week you could go back to school.'

'Yes,' said Liz. That'll be O.K.'

It was Tuesday night. No, Wednesday morning of course.

Very early, barely four. She stirred, half-awake. She had been riding the bus again, in the endless din. She had finished *Bevis*, she finished him last week, and tried to read *Hassan*. The prayer to Yasmin was beautiful, it had made her want to cry, but later the violence of the play distressed her and she had laid it aside.

The days had been like any other; the bus, then the run for the lavatories, the noise and heat of School; uproar in the Study Halls, the trannies, sun through the hot high panes. She had been counting the hours, nearly the minutes, each one a victory; but the enemy was Time itself, and she could never win. There was too much Time; even the eight days to end of term stretched like an eternity, and there was another whole year to run. There would never come a Last Day, a last time for the bus, an evening when she could walk away and be free, never to return. She knew now, she would stay at the School for ever.

Her absence had been noted, she was certain of it; it would be all they needed, the last piece of proof. The Fourths and Fifths were watching her, she was nearly sure. She had been jostled badly in the Canteen and on her way to her Study Group, and a filthy note had been somehow slipped into her pocket; so the word had gone round.

The Duke had a new girl-friend now, or so they said; Janey Hollis, from the next village but one. She usually caught one of the other buses but she'd started coming on hers. Her heart nearly stopped when she saw her fair hair in the little group by the halt. She'd seen him with her at break times, twice now; she was a tall girl, really pretty, you couldn't miss her. And once she'd turned and stared – straight at Liz – and said something to the rest and they had all laughed as she hurried away, trying not to run. She knew they turned and stared, she felt their eyes burn hotly on her back. Kolaszynski had been there and Osgood and two other girls – Sheila Brent from 5X Second and Patricia something, she was very tall, even taller than Jane. She was wearing silvery stretch pants and she was really beautiful; dark, like an Indian, with long narrow black eyes. They said it was Pat who'd held the kitten for him.

She jumped, and the whole bed started; one of those great starts that happen when you're dozing, half asleep and half awake. Like falling off a cliff. They said you always woke before you hit the ground; if you didn't you would die. But

she had woken. She clenched her fingers, stared out at the bright night patch of sky. She could see things in the room even though it was dark; the chairback and her skirt and shoes, pale patch that was a fresh-pressed shirt, hanging on the wardrobe front. She was sure something had roused her, some sound. But there couldn't be anything, else Sheba would be barking.

She had had a dream that he was in the house. The Duke. She drew her breath in sharply, bit her lip. She had thought of an idea, a way to stop him hating her. He wouldn't let her be beaten, not then. She would be safe, for ever. She tried to make the idea go away, but it would not. Her mind recoiled at the very idea of fucking. She didn't even like the word, though Pamela used it freely enough.

She'd have to get an invite to a party. And maybe it would be better to get a little drunk. Then she could . . . well, she'd have to see. You couldn't plan these things. She practised making eyes, in the dark. She didn't think she was really all that sexy; but she supposed she could learn. She'd have to be on the pill a good time of course first. A month at least, she thought it was. No problem about that anyway. You could get them from most of the girls, even some in her own Study Groups; they sold them to each other, or traded them sometimes for cigarettes. She supposed to make it easier she'd have to wear a mini.

She was definitely dreaming now, because the Duke was there. It seemed she'd changed herself; she was tall and slender, nearly as pretty as Jane. Her eyes were on his face; she was touching him, light at first then hard and harder, feeling her own heat grow, pulling at his belt buckle, the zipper of his jeans. It seemed the fastenings melted; then they were both undressed and she was pushing against him, trying to reach his . . . well, his *thing*. Only she couldn't, she couldn't hold it, it was so small and getting smaller all the time. Then her fingers went . . . sort of *in* and she recoiled in terror. It was too late though, she knew his secret, that he was a woman. She saw his face, the hatred, saw him raise his fist. She tried to run but she was rooted; and the blow hit her on the ear, on the side of the head. Like an explosion.

She sat up. Her ears were ringing; and there was a queer light in the room, flickering and pink. Sheba was barking in the kitchen, great volleys of noise; she could hear her crashing at the door. She shouted and heard Pam answer. She

said, 'It's all right, I've called the police. *Bunny, it's all right.*'

Liz tried to shove her away. She said, 'What *happened*?'

Pamela said, 'You'd better get dressed, they'll be here any minute. I'm going to let Sheba go.'

Liz said, 'No, they'll kill her too.' Queer words. She didn't know why she'd said them, they just came out. She was struggling with her skirt. She heard the side door open.

She opened the window. Flames were licking up where the outhouse had been. She supposed her bicycle had gone. The side was out of the summerhouse too. The summerhouse her father had built. She thought, 'I won't be able to go to the Properjohns' any more.' But she hadn't intended to in any case.

She had put her school things on, not thinking. She heard a car coming up the lane, moving fast. She ran downstairs. Pamela said, 'Don't go outside, darling. Not till it's safe.'

The policeman sat in the kitchen, drinking coffee. It was the sallow one, the one she didn't like. She was obscurely sorry that Pam had left the dinner things in the sink. He said, 'Oh, tearaways I should reckon. Been a whole spate of it. Two last night over at Dinsley, 'nother the night before. Anything of value out there, Mrs Manley?'

Pam put a hand on her shoulder. She said, 'Only my daughter's bike.'

The policeman grunted. He said, 'I expect the insurance will cover.'

The fire was out now; it had mainly been old sacks and boxes. And a bed Pamela had stored. But for a time the house had seemed full of men.

Pam went to the sink, refilled the kettle. She said, 'What was it? What did they use?'

He shrugged. He said, 'Could have been anything. Can of weedkiller, and a detonator. Anything goes these days. They nicked a box of detonators from the Tech College last month. Had 'em for demo.'

The side door opened. The other man was the fair one, the one she had seen at the Properjohns'. Sheba growled, and she put a hand to her collar. She could feel the big dog still trembling with rage. The policeman at the table said, 'Anything?'

The other shook his head. He said, 'Asked for a vehicle check. Won't do any good. Reckon they're away.'

Pam folded a fresh filter into the coffee pot. She said, 'But why us? Why bomb us? We haven't done any harm.'

The sallow man said, 'You don't have to. Not any more. They call it progress.' He closed his notebook with a vaguely satisfied air. He said, 'No ideas at all then? Who it could have been?' Pam shook her head, and he grinned. He said, 'How about the young lady?'

Pamela said quickly, 'She doesn't know anything either. Liz, get that other chair.'

The second policeman took his coffee non-committally. The sallow man said, 'That's about it then. Somebody'll be along in the morning. We can finish the statements then.'

Statements. Of course. She'd been meaning to make some sort of statement, it had nearly slipped her mind. She opened her mouth, but what came out was a question. She said, 'Where's Ian tonight? Isn't he on?' Silence at that; and she thought they looked at her oddly. She wondered why she had spoken. Her ears were still singing; she thought perhaps she was in shock.

Pamela said, 'Bunny, don't bother now.' Then to the policeman, 'She's very upset. She wasn't well at all last week. Now this . . .'

They were standing. The sallow man put his cap on, the flat cap with the chequered band. They moved into the passage, stood talking again. There seemed so much to say. But surely it was all so simple. No need for words at all. She swallowed hard. The singing didn't stop.

The side door closed. She heard Pam shoot the bolts. She came back into the kitchen. She thought how tired she looked. She said, 'It stopped the clock.'

Pam said, 'What?'

'The clock. Look, it's stopped.'

Pam said, 'Bunny, you ought to go back to bed. You can still get an hour.'

She yawned. She said, 'Will you be O.K.?'

Pam said, 'I'll just do the cups. Go on, Bun. And don't worry. He'll be all right.'

She had her foot on the stairs. She turned back, puzzled. She said, 'Who? Who do you mean?'

Her mother looked confused. She said vaguely, 'I thought you heard . . . Go on up now. It's nothing.'

She came back into the room. She said, 'What happened to him? Where is he?'

Pamela said, 'Go to bed now, Liz. Be a good girl.'

'What happened to him?'

Pam took her by the shoulders. She said, 'I didn't mean . . .' She swallowed. She said, 'They took him to hospital. He was . . . well, he was hurt.'

Liz said, 'Where? Was it tonight?'

Pamela said, 'The policeman told me. The one who took the statements. He shouldn't have, really. They . . . somebody knocked him out. I don't think it's very bad.'

'Where was it?'

Pamela sighed. She said, 'As a matter of fact . . . it was at the School. The night men found him.' She smiled and said, 'I expect you'll hear all about it tomorrow.'

Liz said, 'We'd better go and see him.'

Pamela said, 'Don't worry now, Bunny. Up to bed, go on. We'll talk about it tomorrow.'

The Patricia girl was on the bus that morning. She'd got a new pair of jeans. Stretch-yellow, very low. They showed nearly everything. She stood by Liz a minute when she first got on, she couldn't help but see.

The rumours were buzzing already. She wondered how they had got to know. D Block it was where they had found him, the Fourths seemed sure. They said there had been a huge great pool of blood.

She was trying to think; but her head still seemed to be ringing. At the School, at night. She wondered why he could have gone there. Perhaps to see one of the security guards, talk to him. It had been a security man that found him, one of the dog patrols. She wondered if he'd been Pursuing Private Inquiries. He'd told her a lot from time to time about how policemen worked.

She rubbed her face, pushed her hair back. She remembered how he had been, that day at the Properjohns'. He'd tried so hard to make her talk. But she hadn't dared. So he'd talked to David instead – to the Minister. And David had believed it had to do with School.

It was no use. She stared out the window, not seeing the sunlit buildings moving past. She knew why he had gone there. And whose fault it really was.

The last hope left her late that afternoon.

She had opted earlier in the year for a course in Social Studies; not so much from interest as because that Group was usually taken by Bomber Hughes. He didn't look impressive; a stocky, square-set man, moustached and with bright, cornflower-blue eyes. But he'd been an officer, a pilot in the R.A.F., and ran his Groups with an iron hand though he seldom raised his voice. There was the usual crop of silly stories of course; that he was a Black Belt, that he was an unarmed combat expert, that he had once taken on a dozen men singlehanded and disabled all but two. But true or false, no pupil seemed keen to cross him, not even the worst of the Fifths. His classes were havens of peace.

The afternoon seemed at first unexceptional. Three other Groups were sharing the Study Area; but for once no pop was being played, and there was relatively little din. Liz found herself a place to one side, content as usual to remain unobserved; but the session had scarcely begun when the double doors at the end of the hall swung back.

Macanulty was the first to enter, tranny slung and with a girl clinging to his arm. Three lesser lights appeared soon after, with Sheila Brent and Patricia. She had changed since the morning; she was wearing a belly necklace now and a nearly see-thru top. The Group quietened a little; but when Osgood and Kolaszynski slouched in even the twelve-year-olds grew silent. They took up places to either side of Liz; and Kolaszynski took the notepad from her knee and began to draw.

She knew the Duke had followed, though she didn't dare raise her eyes. She was wondering disjointedly why she had ever imagined she understood terror till now. Her eyes were fixed on a point on the pale, bright floor; the sweat was starting, and she was having difficulty getting her breath. Last night had been the warning; now they had come for her. All of them. They had found her out.

The Bomber stood awhile surveying the additions to his Group. 'Well,' he said finally, 'Good afternoon, Gentlemen. And ladies. To what do we owe the pleasure of this undistinguished company?'

Nobody else, certainly no staff member, would have dared address the Duke and his gang like that; not with their broads in the room. Somebody tittered; the noise was silenced instantly by a glare from Osgood.

The Bomber rubbed his hands. 'I take it,' he said, 'that we are now all met. Or are we to expect further reinforcements? In which case, I shall be happy to wait.'

Her ears were singing; and she was thinking how any second they would smell that she was afraid. She'd read somewhere, or heard, that fear can be smelled.

'No reinforcements?' said Mr. Hughes. 'Good. Then perhaps we can start.'

He took three paces from the Group, turned on his heel to face them. 'First, an announcement,' he said, 'which will no doubt be honey to your ears. This is the last chance you'll have to witness my 'andsome visage. Tomorrow I am leaving this seat of culture for another position; one, I'm happy to say, unconnected with teaching.'

An expected chorus of cheers and jeers; he raised a hand, and it was stilled. 'Under the circumstances,' he said, 'I'd like to tidy up what we've been talking about this term; and maybe leave you with one or two thoughts.'

He was teaching nearly in the old way, voice low but pitched to travel; she sensed the other Groups in the Hall were listening too.

'Over the past few weeks,' said the Bomber, 'we've had a look at the origins of this Welfare State of ours. We've glanced at the various benefits it offers, we've tripped delicately over the processes of local and national Government; we've examined the development of education. Now I want to put a question to you. What's education for, do you reckon? What actual end purpose does it serve?'

The Group seemed puzzled. Then a freckled, bespectacled girl called Jarvis spoke up. 'It's sort of . . . well, for children,' she said. 'Must be. To . . . you know. Broaden their minds.'

'Education is for children,' said the Bomber. An interestin' hypothesis. Who'll back it?'

Kolaszynski had finished his drawing. He showed it surreptitiously to somebody behind him. There were giggles; but she still didn't turn her head.

The Bomber was talking again. 'In the bad old days,' he said, 'say the middle of the last century, we had what was called the public school system. If you were a young feller at a public school, you'd 'ave a whackin' great cold bath every morning. If you got your prep wrong, you'd get the skin took off your backside. What was behind all that, d'you reckon?'

The Group was giggling. Somebody said, 'That was all class though. Privilege and that.'

'Funny sort of privilege, when you think about it,' said the Bomber. 'Don't you think though it might have been to toughen 'em up? Make 'em fit enough to trot up and down rulin' India?'

Kolaszynski pushed the rough book back into her lap. On one page was a crudely-scrawled figure with a coxcomb of hair and what looked to be a leather jacket. Its penis, which was monstrously overlarge, was dripping at the tip. Opposite, a roundfaced girl with plaits stood with her legs apart. The details of her anatomy were unpleasant. Over her head a stylized explosion framed the words BLAT and POWEE. Liz made her hand move, turn the page and press. She left a sweat mark where her palm had been.

'Take the Board Schools,' said the Bomber. 'The old three R's. Came along just when there'd started to be a massive demand for clerks. Funny, isn't it?'

Sue Jarvis said uncertainly, 'You mean it's sort of ... society. Making the schools it wants.'

'Very good indeed,' said the Bomber. 'You're catchin' on fast. What about today though?'

Sue said, 'Well, we're best off, aren't we? No, you know, special schools and that.'

'Ah,' said the Bomber, 'special schools. Privilege by class; privilege by money; *privilege by intelligence.* How about that?'

The Group didn't answer.

'Let's 'ave a few home truths,' said the Bomber. 'Here we have a School of roughly four thousand pupils. Set up like all the rest with the best possible intentions, nobody's disputin' that. Of that four thousand, approximately a quarter – including some of you in this room – can neither read nor write with fluency. You are what the old system – the bad old system – would have called illiterates. Another couple of thousand have attained a certain proficiency in simple communication. "Love" on one fist and "hate" on the other, that sort of thing. You are the semi-literates. The remainder for the most part go in fear. Fear of the rest, of what might happen if their superiority was detected. Intelligence isn't fostered, not any more. It survives, as best it can. D'you reckon that was the will of society too?'

Beside her, Kolaszynski was drumming his fingers. She

thought, 'They won't put up with this much longer.'

'I'll put it to you this way,' said the Bomber. 'Think about an ants' nest. Thousands of little creatures all scurryin' this way and that, up one path and down another. All collectin' sugar. Now what do you think would happen if all those ants started developin' minds of their own? What if one said to another, ' 'Ere, Charlie, or Bill, or Fred or whatever, I don't fancy runnin' all that way back again. How about puttin' our sugar down here? Startin' another pile, see.' Wouldn't be too good, would it? All the sugar scattered, 'stead of bein' in one nice big shiny heap. Now supposin' you were runnin' that anthill, which would you prefer? Ants that couldn't think too good on their own, or ants that started quarrellin' with the management?'

Sue Jarvis said, 'I don't see what ants have got to do with people.'

'They shouldn't have anything, agreed,' said the Bomber. 'But we live in a small, crowded, would-be egalitarian society. No harm constructin' a model, is there? Seein' where it leads.' He shook his head. 'You'll learn, all you bright ones,' he said. 'You'll all take up window cleanin' one day. Those that don't emigrate. We shall have the most sparklin' glass in Europe.'

Sue Jarvis said stubbornly, 'It isn't like that though. I mean, it isn't what Mr Horrocks told us. About getting rid of, you know, other sorts of schools. He reckoned it was the best that had happened.'

The Bomber stroked his moustache. 'There's a very old and very true saying,' he said. 'The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.'

Osgood had become bored. He raised a leg indolently, and emitted a long and contemplative fart.

'Ah, democracy,' said the Bomber. 'And come upon its cue. The fag end of the egalitarian process. The true *vox humana*.'

He walked forward. 'What fascinates me about people like you,' he said, 'is you're not even evil. You're nothing. There was a man once, smashed the Michelangelo Madonna because he didn't like the idea of God. You'd smash her just because somebody gave you the hammer. No imagination, see? You don't exist really though. You're just my bad dreams.'

Osgood didn't answer.

'You've no idea, have you,' said the Bomber, 'of the true magnitude of your achievement of a moment ago. Do you have any inkling of the battle waged year after year by generations of well-meaning idiots, to win you the right to such original expression? No? Well, I think you should be proud. You have farted on decency; on chastity, on morality, on modesty and on dignity. And everything else that was swept aside when we got this rubbish about equality stuck in our heads. You have farted on Privilege itself; a Privilege that ceased to exist a quarter century before you were bloody born.'

Osgood said, 'Fuckin' jack it in, mate.'

'Ah,' said the Bomber, 'the other end of the oracle. I think I preferred your previous utterance. I'll jack it in when I'm good and ready, you hairy lout.'

The noise in the Group was rising. Evidently another of the gang was behind her. Something – a ruler – had been pushed between her bottom and the seat. Now it was being worked forward and back. She wanted to run, run for the door, but her legs had turned to jelly. Pam had told her once, when she was trying to talk, that the gang were only cowards. But it wasn't true, even that wasn't true. She'd seen Osgood in the cycle sheds the time the two Fifthers tried to take him. The teeth, and the blood all coming; but he hadn't cared. He got one with a bottle, the other with a long iron bar. Then he went walking round the School. He kept snorting and spitting, throwing out these great messes of red.

They were screaming at the Bomber now, all of them. Somebody – Janey, or Patricia – shouted, 'Chapel fuckpig,' and Hughes exploded. 'You,' he bellowed. 'Out. You disgrace the remains of the dignity of woman. *Bloody well get out . . .*'

Kolaszynski said, 'That's it then.' He slammed the tranny on the table in front of him, turned the volume up; she watched, dazed, as the Bomber advanced again. 'As for you, you dirty little sod,' he said, 'I'm going to do something I've wanted to do for many weary years.' His hand flashed out; and Kolaszynski, taken by surprise, was knocked sprawling. The tranny went with him, and the Bomber let fly with his boot. The tranny sailed across the room, hit the wall and burst.

Everything seemed to happen at once. The Duke roared a warning, but he was too late. Osgood rose, yelling, and

charged; but for some reason he never reached his target. The Bomber seemed to pivot on his heel, lightning-quick; his hand flew up again and Osgood hit the desk corner, face first, with a terrible sound. 'There's a silly chap,' said the Bomber. 'Slipped and hurt yourself, didn't you? Who's for afters?' Then in a bellow, '*Let that girl alone . . .*'

It seemed her legs unfroze at last. She ran blindly, away from the noise. Hands grabbed for her; she wrenched free, opened the door, slammed it. A tinkling, and she thought she heard a scream. Then she was running again. She turned left and right, no longer motivated by conscious thought.

The washroom was a big, faintly echoing place. She groped along the line of cubicles. One smashed lock, another; the third bolt worked. She fell to her knees, fists on the pedestal edge, forehead on her hands. She shut her eyes and tried to control her breathing. It was as if hot brushes were scraping, inside her chest.

A long time later she lifted her head. She was conscious now of the pain in her knees from the concrete floor. She rubbed her face, pushed the hair from her eyes. The trembling had nearly stopped. She stood up shakily, brushed at her skirt. She reached for the doorcatch; and the footsteps outside halted.

She backed, eyes widening, pressed herself against the end wall of the cubicle. She realized, now, that the washroom wasn't empty. The paddings, whisperings; she'd been conscious of them all the time. She swallowed, and the sounds came again. Somebody laughed and a voice called, soft and high. Impossible to tell even if it was girl or boy. '*Liz*,' it said. '*Fat Liza . . .*' Then something sailed over the partition top. Sparks stung her face; while in the confined space it seemed the bang was worse than the explosion of the night before. It left her deaf one side all the rest of the day.

3

ON SATURDAY MORNING she walked into the village. Usually the phone box wasn't working; but the smashed handset had been replaced only the day before. She dialled, not expecting

an answer; but the receiver was lifted. Helen's voice said, 'Hello?'

She worked the coinbox. She said, 'It's Liz.' Then, 'Yes. Yes, fine.' To her request Helen said, 'David isn't home. Look, I'm not too sure. I don't know whether it would be a good thing. Have you talked to your mother?'

Liz said, 'She said to speak to you.' She could square Pam later.

Helen said, 'I'm still not happy about it.'

She said, 'It is important.'

A long pause. Then Helen said, 'All right. I'll try. But if they say no you will understand, won't you?'

Liz said, 'I'm . . . thank you. Very much.'

The phone said, 'Look Liz, promise me something. You won't get upset again, will you?'

Liz said, 'I promise.'

The bus was quieter than those to which she was accustomed. Pamela sat tight-lipped for a while, aware that she had been outmanoeuvred but unwilling to contradict the Properjohns. Later, as they reached the town, she thawed. She said, 'Now remember what Helen told you. You're not to get upset.'

Liz said, 'I won't.'

Pamela said, 'I don't expect they'll let us stay more than a minute anyway.' A pause; then she smiled. She said, 'You're a good girl, Liz. It was thoughtful of you to want to come.'

The hospital was an enormous place, bigger even than she had imagined. They had to follow lines of certain colours, along this corridor and that. Once when she crossed a little courtyard the lines were painted on the asphalt. It was funny somehow; like a children's game.

He was in a private room. It was very small. The nurse who took them in – or maybe she was a Sister – seemed disapproving; but the Properjohns' name was magic. She said, 'It's five minutes at the outside.'

He looked different somehow, lying there in the bed. Smaller. His eyes were closed, and there was a big gauzy dressing on his head. His cheek was scratched all down one side. She supposed it must have happened when he fell. The marks looked very bright. A clip of notes hung on the bed-

rail; there was a side table with a bowl of flowers and a telephone. She could have brought some flowers. But she hadn't thought.

She walked forward. She said, 'Hello, Ian.' He opened his eyes; but they soon lost interest. She said, 'We came to see you.'

She was wearing her best jeans, and a bright checky shirt he'd said one time he liked. She said, 'Are you feeling better? We wanted to bring Sheba but she couldn't come in.'

She'd realized of course it wouldn't be like the telly. When you got hit on the head in a gangster film you just got up and carried on. She said, 'You remember Sheba, don't you? You met her when you told me about the guns.'

He started fumbling at the bedclothes. He said, '*Gu . . . gu . . .*' His voice sounded queer and thick. She realized he was trying to say, 'gun'. The nurse said, 'I can't have him disturbed like this. You can see how ill he is.'

Pamela was gripping her arm. She said, 'We wanted to bring Sheba, but they wouldn't let her in.' She said, 'You remember Sheba,' then, 'Ian,' then, '*Ian, Ian, Ian . . .*'

Afterwards, when she had run back the way she had come and stood and held the railings for a minute and not cried, Pamela said, 'Bunny, after all he's not dead. He isn't dead.'

'No,' she said. 'Not quite.'

They took her, finally, on Tuesday afternoon at about half past three. She was crossing a corridor at the far end of B Block, near the Annexe that jutted out into the Quad. The Annexe they were still building. There were quite a few people about, pupils and some staff. But nobody paid any attention. Maybe it happened too quickly for them to see; or maybe they didn't care.

She heard the footsteps behind her, but her arms were grabbed before she could turn and a cloth or something pulled over her face. She was thrown off balance; they bundled her through a doorway, she heard it shut and the snap of the lock. She was pushed backwards against something – shelving or a rack – then they took the blindfold off.

She had known for a long time now it would be the girls. There were three of them. The two that held her wore

Batwoman gear. One was very tall, she supposed it was Patricia. The third one had on a velvety mask of Super Kat. She was wearing light blue jeans that just showed her navel, and a white fluffy top. She looked really pretty.

She was surprised to find she wasn't as scared as she had expected. She was going to be beaten up of course; but having it happen after so long was nearly a relief. Though Pam always used to say nothing was ever as bad as you imagined. And anyway she deserved it, for what she had done to Ian.

They were in a storeroom. Doors to either side, and a little window. There were grey metal racks round the walls, stacked with boxes and bottles. On one of the shelves lay cigarettes and a box of matches. Super Kat lit up, carefully. So she wasn't in any hurry. Then she turned to stare at her. She could see her eyes glinting through the mask. She said, 'We've got you now, you fucking little whore.'

The others had her arms pulled sideways, gripping her elbows and wrists. When they twisted the pain was really quite bad. The one she thought was Pat said, 'Let's get her boobs out.' She sounded eager. But Super Kat shook her head. She said, 'She isn't worth looking at.'

She stepped forward. She said, 'You're a fucking little whore. You tell tales about people, don't you? And you spy.'

Liz said, 'No, I don't.' Super Kat hit her across the face. She was surprised how light the blow felt. Her cheek stung a little but that was all.

Super Kat said, 'You tell lies. And you go to bed with your mother.'

She shook her head. She said, 'I don't.'

The next blow was harder. It brought her hair down across her face. She flicked her head, trying to toss it back.

Super Kat said, 'You're a little bourgeoise whore. You used to let a policeman touch you up.' She slapped her again, then changed her tactics and punched. It took Liz by surprise.

She hung her head. There was a red hot ball of pain in her stomach, and she couldn't get her breath. She panted for a time; then she was afraid she would be sick. When the pain went away a little she raised her head. Super Kat said, 'That was nice, wasn't it?' She punched her again, this time in the mouth. She felt her lip split, then it seemed to go numb.

Super Kat said, 'You shopped us all to Hughesey boy. Ossie got his eye knocked out. And Joanne cut a vein.'

There seemed to be a lot of blood in her mouth. She hoped it wasn't running down her chin. Super Kat put the cigarette out on her wrist. She said, 'You used to let a copper rub you up. We know who it was.' She hit her several times more, but curiously the pain seemed less. Instead she was becoming angry. They were laughing at Ian, which wasn't fair. Not after they'd made him cry by stealing his gun. On the heels of the thought came another, quite new and strange. She thought, 'I was wrong, really. We were all wrong'. She had realized, it seemed for the first time, that the fear she had walked in day after day might not be avoidable. It might even be necessary; but it wasn't *natural*. It had to do with something David had said in his speech, about having rights as individuals, as people. It was like the lunch money racket, one hungry day a week the price of peace. She had grown *used* to it; so the real fault lay in her. It might be understandable, it might even be correct, to stand here in a storeroom and be beaten. But it wasn't *natural*.

Super Kat was pushing something on to her knuckles. Four metal loops, like the handles of scissors joined in a curve. She said, 'We're going to mark you now.' She stepped forward again; and Liz convulsed.

She was stronger than they had realized; and their grip on her had slackened while she stood passive. One elbow, driven back, caught Patricia under the heart; and she hit out at the cat-mask with all her strength. Super Kat yelped, and instinct more than reason made her bring her knee up hard. Super Kat doubled up, crashed into the shelving. The rack shook, a bottle tipped and smashed, there was a great raw stink of chemicals.

She understood before the screaming started. She thought, 'Alkalis are worse than acids'. The other door was unlocked. She ran through it, slammed. There was an empty classroom. She ran again for the passage beyond. The thought was still in her head. 'Alkalis are worse than acids'.

She had her hands over her ears. She realized she could still hear the noise. The corridor turned left and there was a flight of steps. She ran up them, through another door. She slammed it behind her, locked it.

She was in a big empty room. Sunlight streamed through the windows on two sides. For a moment she was confused.

Then she realized where she was. It was the third storey of the Annexe. One of the new labs. Some benches were installed already. There were sinks let into them and high shiny taps. Packing cases stood about, and there was a smell of new wood.

There were two other doors. One led to a little store room, not much bigger than a cupboard. The other opened outside, on to a fire escape. It was already locked.

She went round opening drawers. She found some bottles with ground glass stoppers. The taps on the benches weren't connected but there was a sink in the cupboard that worked. She filled two of the bottles, went back to the door. A noise was starting, in the corridor outside. The handle turned and rattled. A voice said, 'Open up this instant.' She couldn't see who it was, the panes were frosted to above head height. She shouted, 'I've got acid.' The handle shook again and she threw one of the bottles. It hit the door just by the frame and smashed. Footsteps pattered outside. She peered through the hole she had made. There was nobody in sight.

She went to the windows. The Quad stretched into the distance, the Blocks that fronted it bright in hazy sunshine. It all looked deserted somehow. She saw some children run from beneath D Block Annexe, stand staring up. They were ushered back.

There was a siren. She thought it was police. But it was an ambulance. It came very fast down the middle of the Quad, swerved out of sight beneath the windows. She didn't see it go back off. She supposed it must have taken another way.

There was a buzzing noise. In the store room. It had been going on a long time. There was a phone she hadn't noticed, on a shelf at the back. She picked it up. It said, 'Listen, my girl, this is Doctor Brewster. You're in a lot of trouble already. You're only making it worse for yourself.'

She supposed she ought to play a part. She said, 'Go and suck your cock.' She put the phone down unhappily. The words had hurt her to say. She thought, 'How strange. That it should be me.' The phone buzzed again. She ignored it.

There was a noise outside. Scrapings, and a bump. So they were trying the fire escape. She threw the other bottle at the windows. This time it sailed right through. Splinters of glass flew outwards. The noise stopped.

There seemed to be a lot of people now at the far end of the Quad; but the windows of the Blocks, that had been

white with faces when the ambulance came, were empty. Bells were ringing somewhere, and a loudhailer was working. She saw lines of children in the distance, moving away. Like a fire drill. They were evacuating all the Blocks that faced the main quad. She couldn't understand why.

The phone was buzzing again. This time she answered. Dr Brewster said, 'Look, you really are being very silly. The police are here. We want you to come down, slowly. You won't be hurt.'

It seemed a great deal was crystallizing in her mind. She said, 'I want to think. Tell them to keep away. Which button do I press to speak to you?'

The phone said, 'Any of them.'

She put the handset back. She could see the police cars now. Two in the Quad, facing her way, and another arriving. She thought, 'What a lot of fuss. Just for me.' She wondered what they would do to get her out. She didn't think they would shoot at her. She supposed they might have gas. But they wouldn't use that either. Far too bad for the Image. They must be really worried.

Her wrist was throbbing now, where it had been burned. She ran cold water on it from the tap. It helped a little. Later she washed her face. She thought it might clear her head.

People in situations like this usually Made a Request. She supposed she might send for Pamela. But that wouldn't be much use. She could see the headlines already: *'Schoolgirl in acid siege.' 'Desperate Liz – a mother's bravery.'* It had to be better than that.

She picked the phone up, pressed. She said, 'I want the Minister of Children.'

Dr. Brewster said, 'We're trying to contact him.'

It was probably on the news already. There'd be cameras arriving soon. She said, 'I don't want to contact him. I want him to come.'

The phone began to squawk.

She said, 'I know what happened in the machine shop. I know who hurt Ian Cameron. I know who's making the bombs. I won't tell anybody. Only him.'

The phone said, 'You must see you're being unreasonable . . .'

She said, 'Tell him. Tell him to come. Say Liz.'

The phone spluttered. It said, 'What if he won't?'

She said, *'Then I'll say how he broke his word.'*

She put the handset down. Her chest was heaving. And she was miserable now about Super Kat. She wondered why she had ever thought she hated anybody. Or been jealous. You couldn't, not when you saw them like that. Doubled up in the silly mask, and the stuff all running on her back and neck.

She'd realized of course why they had emptied the School. It really was too silly for words. They thought she'd got the gun.

The loudhailer was working again down in the Quad. She couldn't hear what it was saying, the echoes from all the buildings mussed up the words. There were crowds of people now, a long way back. She saw another ambulance drive up and stop.

The phone was buzzing. She wished they'd leave her alone. She picked it up. She said, 'How's Jane?'

Dr. Brewster said, 'She's very, very badly hurt indeed. Lizabeth, your mother's here. She wants to talk to you.'

She said, 'It was an accident. I didn't mean to do it.'

The phone said, 'We know what happened now. Everything. You silly girl, we're all on your side. We know you didn't do anything wrong.'

She swallowed. The phone said, 'You won't even have to answer any questions. Not tonight. Won't you come down?'

She nearly wavered. Then she set her lip. She said, 'I've told you what I want.'

She walked back into the lab. It had all gone really silent now. The loudspeaker had stopped, and nobody was moving. She thought, 'He's down there somewhere. The Duke.' She tried to imagine what he might be thinking. But it was impossible. She had never been able to imagine what anybody was thinking. She wondered about Mr. Hughes. She thought, 'I expect he got in terrible trouble too.'

The phone was still buzzing. When she could stand it no longer she answered it. It said, 'Bunny, darling . . .'

She said, 'Keep away. Or I'll . . . pour it on myself. Is the Minister coming?'

Pamela said, 'We're doing everything we can.' She sounded as if she was crying.

She was shaken by a sudden gust of rage. Damn Pamela, let her go to hell; the hell she helped to make with her pissarsed theories and her lousy rotten books. Later, she wanted to cry again herself.

The shadows had lengthened. They had reached the side of D Block Annexe now. She couldn't believe it was nearly five o'clock. School had emptied long ago, but they wouldn't have gone home. She could imagine all of them out there. Watching, and waiting.

Nothing to do any more, really, but wait. She stood remembering the conversation she had had with Pam. She could remember it all now, nearly every word. Strange how it had ever slipped her mind. She thought, 'Whatever happens now, he's got his Fact. He said he only wanted one.' Later she fell nearly into a drowse. She thought about the day they wrecked the stables; how he had taken her in the car, and let her see the hills. She thought, 'That's where I'd like to ride. On and on, for ever.'

There was a droning. It rose to a roar. All the windows shook; and a shadow flicked overhead.

She ran to stare up. The helicopter moved on slowly, over the roof of D Block. It looked huge. She saw the sun on the cabin windows, the big R.A.F. markings on the sides. It swung and settled, out of sight beyond the cars.

The phone buzzed. She picked it up. Her heart was hammering. Dr. Brewster said, 'It's all right now, Lizabeth. You can come down. The Minister's here.'

She said, 'Let me speak to him.'

A pause; then the phone said, 'No. He says it's your turn now to keep your word.'

Her knuckles whitened on the handset. She said, 'You're trying to trick me. I don't believe you. He isn't really there.'

More waiting. She heard voices speaking urgently. Then Dr. Brewster came back on. He sounded puzzled. He said, 'He wants you to put Gaylord back on the shelf.'

Her knees felt wobbly, suddenly. She had to hang on to the edge of the door. She wondered how she had held out all that time. She said, 'Tell him to keep away. It isn't safe. Tell him he mustn't come inside the Quad. Do you understand?'

The phone said, 'Yes.'

She said, 'I'm coming down. You're not to try and catch me. Remember I've still got acid.'

She walked to the door that opened on the fire escape. She unlocked it, pushed it open. She half expected something to happen. Nothing did. The breeze on her face felt cool.

She looked down. It seemed a long way to the ground. She started down the metal steps, still clutching one of the silly bottles. She knew where the Duke was now. Where he would be. She thought, 'There's only one way he can stop me. And he won't do that. Not even him.'

She had reached the ground. It was still all quiet. She saw they'd put up rope barriers, to keep the people back. The Quad looked funny somehow. Empty. And the towering Blocks to either side, the lines and lines of windows.

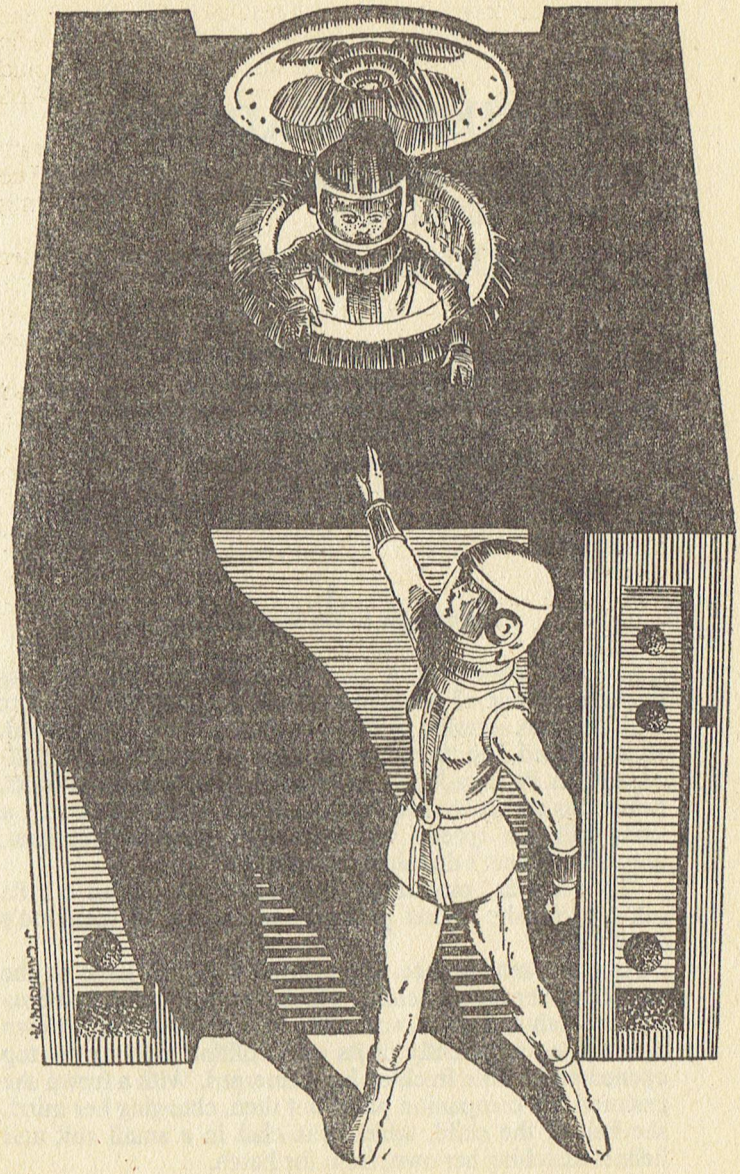
She thought, 'Why not? There has to be a first time, after all.' She started to walk, holding the bottle. She thought, 'It wouldn't matter anyway, all that much. It would just be another Fact.' It was just as well, really, that it was her. She thought, 'I wasn't good for much else anyway.'

Somehow she couldn't help increasing her speed. She was half-way to the cars now, nearly running. She tried to make out David, to see if he was there; but her sight seemed blurred, she could only see the crowd. Her breath had started to tighten. She was wondering if the Duke was actually mad.

There was a bang from somewhere. Hollow-sounding, like a car backfire. Then another; and a window behind her shattered and fell in. She felt like nearly laughing. Ian had told her, so many times, how difficult it was to hit a target with a pistol. Even if the target was standing still.

There seemed to be banging and popping everywhere now. Men were running, blue-shirtsleeved, firing up at D Block. They held the pistols in both hands, like on the films. She was wondering what it would feel like to be hit. She'd read somewhere it was like a great big hammer. Her breath was rasping; but she couldn't slow down now.

She was almost at the ropes.



ANCIENT SHADOWS

A Tale of the Dancers at the End of Time

by MICHAEL MOORCOCK

In ancient shadows and twilights
Where childhood had stray'd,
The world's great sorrows were born
And its heroes were made.
In the lost boyhood of Judas
Christ was betray'd.
– G. W. Russell ('Æ') *Germinal*

1
A Stranger to the End of Time

UPON THE SHORE of a glowing chemical lake, peering through a visor of clouded perspex, a stranger stood, her dark features showing profound awe and some disapproval, while behind her there rustled and gibbered a city, half-organic in its decadence, palpitating with obscure colours, poisonous and powerful. And overhead, in the sallow sky, a small old sun spread withered light, parsimonious heat, across the planet's dissolute topography.

'Thus it ends,' murmured the stranger. She added, a little self-consciously: 'What pathetic monuments to mankind's Senility!'

As if for reassurance, she pressed a gloved hand to the surface of her time machine, which was unadorned and box-like, smooth and spare, according to the fashions of her own age. Lifting apparently of its own volition a lid at the top opened and a little freckled head emerged. With a frown she gestured her companion back, but then, changing her mind, she helped the child, which was clad in a small suit and helmet matching her own, from the hatch.

'Witness this shabby finale, my son. Could I begrudge it you?'

Guilessly the child said: 'It is awfully pretty, mama.'

It was not her way to contradict a child's judgement. She shrugged. 'I am fulfilled, I suppose, and unsurprised, though I had hoped, well, for Hope.' From the confusion of her private feelings she fled back to practicality. 'Your father will be anxious. If we return now we can at least report to the committee tonight. And report success!' A proud glove fell upon her son's shoulder. 'We have travelled the limit of the machine's capacity! Here, Time has ceased to exist. The instruments say so, and their accuracy is unquestionable.' Her eye was caught by a shift of colour as the outline of one building appeared to merge with another, separate, and reform. 'I had imagined it bleaker, true.'

The city coughed, like a giant in slumber, and was silent for a while.

The boy made to remove his helmet. She stopped him. 'The atmosphere! Noxious, Snuffles, without doubt. One breath could kill.'

It seemed for a moment that he would argue with her opinion. Eye met grey-blue eye; jaws set; he sighed, lowering his head and offering the side of the machine a petulant kick. From the festering city, a chuckle, causing the boy to whirl, defensive and astonished. A self-deprecating grin, the lips gleaming at the touch of the dampening tongue; a small gauntlet reaching for the large one. An indrawn breath.

'You are probably correct, mama, in your assessment.'

She helped him back into their vessel, glanced once, broodingly, at the shimmering city, at the pulsing lake, then followed her son through the hatch until she stood again at her controls in the machine's green-lit and dim interior.

As she worked the dials and levers, she was studied by her son. Her curly brown hair was cut short at the nape, her upcurving lips gave an impression of amiability denied by the sobriety and intensity of her large, almond-shaped brown eyes. Her hands were small, well-formed, and, to a person from the twentieth century, her body would have seemed slight, in proportion with those hands (though she was thought tall and shapely by her own folk). Moving efficiently, but with little instinctive feel for her many instruments, considering each action rapidly and intelligently and carrying it through in the manner of one who has learned a

lesson thoroughly but unenthusiastically, she adjusted settings and figures. Her son seated himself in his padded chair, tucked beneath the main console at which his mother stood, and used his own small computer to make the simpler calculations required by her for the re-programming of the machine so that it could return to the exact place and almost the exact time of its departure.

When she had finished, she withdrew a pace or two from the controls, appraised them and was satisfied. 'We are ready, Snuffles, to begin the journey home. Strap in, please.'

He was already safely buckled. She crossed to the chair facing him, arranged her own harness, spread gloved fingers across the seven buttons set into the arm of the chair, and pressed four of them in sequence. The green light danced across her visor and through it to her face as she smiled encouragement to her son. She betrayed no nervousness; her body and her features were mastered absolutely. It was left to her child to display some anxiety, the upper teeth caressing the lower lip, the eyes darting from mother to those dials visible to him, one hand tugging a trifle at a section of the webbing holding his body to the chair. The machine quivered and, barely audible, it hissed. The sound was unfamiliar. The boy's brows drew closer together. The green light became a faint pink. The machine signalled its perplexity. It had not moved a moment or a centimetre. There was no reason for this; all functions were in perfect operation.

Permitting herself no sign of a reaction, she re-set the buttons. The green light returned. She repeated the preliminary code, whereupon the light grew a deeper pink and two blue lamps began to blink. She returned all functions to standby, pulled the harness from her body, rose to her feet and began to make her calculations from the beginning. Her original accuracy was confirmed. She went back to her seat, fastened her webbing, pressed the four buttons in sequence. And for the third time the machine stated its inability to carry out the basic return procedure.

'Is the time machine broken, mama?'

'Impossible.'

'Then someone is preventing us from leaving.'

'The least welcome but the likeliest suggestion. We were unwise not to bring protection.'

'The baboons do not travel well.'

'It is our misfortune. But we had not expected any life at all at the end of time.' She fingered her ear. 'We shall have to rule out metaphysical interference.'

'Of course.' He had been brought up to the highest standards. There were some things which were not mentioned, nor, better yet, considered, by the polite society of his day. And Snuffles was an aristocrat of boys.

She consulted the chronometer. 'We shall remain inside the machine and make regular attempts to return at every hour out of twenty hours. If by then we have failed, we shall consider another plan.'

'You are not frightened, mama?'

'Mystified, merely.'

Patiently, they settled down to let the first hour pass.

2
An Exploratory Expedition

HAND IN HAND and cautiously they set their feet upon a pathway neither liquid nor adamantine, but apparently of a dense, purple gas which yielded only slightly as they stepped along it, passing between forms which could have been the remains either of buildings or of beasts.

'Oh, mama!' The eyes of the boy were bright with unusual excitement. 'Shall we find monsters?'

'I doubt if it is life, in any true sense, that we witness here, Snuffles. There is only a moral. A lesson for you – and for myself.'

Streamers of pale red wound themselves around the whispering towers, like pennants about their poles. Gasping, he pointed, but she refused the sight more than a brief glance. 'Sensation, only,' she said. 'The appeal to the infantile imagination is obvious – the part of every adult that should properly be suppressed and which should not be encouraged too much in children.'

Blue winds blew and the buildings bent before them crouching and changing shape, grumbling as they passed. Clusters of fragments, bloody marble, yellow-veined granite, lilac-coloured slate, frosted limestone, gathered like insects in the air; fires blazed and growled, and then where

the pathway forked they saw human figures and stopped, watching.

It was an arrangement of gallants, all extravagant cloaks and jutted scabbards. It stuck legs and elbows at brave angles so the world should know its excellence and its self-contained beauty, so that the collective bow, upon the passing of a lady's carriage, should be accomplished with a precision of effect, swords raised, like so many tails, behind, heads bent low enough for doffed plumes to trail, and be soiled, upon the pavings.

Calling, she approached the group, but it had vanished, background, carriages and all, before she had taken three paces, to be replaced by exotic palms which forever linked and twisted their leaves and leaned one towards the other, as if in a love-dance. She hesitated, thinking that she saw beyond the trees a plaza where stood a familiar old man, her father, but it was a statue, and then it was a pillar, then a fountain, and through the rainbow waters she saw three or four faces which she recognized, fellow children, known before her election to adult status, smiling at her, memories of an innocence she sometimes caught herself yearning for: a voice spoke, seemingly into her ear (she felt the breath, surely!): 'The Armatuce shall be Renowned through you, Dafnish . . .' Turning, clutching her son's hand, she discovered only four stately birds walking on broad, careful feet into a shaft of light which absorbed them. Elsewhere, voices sang in strange, delicate languages, of sadness, love, joy and death. A cry of pain. The tinkling of bells and lightly brushed harp-strings. A groan and deep-throated laughter.

'Dreams,' said the boy. 'Like dreams, mama. It is so wonderful.'

'Treachery,' she murmured. 'We are misled.' But she would not panic.

Once or twice more, in the next few moments, buildings shaped themselves into well-known scenes from her recent past. In the shifting light and the gas it was as if all that had ever existed existed again for a brief while.

She thought: 'If Time has ceased to be, then Space, too, becomes extinct – is all this simply illusion – a memory of a world? Do we walk a void, in reality? We must consider that a likelihood.'

She said to Snuffles: 'We had best return to our ship.'

A choir gave voice in the surrounding air, and the city swayed to the rhythm. A young man sang in a language she knew:

Ten times thou saw'st the fleet fly by:
The skies illum'd in shining jet
And gold, and lapis lazuli.
How clear above the engines' cry
Thy voice of sweet bewilderment!
(Remember, Nalorna, remember the Night).

Then, wistfully, the voice of an older woman:

'Could I but know such ecstasy again,
When all those many heroes of the air
Knel't down as one and call'd me fair,
Then I would judge Nalorna more than bless'd!
Immortal Lords immortal, too, made me!
(I am Nalorna, whom the flying godlings loved).''

And she paused to listen, against the nagging foreboding at the back of her brain, while an old man sang:

'Ah, Nalorna, so many that are dead loved thee!
Slain like wingéd game that falls beneath the hunter's shot.
First they rose up, and then with limbs outspread, they drop'd:
Through fiery Day they plung'd, their bodies bright;
Stain'd bloody scarlet in the sun's sweet mourning light.
(But Remember, Nalorna, remember only the Night).'

A little fainter, the young man's voice came again:

Ten times, Nalorna, did the fleet sweep by!
Ten hands saluted thee, ten mouths
Ten garlands kiss't; ten silent sighs
Sailed down to thee. And then, in pride,
Thou rais'd soft arms and pointed South.
(Oh, Remember, Nalorna, only the Night).

Telling herself that her interest was analytical, she bent her head to hear more, but though the singing continued, very faintly, the language had changed and was no longer in a tongue she could comprehend.

'Oh, mama!' Snuffles glanced about him, as if seeking the

source of the singing. 'They tell of a great air battle. Is it that which destroyed the folk of this city?'

'... *without which the third level is next to useless* ...' said an entirely different voice in a matter-of-fact tone.

Rapidly, she shook her head, to clear it of the foolishness intimidating her habitual self-control. 'I doubt it, Snuffles. If you would seek a conqueror, then self-indulgence is the villain who held those last inhabitants in sway. Every sight we see confirms that fact. Oh, and Queen Sentimentality ruled here, too. The song is her testament – there were doubtless thousands of similar examples – books, plays, tapes – entertainments of every sort. The city reeks of uncontrolled emotionalism. What used to be called Art.'

'But we have Art, mama, at home.'

'Purified – made functional. We have our machine-makers, our builders, our landscapers, our planners, our phrasemakers. Sophisticated and specific, our Art. This – all this – is coarse. Random fancies have been indulged, potential has been wasted ...'

'You do not find it in any way attractive?'

'Of course not! My sensibility has long since been mastered. The intellects which left this city as their memorial were corrupt, diseased. Death is implicit in every image you see. As a festering wound will sometimes grow fluorescent, foreshadowing the end, so this city shines. I cannot find putrescence pleasing. By its existence, this place denies the point of every effort, every self-sacrifice, every martyrdom of the noble Armatuce in the thousand years of its existence!'

'It is wrong of me, therefore, to like it, eh, mama?'

'Such things attract the immature mind. Children once made up the only audience a senile old man could expect for his silly ravings, so I've heard. The parallel is obvious, but your response is forgiveable. The child who would attain adult status among the Armatuce must learn to cultivate the mature view, however. In all you see today, my son, you will discover a multitude of examples of the aberrations which led mankind so close, so many times, to destruction.'

'They were evil, then, those people?'

'Unquestionably. Self-indulgence is the enemy of self-interest. Do not the School Slogans say so?'

'And Sentimentality Threatens Survival,' quoted the pious lad, who could recall perfectly every one of the

Thousand Standard Maxims and several score of the Six Hundred Essential Slogans for Existence (which every child should know before he could even consider becoming an adult).

'Exactly.' Her pride in her son helped dispell her qualms, which had been increasing as a herd of monstrous stone reptiles lumbered past in single file while the city chanted, in what was evidently a version of her own tongue, something which seemed to be an involved scientific formula in verse form. But she shivered at the city's next remark:

'*... and Dissipation is Desecration and Dishonours All. Self-denial is a Seed which grows in the Sunlight of Purified something or other ... Oh, well – I'll remember – I'll remember – just give me time – time ... It is not much that a man can save. On the sands of life, in the straits of time, Who Swims in sight of the great third wave that never a swimmer shall cross or climb. Some waif washed up with the strays and spars That ebb-tide shows to the shore and the stars; Weed from the water, grass from a grave, A broken blossom a ruined rhyme ... Rapid cooling can produce an effect apparently identical in every respect and this leads us to assume that, that, that ... Ah, yes, He who dies serves, but he who serves shall live forever ... I've got the rest somewhere. Available on Requisition Disc AAA4. Please use appropriate dialect when consulting this programme. Translations are available from most centres at reasonable swelgarter am floo-oo chardra werty ...*'

'The Maxims, mother! The city quotes the Maxims!'

'It mocks them, you mean! Come, we had best return to our craft.'

'Is the city mad, mama?'

With an effort she reduced the rate of her heart beat and increased the width of her stride, his hand firmly held.

'Perhaps,' he said, 'the city was not like this when Man lived here?'

'I must hope that.'

'Perhaps it pines.'

'The notion is ridiculous,' she said sharply. As she had feared, the place was beginning to have a deteriorating influence upon her son. 'Hurry.'

The hulls of three great ships, one in silver filigree, one in milk-jade, one in woven ebony, suddenly surrounded them, then faltered, then faded.

She considered an idea that she had not passed through Time at all, but was being subjected by the Elders of Armatuce to a surprise Test. She had experienced four such tests since she had become an adult, but none so rigorous, so complex.

She realized that she had lost the road. The purple pathway was nowhere to be seen; there was not a landmark which had retained its form since she had entered the city; the little niggardly sun had not, apparently, changed position, so offered no clue. Panic found a chink in the armour of her self-control and poked a teasing finger through.

She stopped dead. They stood together beside a river of boiling, jigging brown and yellow gas which bounded with what seemed a desperate gaiety towards a far-off pit which roared and howled and gulped it down. There was a slim bridge across this river. She placed a foot upon the first smooth step. The bridge was a coquette; it wriggled and giggled but allowed the pressure to remain. Slowly she and the boy ascended until they were crossing. The bridge made a salacious sound. She flushed, but marched on; she caught a trace of a smile upon her boy's lips. And she shivered for a second time. In silhouette, throbbing crimson, the city swayed, its buildings undulating as if they celebrated some primitive mass. Were the buildings actually creatures, then? If so, did they enjoy her discomfort? Did she and her son represent the sacrifice in some dreadful post-human ritual? Had the last of the city's inhabitants perished, mad, as she might soon be mad? Never had she been possessed before by such over-coloured terrors. If she found them a touch attractive nothing of her conscious mind would admit it. The bridge was crossed, a meadow entered, of gilded grass, knee-high and harsh; the sounds of the city died away and peace, of sorts, replaced them. It was as if she had passed through a storm. In relief she hesitated, still untrusting but ready to accept any pause in order to recover her morale, and found that her hand was rising and falling upon her son's shoulder, patting it. She stopped. She was about to offer an appropriate word of comfort when she noted the gleam in his eye, the parted lips. He looked up at her through his little visor.

'Isn't this jolly, though, mama?'

'J—?' Her mouth refused the word.

'What tales we'll have to tell. Who will believe us?'

'We must say nothing, save to the committee,' she warned. 'This is a secret you must bear for the rest of your boyhood, perhaps the rest of your life. And you must make every effort to – to expunge – to dismiss this – this . . .'

'Twa-la! The time twavellers, doubtless. Even now Bwannart seeks you out. Gweetings! Gweetings! Gweetings! Welcome, welcome, welcome to the fwutah!'

Looking to her right she drew in such a sharp gasp of oxygen that the respirator on her chest missed a motion and shivered; she could scarce credit the mincing young fantastico pressing a path for himself with his over-ornamented dandy-pole through the grass, brushing at his drooping, elaborate eyebrows which threatened to blind him, primping his thick, lank locks, patting at his pale, painted cheeks. He regarded her with mild, exaggerated eyes, fingering his pole as he paused.

'Can you undahstand me? I twust the twanslatah is doing its stuff. I'm always twisting the wong wing, y'know. I've seahched evewy one of the thiwty six points of the compass without a hint of success. You haven't seen them, have you? A couple of lawge hunting buttahflies? So big.' He extended his arms. 'No? Then they've pwobably melted again.' He put index finger to tip of nose. 'They'd be yellah, y'know.'

A collection of little bells at his throat, wrists and knees, began to tinkle. He looked suddenly skyward, but he was hopeless.

'Are you real?' asked Snuffles.

'As weal as I'll evah be.'

'And you live in this city?'

'Only ghosts, my deah, live in the cities. I am Sweet Ohb Mace. Cuwwently masculine!' His silks swelled, multicoloured balloons in parody of musculature.

'My name is Dafnish Armatuce. Of the Armatuce,' said she in a strangled tone. 'And this is Snuffles, my son.'

'A child!' The dreadful being's head lifted, like a swan's, and he peered. 'Why, the wohld becomes a kindehgahten! Of couwse, the otheh was actually Mistwess Chwistia. But weah! A great pwize foh someone!

'I do not understand you, sir,' she said.

'Ah, then it is the twanslatah.' He fingered one of his many rings. 'Shoroloh enafnisoo?'

'I meant that I failed to interpret your meaning,' said Dafnish Armatuce wearily.

Another movement of a ring. 'Is that bettah?'

She inclined her head. She was still less than certain that this was not merely another of the city's phantasms, for all that it addressed them and seemed aware that they had travelled through time, but she decided, nonetheless, to seek the help of Sweet Orb Mace.

'We are lost,' she informed him.

'In Djeh?'

'That is the city's name?'

'Oah Shenalowgh, pewhaps. You wish to leave the city, at any wate?'

'If possible.'

'I shall be delighted to help.' Sweet Orb Mace waved his hands, made a further adjustment to a ring, and created something which shone sufficient to blind them for a moment. Of course they recognized the black, spare shape.

'Our time craft!' cried Snuffles.

'My povahty of imagination is weknowned, I feah,' said Sweet Orb Mace blithely. 'It's all I could come up with. Not the owiginal, of coahse, just a wepwoduction. But it will sehve us as an aih cah.'

They entered, all three, to find fantasy within. Gone were the instruments and the muted lights, the padded couches, the simple purity of design, the austere dials and indicators. Instead, caged birds lined the walls, shuffling and twittering, their plumage vulgar beyond imagining; there was a carpet which swamped the legs to the calves, glowing a violent lavender, a score of huge clocks with wagging pendulums, a profusion of brass, gold and dark teak.

Noting her expression, Sweet Orb Mace said humbly: 'I saw only the extewiah. I had hoped the inside would sehve foh the shoht time of ouah flight.'

With a sob, she collapsed into the carpet and sat there with her visor resting upon her gauntlets while Snuffles, insensitive to his mother's mood, waggled youthful fingers and tried to get a macaw to reveal its name to him.

'A mattah of moments!' Sweet Orb Mace assured her. He tapped at a clock with his cane and they were swinging upwards into the sky. 'Do not, I pway you, judge the wohld of the End of Time by yoah impwession of me. I am weckoned the most bohwing being on the planet. Soon you shall meet people much moah intewesting and intelligent than me!'

3
A Social Lunch at the End of Time

'LOOK, MAMA! LOOK at the food!' The boy shuddered in his passion. 'Oh, look! Look!'

They descended from the reproduction time machine. They were in a long, broad meadow of blue and white grass. The city lay several miles away, upon the horizon.

'An illusion, my dear.' Her voice softened in awe. 'Perhaps your desires project . . .'

He began to move forward, tugging at her hand, through the patchwork grass, with Sweet Orb Mace, bemused behind to where the long table stood alone, spread with dishes, with meats and fruits, pastes and breads. 'Food, mama! I can almost smell it. Oh, mama!'

He whimpered. 'Could it be real?' he entreated.

'Real or false, we cannot eat.' No amount of self-control could stem the saliva gathering upon her palate. She had never seen so much food at one time. 'We cannot remove our helmets, Snuffles.' For a second, her visor clouded at her breath. 'Oh . . .'

In the distance the city danced to a sudden fanfarronade, as if exulting in their wonderment.

'If you wish to begin . . .' murmured their guide, and he gestured at the food with his cane.

Her next word was moaned: 'Temptation . . .' It became a synonym, on her lips, for fulfilment. To eat – to eat and be replete for the first time in her life! To sit back from that table and note that there was still more to eat – more food than the whole of the Armatuce could save between them if they ate absolutely nothing of their rations for a month. 'Oh, such wickedness of over-production!'

'Mother?' Snuffles indicated the centre of the table.

'A pie.'

They stared. As the voices of the Sirens entranced the ancient Navigators, so were they entranced by flans.

'A vewy simple meal, I thought,' said Sweet Orb Mace, uncomfortable. 'You do not eat so much, in yoah age?'

'We would not,' she replied. 'To consume it, even if we produced it, would be disgusting to us.' Her knees were weak; resistance wavered. Of all the terrors she had antici-

pated in the future, this was one she could not possibly have visualized, so fearsome was it. She tried to avert her eyes. But she was human. She was only one woman, without the moral strength of the Armatuce to call on. The Armatuce and the world of the Armatuce lay a million or more years in the past. Her will drooped at this knowledge. A tear started.

'You cannot pwoduce it? Some disastah?'

'We could. Now, we could. But we do not. It would be the depths of decadence to do so!' She spoke through clenched teeth.

She and the boy remained transfixed, even when others arrived and spoke in reference to them.

'Time travellers. Their uniforms proclaim their calling.'

'They could be from space.'

'They are hungry, it seems. Let them eat. You were speaking of your son, maternal Orchid. This other self, what?'

'He lives through her. He tells me that he lives *for* her, Jagged! Where does he borrow these notions? I fear for his – "health", is it?'

'You mean that you disapprove of his behaviour?'

'I suppose so. Jherek "goes too far".'

'I relish the sound of your words, Iron Orchid. I never thought to hear them here.'

'In Djer?'

'In any part of our world. My theories are confirmed. One small change in the accepted manners of a society and the result is hugely rich.'

'I cannot follow you, allusive lord. Neither shall I try . . . The strangers do not eat! They only stare!'

'The twanslahtahs,' cautioned Mace. 'They opahwate even now.'

'I fear our visitors find us rude.'

Dafnish Armatuce felt a soft touch upon her shoulder and turned, almost with relief, from the food to look up into the patrician features of a very tall man, clothed in voluminous lemon-coloured lace which rose to his strong chin and framed his face. The grey eyes were friendly, but she would not respond (daughter to father) as her emotions dictated. She drew away. 'You, too, are real?'

'Ah. Call me so.'

'You are not one of the illusions of that city?'

'I suspect that I am at least as real as Sweet Orb Mace. He convinces you?'

She was mute.

'The city is old,' said the newcomer. 'Its whimsicalities proliferate. Yet, once, it had the finest of minds. During those agitated centuries, when beings rushed willy-nilly about the universe, all manner of visitors came to learn from it. It deserves respect, my dear time traveller, if anything deserves it. Its memory is uncertain, of course, and it lacks a good sense of its identity, its function, but it continues to serve what remains of our species. Without it, I suspect that we should be extinct.'

'Perhaps you are,' she said quietly.

His shoulders moved in a lazy shrug and he smiled. 'Oh, perhaps, but there is better evidence supporting more entertaining theories.' His companion came closer, a woman. 'This is my friend, the Iron Orchid. We await other friends. For lunch and so on. It is our lunch that you are admiring.'

'The food is real, then? So much?'

'You are obsessed with the question. Are you from one of the religious periods?'

She trusted that the child had not heard and continued hastily. 'The profusion.'

'We thought it simple.'

'Mama!' Tugging, Snuffles whispered. 'The lady's hand.'

The Iron Orchid, long-faced with huge, brown eyes, hair that might have been silver filligree, peacock quills sprouting from shoulder-blades and waist, had one hand of the conventional, five-fingered sort, but the other (which she flourished) was a white-petalled, murmuring goldimar poppy, having at the centre scarlet lips like welts of blood.

'And I am called here Lord Jagged of Canaria,' said the man in yellow.

'Mama!' An urgent hiss. But no, she would not allow the lapse, though it was with difficulty she redirected her own gaze, away from the goldimar. 'Your manners, lad,' she said, and then, to the pair: 'This is my boy, Snuffles.'

The Iron Orchid was rapturous. 'A boy! What a shame you could not have arrived earlier. He would have been a playmate for my own son, Jherek.'

'He is not with you?'

'He wanders Time. The womb, these days, cannot make claims. He is off about his own affairs and will listen to no-one, his mother least of all!'

'How old is your son?'

'Two hundred – three hundred – years old? Little more. Your own boy?'

'He is but sixty. My name is Dafnish Armatuce. Of the Armatuce. We . . .'

'And you have travelled through Time to lunch with us.' Smiling, the Orchid bent her head towards the child. Stroking him with the hand that was a goldimar, she cooed. He scarcely flinched.

'We cannot lunch.' Dafnish Armatuce was determined to set an example, if only to herself. 'I thank you, however.'

'You are not hungry?'

'We dare not breathe your atmosphere, let alone taste your food. We wish merely to find our machine and depart.'

'If the atmosphere does not suit you, madam,' said Lord Jagged kindly, and with gentleness, 'it can be adapted.'

'And the food, too. The food, too!' eagerly declared the Iron Orchid, adding, *sotto voce*, 'though I thought it reproduced perfectly. You eat such things? In your own age?'

'Such things are eaten, yes.'

'The selection is not to your satisfaction?'

'Not at all.' Dafnish Armatuce permitted her curiosity a little rein. 'But how did you gather so much? How long did it take?'

The Iron Orchid was bewildered by the question. 'Gather? How long? It was made a few moments before we arrived.'

'Wustically wavishing!' carolled Sweet Orb Mace. 'A wondahfully wipping wuwal wepast!' He giggled.

'Two or three other time travellers join us soon,' explained Lord Jagged. 'The choice of feast is primarily to please them.'

'Others?'

'They are inclined to accumulate here, you know, at the End of Time. From what age have you come?'

'The year was 1922.'

'Aha. Then Ming will be ideal.' He hesitated, looking deep into her face. 'You do not find us – sinister?'

'I had not expected to encounter people at all.' The perfection of his manners threw her into confusion. She was bent on defying his charm, yet the concern in his tone, the acuteness of his understanding, threatened to melt resolve. These characteristics were in conflict with the childish

decadence of his costume, the corrupt grotesquerie of his surroundings, the idle insouciance of his conversation. she could not judge him, she could not sum him up. 'I had expected, at most, sterility . . .'

He had detected the tension in her. Another touch, upon her arm, and some of that tension dissipated. But she recovered her determination almost at once. Her own hand took her son's. How could such a creature of obvious caprice impress her so strongly of his respect both for her and for himself?

Watching them without curiosity, the Iron Orchid plucked up a plum and bit into it; the fruit and her lips a perfect match. Droplets of juice fell upon the gleaming grass, and clung.

Her eyes lifted; she smiled. 'This must be the first entrant.'

In the sky circled four gauzy, rainbow shapes, dipping and banking.

'Mine weah the fiwst,' said Sweet Orb Mace, aggrieved, 'but they escaped. Or melted.'

'We play flying conceits today,' explained Lord Jagged. 'Aha, it is undoubtably Doctor Volospion. See, he has erected his pavilion.'

The large, be-flagged tent had not been on the far side of the field a moment ago, Dafnish Armatuce was sure; she would have marked its gaudy red, white and purple stripes.

'The entertainment begins.' Lord Jagged drew her attention to the table. 'Will you not trust us, Dafnish Armatuce? You cannot die at the End of Time, or at least remain dead, for very long. Try the atmosphere. You can always return to your armour.' He took a backward pace.

Good manners dictated her actions, she knew. But did he seduce her? Again Snuffles eagerly made to remove his helmet, but she restrained him, for she must be the first to take the risk. She raised hesitant hands. A sidelong glance at the dancing city, distant and, she thought, expectant, and then a decision. She twisted.

A gasp as air mingled with air, and she was breathing spice, her balance at risk. Three breaths and she was convinced; from the table drifted the aroma of pie, of apricots and avocados; she failed to restrain a sob and tingling melancholy swept from toe to tight brown curl. Such profound feeling she had experienced only once before, at the birth of her Snuffles. The lad was even now wrenching his own helm free – even as he was drawn towards the feast.

She cried: 'Caution!' and stretched a hand, but he had seized a fowl and sunk soft, juvenile teeth into the breast. How could she refuse him? Perhaps this would be the only time in his life when he would know the luxury of abundance, and he must become an adult soon enough. She relented for him, but not for herself, yet even her indulgence of the child went hard against instinct.

Chewing, Snuffles presented her with a shining face, a greasy mouth, and eyes containing fires which had no business burning in one of his years. Feral, were they?

The Orchid trilled (artificial in all things, so thought Dafnish Armatuce): 'Children! Their appetites!' (Or was it irony Dafnish Armatuce detected? She dismissed any idea of challenge, placing her hands on her boy's shoulders, restraining her own lust): 'Food is scarce in Armatuce, just now.'

'For how long?' Casually polite, the Iron Orchid raised a brow.

'The current shortage has lasted for about a century.'

'You have found no means of ending the shortage?'

'Oh, we have the means. But there is the moral question. Is it *good* for us to end the shortage?'

For a second there came a faint expression of puzzlement upon the Iron Orchid's face, and then, with a polite wave of an ortolon leg, she turned away.

'Fatness is faithlessness,' quoted Dafnish Armatuce. 'Alone, the lean learn.' She realized, then, that these maxims were meaningless to them, but the zeal which touched the missionary touched her, and she continued: 'In Armatuce we believe that it is better to have less than to have enough, for those who have enough always feel the need for too much, whereas we only quell the yearning for sufficient, do you see?' She carried on 'Greed Kills. Self-Indulgence is Suicide. We stay hungry so that we shall never be tempted to eat more than we need and thus risk, again, the death of the planet. Austerity is Equilibrium.'

'Your world recovers from disaster, then?' said Lord Jagged sympathetically.

'It has recovered, sir.' She was firm. 'Thanks to the ancestors of the Armatuce. Now the Armatuce holds what they achieved in trust. Stable Is He Who Stoic Shall Be.'

'You fear that without this morality you would reproduce the disaster?'

'We know it,' she said.

'Yet,' (he spread his hands), 'you find a world still here when you did not expect it and no evidence that your philosophy has survived.'

She scarcely heard the words, but she recognized the sly, pernicious tone. She squared her shoulders. 'We would return now, if you please. The boy has eaten.'

'You will have nothing?'

'Will you show me to my ship?'

'Your ship will not work.'

'What? You refuse to let me leave?'

As succinctly as possible, Lord Jagged explained the Morphail Effect, concluding: 'Therefore you can never return to your own age and, if you left this one, might well be killed or at very least stranded in a less congenial era.'

'You think I lack courage? That I would not take the risk?'

He pursed his lips and let his gaze fall upon the gorging boy. She followed his meaning and put two fingers softly upon her cheek.

'Eat now,' said the tall lord with a tender gesture.

Absently, she touched a morsel of mutton to her tongue.

A SHADOW MOVED across the field, cast by a beast, porcine and grey, which with lumbering grace performed a somersault or two in the sky. Overhead there were now several more objects and creatures pirouetting, diving, spiralling – a small red biplane, a monstrous mosquito, a winged black and white cat, a pale green stingray – while below the owners of these entrants jostled, laughed and talked: a motley collection of races (some Earthly beasts, others extra-terrestrial; but mostly humanoid) clothed and decorated in all manner of fanciful array. On the edges of the blue and white field there had sprouted marquees, flagpoles, lines of bunting, crowded together and waving boisterously, so that she could no longer see beyond their confines. She let the mutton melt, took one plum and consumed it, drank an inch of water from a goblet, and her meal was done, though the effort of will involved in resisting a leaf of lettuce only by a fraction succeeded in balancing the guilt experienced at having allowed herself to eat the second half of the fruit.

Meanwhile Snuffles' jaws continued to move with dedicated precision.

Several large, fiery wheels went by, a score of feet above her head, drowning with their hissing the loud babble of the crowd.

'Cwumbs!' exclaimed Sweet Orb Mace, with a knowing wink at her, as if they shared a secret. 'Goah Blimey!'

The words were meaningless, but he appeared to be under the impression that she would understand them.

Deliberately, she guided her glance elsewhere. Everyone was applauding.

'Chariots of Fire!' bellowed a deep, proprietorial voice. 'Chariots of Fire! Number Seventy Eight!'

'We shan't forget, dear Duke of Queens,' sang a lady whose gilded skin clashed sickeningly with her green mouth and glowing, emerald eyes.

'My Lady Charlotina of Below the Lake,' murmured Lord Jagged. 'Would you like to meet her?'

'Can she be of help to me? Can she give me practical advice?' The rhetoric rang false, even in her own ears.

'She is the Patron of Brannart Morphail, our greatest, maddest scientist, who knows more about the Nature of Time than anyone else in history, so he tells us. He will probably want to interview you shortly.'

'Why should one of your folk require a Patron?' she asked with genuine interest.

'We seek traditions wherever we can find them. We are glad to get them. They help us order our lives, I suppose. Doubtless Brannart dug his tradition up from some ancient tape and took a fancy to it. Of late, because of the enthusiasm of the Iron Orchid's son, Jherek, we have all become *obsessed* with morality . . .'

'I see little evidence for that.'

'We are still having difficulty defining what it is,' he told her. 'My Lady Charlotina – our latest time travellers – Mother and Son – Dafnish and Snuffles Armatuce.'

'How charming. How unusual. Tell me, delightful Dafnish, are you claimed yet?'

'Claimed?' Dafnish Armatuce looked back at the departing Jagged.

'We vie with one another to be hosts to new arrivals,' he called. His wave was a little on the airy side. 'You are "claimed", however, as my guests. I will see you anon.'

'Greedy Jagged! Does he restock his menagerie?' My Lady Charlotina of Below the Lake stroked her crochet snood as her eyes swept up from Dafnish's toes and locked with Dafnish's eyes for a moment. 'Your figure? Is it your own, my dear?'

'I fail to understand you.'

'Then it is! Ha, ha!' Mood changed, My Lady Charlotina made a curtsey. 'I will find you some friends. My talent, they say, is as a Catalyst!'

'You are modest, cherubic Charlotina! You have all the talents in the catalogue!' In doublet and hose reminiscent of pre-cataclysm decadence, extravagantly swollen, catechrestically slashed and galooned, bearing buttons the size of cabbages, the shoes with toes a yard or two long and curled to the knees, the cap peaked to jut more than a foot from the face, beruffed and bedecked with thin brass chains, a big-buckled belt somewhere below the waist so as, in whole, to make Sweet Orb Mace seem mother naked, a youth bent a calculated leg before continuing with his catechism of compliment. 'Let me cast myself beneath the cataract of your thousand major virtues, your myriad minor qualities, O mistress of my soul, for though I am considered clever, I am nought but your lowliest catechumen, seeking only to absorb the smallest scraps of your wisdom so that I may, for one so small, be whole!' Whereupon he flung himself to the grass on velvet knees and raised powdered, imploring hands.

'Good afternoon, Doctor Volospion.' She relished the flattery, but paused no longer, saying over her shoulder: 'You smell very well today.'

Unconcerned, Doctor Volospion raised himself to his feet, his cap undulating, his chains jingling, and his rouged lips curved in a friendly smile as he saw Dafnish Armatuce.

'I seek a lover,' he explained, peeling a blade of blue grass from his inner thigh. 'A woman to whom I can give my All. It is late in the season to begin, perhaps, with so many exquisite Romances already under way or even completed (as in Werther's case), but I am having difficulty in finding a suitable recipient.' His expression, as he stared at her, became speculative. 'May I ask your sex, at present?'

'I am a woman, sir, and a mother. An Armatuce, mate to a cousin of the Armatuce, sworn to suffer and to serve

together until my son shall be ready to suffer and to serve in my place.'

'You would not like to link your fate with mine, to give yourself body and soul to me until the End of Time (which, of course, is not far off)?

'I would not.'

'I came late to the fashion, you see, and now most are already bored with it, I understand. But there is, surely, the fulfilment of abandonment. Is it not delicious to throw oneself upon another's mercy – to make him or her the absolute master of one's fate?' He took a step closer, peering into her immobile countenance, his eye sparkling. 'Ah! Do I tempt you? I see that I do!'

'You do not!'

'Your tone lacks conviction.'

'You are deceived, Doctor Volospion.'

'Could we have our bodies so engineered as to produce another child?'

'My operation is past. I have my child. No more can bloom.'

She turned to search for Snuffles, fearing suddenly for the safety of his person as well as for his mind, for she was now aware that this folk had no scruples, no decency, no proper inhibitions even where that most sacrosanct of subjects was concerned. 'Snuffles!'

'Here, mama!'

The boy was in conversation with a tall, thin individual wearing a crenellated crown as tall as himself.

'To me!'

He came reluctantly, waddling, snatching a piece of pastry from the table as he passed, wheezing, his little protective suit bearing a patina of creams and gravies, his hair sticky with confectionery, his face rich with the traces of his feast.

Someone had begun to build cloud-shapes, interweaving colours and kinds and creating the most unlikely configurations. She seized his sweetened hand, tempted to remonstrate, to read him a lesson, to forbid further food, but she knew the dangers of identifying her own demands upon herself with what she expected from her son. Too often, she had learned, had ancient parents forbidden their children food merely because they could not or would not eat themselves, forbidden children childish pleasures because those

pleasures tempted them, too. She would not transfer. Let the boy, at least, enjoy the experience. His training would save him, should they ever return. A lesson would be learned. And if they did not return, well, it would not profit him to retain habits which put him at odds with the expectations of society. And should it seem inevitable that they were permanently marooned, she could decide when he would be mature enough to become an adult, grant him that status herself and so put an end to her own misery.

The crowd seemed to close in on her. Doctor Volospion had already wandered away, but there were others – every one of whom was a living, mocking parody of all she held to be admirable in Man. Her heart beat faster, at last unchecked. She sought for the only being in that whole unnatural, fatuous farrago who might help her escape, but Lord Jagged was gone.

And My Lady Charlotina broke through the throng, Death's Harlequin, grinning and triumphant, drawing another woman with her. 'A contemporary, dear Dafnish. Mutual reminiscence is now possible!'

'I must go . . .' began the time traveller. 'Snuffles wearies. We can sleep in our ship.'

'No, no! The air-fête is hardly begun. You shall stay and converse with Miss Ming.'

Miss Ming, at first bored, brightened, giving Dafnish Armatuce a quick glance which was at once questioning and appraising, warm and calculating. Miss Ming was a heavily built young woman whose long fair hair had been carefully brushed but had acquired no more of a lustre than her pale, unwholesome skin. She wore, for this age, a simple costume, tight dungarees of glowing orange and a shirt and short jacket of pale blue. Now Dafnish Armatuce had her whole attention, was granted Miss Ming's smile of knowing and insincere sympathy.

'Your year?' My Lady Charlotina creased her golden forehead. 'You said . . .'

'1922.'

'Miss Ming is from 2067. Until recently she lived at Doctor Volospion's menagerie. One of the few human survivors, in fact.'

Miss Ming's abrupt, monotonous voice might have seemed surly had it not been for the eagerness with which she imparted meaningless (to Dafnish Armatuce)

confidences, coming closer than was necessary and placing intimate fingers upon her shoulder to say: 'Some of Mongrove's diseases escaped and struck down half the inhabitants of Doctor Volospion's menagerie. By the time the discovery was made, resurrection was out of the question. Mongrove refuses to apologize. Doctor Volospion shuns him. I didn't know time travel was discovered in 1922. And,' a girlish pout, 'they told me that I was the first woman to go into Time.'

Surely, Dafnish thought, she sensed aggression here.

'An all-woman team launched the craft.' Miss Ming spoke significantly. 'I was the first.'

And Dafnish Armatuce, her boy hard alongside, chanted at this threat: 'Time travel, Miss Ming, is the creation and the copyright of the Armatuce. We built the first backward-shifting ships two years ago in 1920. This year, in 1922, I was chosen to go forward.'

Miss Ming pursed lips which became thin and down-turned at the corners, giving her a slight leonine look, but she did not seek conflict. 'Can we both be deluded? I am an historian, after all! I cannot be wrong. Aha! Illumination. A.D.?'

'I regret . . .'

'From what event does your calendar run?'

'From the First Birth.'

'Of Christ?'

'Of a child, following the catastrophe in which all became barren. A method was discovered whereby—'

'There you have the answer! We are not even from the same millennium. Nonetheless,' Miss Ming linked an arm through hers before she could react, and held it tight, 'it needn't stop friendship. How delicate you are. How exquisite. Almost,' insinuatingly, 'a child yourself.'

Dafnish pulled free. 'Snuffles.' She began to dab at his face with her wetted glove. The little boy turned resigned eyes upward and watched the circling machines and beasts. The crowd sighed and swayed and they were jostled.

'You are married?' implacably continued Miss Ming. 'In your own Age?'

'To a cousin of the Armatuce, yes.' Dafnish's manner became more distant as she tried to move on, but Miss Ming's warm hand slipped again into the crook of her elbow. The fingers pressed into her flesh. She was chilled.

Three white bats swooped by performing acrobatics in unison, their twenty-foot wings making the air hiss. A trumpet sounded. There was applause.

'I was divorced, before my journey.' Miss Ming paused, perhaps in the hope of some morbid revelation from her new friend, then continued, girl-to-girl: 'His name was Donny Stevens. He was well thought of as a scientist – a popular and powerful family, too – very old – in Iowa. Rich. But he was like all men. You know. They think they're doing you a favour if they can get to your cubicle once a month, and if it's once a week, they're Casanova! No thanks! Someone said – Betty Stern, I think – that he had that quality of aggressive stupidity which so many women find attractive in a man: they think it's strength of character and, once they've committed themselves to that judgement, maintain it against all the evidence. Betty said dozens of the happiest marriages are based on it. (I idolized Betty). Unfortunately, I realized my mistake. If I hadn't, I wouldn't be here, though. I joined an all-woman team – know what I mean? – anyway we got the first big breakthrough and made those dogs look sick when they saw what the bitches could do. And this age suits me now. Anything goes, if you know what I mean – I mean, really! Wow! What kind of guys do you like, honey?'

She did not want Miss Ming's attentions. Again she cast about for Jagged and, as a rent appeared for a second in the ranks, saw him talking to a small, serious-faced yellow man, clad in discreet denim (the first sensible costume she had observed thus far). Hampered both by reluctant, sleepy son and clinging Ming, she pushed her way through posturing gallants and sparkling frillocks, to home slowly on Jagged who saw her and smiled, bending to murmur a word or two to his companion. Then, as she closed: 'Li Pao, this is Dafnish Armatuce of the Armatuce. Dafnish, I introduce Li Pao from the 27th century.'

'She won't know what you're talking about!' crowed the unshakeable Miss Ming. 'Her dates go from something she calls the First Birth. 1922. I was baffled myself.'

Lord Jagged's eyes became hooded.

Li Pao bowed a neat bow. 'I gather you find this Age disturbing, Comrade Armatuce?'

Her expression confirmed his assumption.

Li Pao's small mouth moved with soft, sardonic delib-

eration. 'I, too, found it so, upon arrival. But there is little need to feel afraid for, as you will discover, the rich are never malevolent, unless their security is threatened, and here there is no such threat. If they seem to waste their days, do not judge them too harshly; they know no better. They are without hungers or frustrations. Nature has long since been conquered by Art. Their resources are limitless, for they feed upon the whole universe (what remains of it). These cities suck power from any available part of the galaxy and transfer it to them so that they may play. Stars die so that on old Earth someone might change the colour of his robe.' There was irony in his tone, but he spoke without censure.

Snuffles cried out as something vast and metallic appeared to drop upon the throng, but it stopped a few feet up, hovered, then drifted away, and the crowd became noisy again.

'The First Birth period?' Lord Jagged made a calculation. 'That would place you in the year 9,478 A.D. We find the Dawn Age reckoning most convenient here. I understand your dismay. You are reconstituting your entire planet, are you not? From the core, virtually, outward, eh?'

She was grateful for his erudition. Now he and Li Pao seemed allies in this fearful world. She was able to steady her heart and recover something of her self-possession. 'It has been hard work, Lord Jagged. The Armatuce had been fortunate in winning respect for their several sacrifices.'

'Sacrifice!' Li Pao was nostalgic. 'A joy impossible to experience here, where the gift of the self to the common cause would go unremarked. They would not know.'

'Then they are, indeed, unfortunate,' she said. 'There is a price they pay for their pleasure, after all.'

'You find our conceits shallow, then?' Lord Jagged wished to know.

'I do. I grieve. Everywhere is waste and decay – the last stages of the Romantic disease whose symptoms are a wild, mindless seeking after superficial sensation for its own sake, effect piled upon effect, until mind and body disintegrate completely, whose cure is nothing else but death. Here, all is display – your fantasies appear the harmless play of children, but they disguise the emptiness of your lives. You colour corpses and think yourselves creative. But I am not deceived.'

'Well,' he replied equably enough, 'visions vary. To one

who cannot conceive of such things, another's terrors and appetites, his day-to-day phantasms, are, indeed, poor conceits, intended merely to display their possessor's originality and to dismay his fellows. But some of us have our joys, even our profundities, you know, and we cherish them.'

She felt a little shame. She had offended him, perhaps, with her candor. She lowered her eyes.

'Yet,' continued Jagged, 'to one of us (one who bothers to contemplate such things at all, and there are few) your way of life might seem singularly dull, denying your humanity. He could claim that you are without any sort of real passion, that you deliberately close your consciousness to the glowing images which thrive on every side, thus making yourself less than half alive. He might not realize that you, or this dour fellow Li Pao here, have other excitements. Li Pao celebrates Logic! A clearly stated formula is, for him, exquisite delight. He feels the same frisson from his theorems that I might for a well-turned aphorism. I am fulfilled if I give pleasure with a paradox while he would seek fulfilment if he could order a silly world, build, comfort, complete a pattern and fix it, to banish the very Chaos he has never tasted but which is our familiar environment, and precious to us as air, or as water to the fish. For to us it is not Chaos. It is Life, varied, stimulating, rich with vast dangers and tremendous consolations. Our world sings and shimmers. Its light can blind with a thousand shapes and colours. It darkness is always populated, never still, until death's own darkness swoops and obliterates all. We inhabit one sphere, but that sphere contains as many worlds as there are individuals on its surface. Are we shallow because we refuse to hold a single point of view?'

Li Pao was appreciative of the argument, but something puzzled him. 'You speak, Lord Jagged, as you sometimes do, as one from an earlier age than this, for few here think in such terms, though they might speak as you did if they bothered to consider their position at all.'

'Oh, well. I have travelled a little, you know.'

'Are there none here,' asked Dafnish Armatuce, 'who have the will to work, to serve others?'

Lord Jagged laughed. 'We seek to serve our fellows with our wit, our entertainments. But some would serve in what you would call practical ways.' He paused, serious for a second, as if his thoughts had become a little private. He

drew breath, continuing: 'Werther de Goethe, perhaps, might have had such a will, had he lived in a different Age. Li Pao's, for instance. Where another sees dreams and beauty, Li Pao sees only disorder. If he could, or dared, he would make our rotting cities stable, clarify and formalize the architecture, inhabit his tidy buildings with workers, honest and humane, to whom Peace of Mind is a chance of worthy promotion and the prospect of an adequate pension, to whom Adventure is a visit to the sea or a thunderstorm during a picnic – and Passion is Comfort's equal, Prosperity's cohort. But shall I judge his vision dull? No! It is not to him, nor to those who think as him, in his own Age, in your own Age, Dafnish Armatuce.' Lord Jagged teased at his fine nose. 'We are all what our societies make of us.'

'When in Rome . . .' murmured Miss Ming piously. Something flapped by and received a cheer.

Jagged was impatient with Miss Ming. 'Indeed.' His cloak billowed in a wind of his own subtle summons, and he looked kindly down on Dafnish Armatuce. 'Explore all attitudes, my dear. Honour them, every one, but be slippery – never let them hold you, else you fail to enjoy the benefits and be saddled only with the liabilities. It's true that canvas against the skin can be as sensual as silk, and milk a sweeter drink than wine, but feel everything, taste everything, for its own sake, and for your own sake, then no one thing shall be judged better or worse than another, no person shall be so judged, and nothing can ensnare you!'

'Your advice is well-meant, sir, I know,' said Dafnish Armatuce, 'and would probably be good advice if I intended to stay in your world. But I do not.'

'You have no choice,' said Miss Ming with satisfaction.

He shrugged. 'I have told you of the Morphail Effect.'

'There are other means of escape.'

Miss Ming, by her superior smirk, felt she had found a flaw in Lord Jagged's argument. 'Cancer?' she demanded. 'Could we love cancer?'

He rose to it willingly enough, replying lightly: 'You are obscure, Miss Ming, for there is no physical disease at the End of Time. But, yes, we could – for what it taught us – the comparisons it offered. Perhaps that is why some of our number seek discomfort – in order to comfort their souls.'

Miss Ming simpered. 'You argue cunningly, Lord Jagged, but I suspect your logic.'

'Is it so dignified, my conversation, as to be termed Logic? I am flattered.' One hand pressed gently against Dafnish Armatuce's back and the other against Li Pao's, rescuing them both. Miss Ming hesitated and then retreated at last.

Eight dragons waltzed the skies above while far-away music played; the crowd grew quieter as it watched and even Dafnish Armatuce admitted, to herself, that it was a delicate beauty they witnessed.

She sighed. 'So this is Utopia, Lord Jagged for you? You are satisfied?'

'Could I expect more? Many think the days of our universe numbered. Yet, do you find concern amongst us?'

'You sport to forget the inevitable?'

He shook his head. 'We sported thus before we knew. We have not changed our lives at all, most of us.'

'You must sense tension. You cannot live so mindlessly.'

'I do not think we live as you describe. Do you not strive, in your Age, for a world without fear?'

'Of course.'

'There is no fear here, Dafnish Armatuce, even of total extinction.'

'Which suggests you are far divorced from reality. You speak of the atrophy of natural instinct.'

'I suppose that I do. There are few such instincts to be found among those who are native to the End of Time. You have no philosophers among your own folk who argue that those natural instincts might be the cause of the tragedy once described, I believe, as the Human Condition?'

'Of course. It is part of our creed. But we ensure that the tragedy shall never be played again, for we encourage the virtues of self-sacrifice and consideration of the common good, and we discourage the vices.'

'Which suggests that they continue to exist. Here, they do not; there is no necessity for either vice or virtue.'

'Yet if Hate dies, surely Love dies, too?'

'I think it has been rediscovered, lately. Love.'

'A fad. I spoke with your Doctor Volospion. An affectation, nothing more.' She gasped and shut her eyes, for two great suns had appeared, side by side, glaring scarlet, and drenched the gathering with their light.

Almost at once the suns began to grow smaller, rising away from the Earth. She blinked and recovered her com-

posure, though weariness threatened her thoughts. 'And Love of the sort you describe is no Love at all, for its attendants are Jealousy and Despair and in Despair lies the most destructive quality of all, Cynicism.'

'You think us cynical, then?'

She looked about her at the chattering press. One of their number, tall, bulky and bearded, festooned in feathers and furs, was being congratulated for what doubtless had been his display.

'I thought so at first.'

'And now?'

She changed the subject. 'I have the impression, Lord Jagged, that you are trying to make this world palatable to me. What if I agree that there is something to be said for your way of life and turn the conversation to a problem rather closer to my heart? My husband, cousin to the Armatuce, and a Grinash on his mother's side, cares for me, as he cares for Snuffles, our son, and eagerly awaits our return, as does the committee which I serve (and which elected me to accomplish my voyage). I would go back to that Age, which you would find grim, no doubt, but which is home, familiar, security for us. You tell me that I cannot, so I must consider my position accordingly. Could I not send a message, at least, or return for a second to assure them of my physical safety?'

'You speak of caring for the common cause,' interrupted Li Pao. 'If you do, you will not make the attempt, for Time disrupts. Morphail warns us. And you risk death. If you tried to go back you might succeed, but you would in all probability flicker for only a moment, unseen, before being flung out again. The time-stream would suck you up and deposit you anywhere in your future, in any one of a million less pleasant ages than this, or you could be killed outright (which has happened more than once). The Laws of Time are cruel.'

'I would risk any danger,' she said, 'were it not for—'

'—the child,' softly said Lord Jagged.

'We are used to sacrifice, the Armatuce. But our children are precious. We exist for them.'

Darkness fell and ivory clashed and rattled above her as a great ship, made all of bone, its sections strung loosely together, its wings beating erratically, staggered upon a sea of faintly glowing clouds.

'What a splendid ending,' she heard Lord Jagged say.

4
An Apology and an Explanation From Your Auditor

YOUR AUDITOR, FOR the most part a mere ear, a humble recorder of that which he is privileged to hear, apologizes if he interrupts the reader's flow with a few words of his own, but it is his aim to hasten the narrative forward by condensing somewhat the events immediately following Dafnish Armatuce's introduction to the society at the End of Time.

Her reaction was a familiar one (familiar to you who have followed this compilation of legends, gossip, rumours and accredited reminiscence thus far) and to detail it further would risk repetition. Suffice: she was convinced of the Morphail Effect. Time had thrown her (as a shipwrecked English tar of old might have been thrown on the shores of the Caliphs' land) upon the mercies of an alien and self-satisfied culture which considered her an amusing prize. Her protestations? They were not serious – Her warnings? Irrelevant fancies. – And her sensitivities? Meaningless to those who luxuriated in the inherited riches of an entire race's history; to whom Grief was a charming affectation and Anxiety an archaic word whose meaning had been lost. They were pleased to listen to her insofar as she remained entertaining, but even as their enthusiasms waxed and waned, mayfly swift, so did their favours shift from visitor to visitor.

Ah, if they had known how cruel they were, how they might have explored the sensation – but they were feline, phantasmagorical, and, like careless cats, they played with the poor creatures they trapped until one of them wearied of the game, for even those denizens at the End of Time who claimed to have known pain knew only the play-actor's pain, that grandiose anguish which, at its most profound, resolves itself as hurt pride.

Dafnish Armatuce knew great pain – though she herself would not admit it – particularly where her maternal instincts were involved. Children, like all else, were scarce in Armatuce and she had worked for half her life to be permitted one. Now her ambition was that her boy be elected to adult status among the Armatuce and take her place so that

she might, at last, rest from service, content and proud. For sixty years, since Snuffles' birth, she had looked forward to the day when he would be chosen (she had been certain that he would be) and had known that his voyage through Time would have been a guarantee of early promotion. But here she was, stranded, thwarted of all she had striven for, unable and unwilling to give service to a community which had no needs; thus it is no wonder that she pined and schemed alternately while she remained a guest of Lord Jagged of Canaria, and fought to retain the standards of the Armatuce against every temptation.

However, though she remained rigorously self-disciplined, she indulged the boy, refusing to impose upon him the demands she made of herself. She allowed him a certain amount of decoration in his clothing; she let him eat, within reason, what he wished to eat. And she took him on journeys to see this world, so similar, in much of its topography, to the deserts of their own. Ruined it might be, wasted and tortured, covered with the half-finished abandoned projects of its feckless inhabitants, but it was beautiful, too.

And it was on these trips that she could find a certain peace she had never known before. While Snuffles climbed the remains of mountains, crying out in delight whenever he made a discovery, she would sit upon a rock and stare at the pale, faded sky, the eroded landscape through which dust and the wind sang with quiet melancholy, and she would think the world new and herself its first inhabitant, perhaps its only inhabitant. As an Armatuce, in Armatuce, she had never once spent a full hour alone, and here, at the End of Time, she realized that it was what she had always wanted, that perhaps this was why she had looked forward so much to her commission, that she had secretly hoped for the cold peace of a lifeless planet. Then she would turn brooding eyes upon her son, as he scrambled, ran or climbed, and she would consider her duty and her love and wonder if she had, after all, been prepared to risk his life, as well as her own, in this quest for loneliness. Such thoughts would throw her into a further crisis of conscience and make her more than ever determined to ensure that he should not suffer as a result of her desires.

But if there was a devil in this dying Eden, then it came in the shape of Miss Ming who sought out Dafnish Armatuce

wherever she went. Lord Jagged was gone from his cage-shaped castle, either to work in his hidden laboratories or else embarked upon a journey' Dafnish did not know, and with him had gone his protection. Miss Ming found excuse after excuse for visiting her, each one increasingly unlikely. And there was no solitude which Miss Ming might not interrupt. In whatever obscure corner of the globe Dafnish flew her little airboat (a gift of Lord Jagged). Miss Ming had observations on every aspect of life, gossip concerning every individual in the world, criticism of all she met or saw, from Doctor Volospion's new demon, to the shade of the sky hanging over the Ottawa monuments, but in particular Miss Ming had advice for Dafnish Armatuce, on the care of her skin, her clothes, the upbringing of children (she had had none of her own), her diet, her choice of scenery and of residence.

'I wish,' Miss Ming would say, 'only to help, dear, for you're bound to have difficulty getting used to a world like this. We expatriates must stick together. If we don't, we're in trouble. Don't let it get to you. Don't mope. Don't get morbid.'

And if Dafnish Armatuce would make an excuse, suggesting that Snuffles must be put to bed, perhaps, Miss Ming would exclaim. 'There! You'll do harm to the boy. You must let him grow up, stand on his own feet. You're afraid of experience – you're using him to protect yourself from what this world can offer. While he remains a child, he gives you an excuse to turn away from your own responsibilities as an adult. You're too possessive, Dafnish! Is it doing any good to either of you? He's got to develop his personality and so have you.'

At last, Dafnish Armatuce, turned on the intolerable Ming. She would ask her, direct, to leave. She would say that she found Miss Ming's company unwelcome. She would ask Miss Ming never to return, but Miss Ming knew how to respond to this.

Pre-menstrual tension,' she would say, sympathetically, undeterred by Dafnish Armatuce's reiteration of the fact that she had never experienced the menstrual cycle. 'You're not yourself today.' Or she would smile a sickly smile and suggest that Dafnish Armatuce get a better night's rest, that she would call tomorrow, in the hope of finding her in an improved mood. Or: 'Something's worrying you about the

boy. Let him have his head. Lead your own life.' Or: 'You're frustrated, dear. You need a friend like me, who understands. A woman knows what a woman needs.' And a clammy, white, red-tipped hand would fall upon Dafnish's knee, like a hungry spider.

That Miss Ming wanted her for a lover, Dafnish Armatuce understood quite early, but love-making, even between man and woman, was discouraged in Armatuce, it was thought vulgar, and some would have it that the old sexual drive had been another central cause of the disaster which had nearly succeeded in destroying the whole race. The new methods of creating children, originally developed from necessity, were seen to contain virtues previously unconsidered. Besides, there was plainly no Armatuce blood in Miss Ming, and there was a strong taboo about forming liaisons beyond the clan.

Thus, no matter how lonely she might sometimes feel, Dafnish Armatuce remained unswervingly contemptuous of Miss Ming's advances, which would sometimes bring the accusation, from that poor, smitten, unlovely woman, that Dafnish Armatuce was 'playing hard to get' and shouldn't 'toy with someone's affections the way you do'.

Scarcely for a day did Miss Ming lift her siege. She tried to dress like Dafnish Armatuce, or impress her with her own coarse taste. She would appear in fanciful frocks or stern tweed; several times she arrived stark naked, and once she had her body engineered so that it was a near-copy of Dafnish's own.

Even Miss Ming's determinedly self-centred conciousness must have understood that the look on Dafnish Armatuce's face, when she witnessed the travesty of her own form, was an expression of revulsion, for the invader did not stay long in that guise.

Harried, horrified and exasperated by Miss Ming's obsessive suit, Dafnish Armatuce began to accept invitations to the various functions arranged by those who were this world's social leaders, for if she could not find peace of mind in the great, silent spaces, then at least she might find some comfort in surrounding herself by a wall of noise, of empty conversation, or useless display. To these balls, fêtes and exhibitions, she sometimes took her Snuffles, but on other occasions she would trust his security to the sophisticated mechanical servants Lord Jagged had placed at her disposal.

Here she would often encounter Miss Ming, but here, at least, there was often someone to rescue her – the Iron Orchid or Sweet Orb Mace or, more rarely and much more welcome, Li Pao. Dafnish Armatuce resented Miss Ming mightily, but since this world placed no premium on privacy, there was no other way to avoid her – and Dafnish resented Miss Ming for that, too – for forcing her into a society with which she had no sympathy, for which she often felt active disgust, and which she suspected might be corrupting the values she was determined to maintain against a day when, in spite of constant confirmation of the impossibility, she might return to Armatuce.

Moreover, it must be said, since she made no effort to adapt herself to the world at the End of Time, she often felt an unwelcome loneliness at the gatherings, for the others found her conversation limited, her descriptions of Armatuce dull, her observations without much wit and her sobriety scarcely worth playing upon; she made a poor topic. Her boy was more attractive, for he was a better novelty; but she balked any effort of theirs to draw him out, to pet him, to (in their terms) improve him; as a result both would find themselves generally ignored (save by the ubiquitous Ming); there was not even food for malicious gossip in her; she was too likeable. She was intelligent and she understood what made her unacceptable to them, that the fault (if fault it were) lay in her, but the treatment she received hardened her, laid her prey to that most destructive of all the demons which threaten the tender, vulnerable human psyche, the Demon of Cynicism. She resisted him, for her son's sake, if not her own, but the struggle was exhausting and took up her time increasingly. Like us all, she desired approval but, like rather fewer of us, she refused to seek it by relinquishing her own standards. Her son, she knew, had yet to learn this pride, for it was of a kind unattractive in a child, a kind that can only be earned, not imitated, so she did not show active disapproval if he occasionally warmed to some paradox-quoting, clown-costumed fop, or repeated a vulgar rhyme he had overheard, or even criticized her for her dour appearance.

How could she know, then, that all these efforts of hers to maintain a balance between dignity and tolerance would have such tragic results for them both, that her nobility, her fine pride, would be the very instruments of their mutual ruin?

Not that disaster is inherent in these qualities; it required another factor to achieve it, and that factor took the form of the despairing, miserable Miss Ming, a creature without ideals, self-knowledge or common-sense (which might well be mutually encouraging characteristics), a creature of Lust which called itself Love and Greed masquerading as Concern, and one who was, incidentally, somewhat typical of her Era. But now we race too fast to our Conclusion. Your Auditor stands back, once again no more than an observing listener, and allows the narrative to carry you on.

5
In Which Snuffles Finds a Playmate

THE DUKE OF QUEENS, in cloth-of-gold, bulked and hung about with lace; pearls in his full black beard, complicated boots upon his large feet, a natural, guttering flambeau in his hand, led his party through his new caverns ('Underground' was the current fad, following the recent discovery of a lost nursery-warren, there since the time of the Tyrant Producers) bellowing cheerfully as he pointed out little grottos, his stalagmites ('Prison-children in the ancient Grautt tongues – a pretty, if unsuitable, name!'), his scuttling troglodytes, his murky rivers full of white reptiles and colourless fish, while flame made shadows which changed shape as the fluttering wind changed and strange echoes distorted their speech.

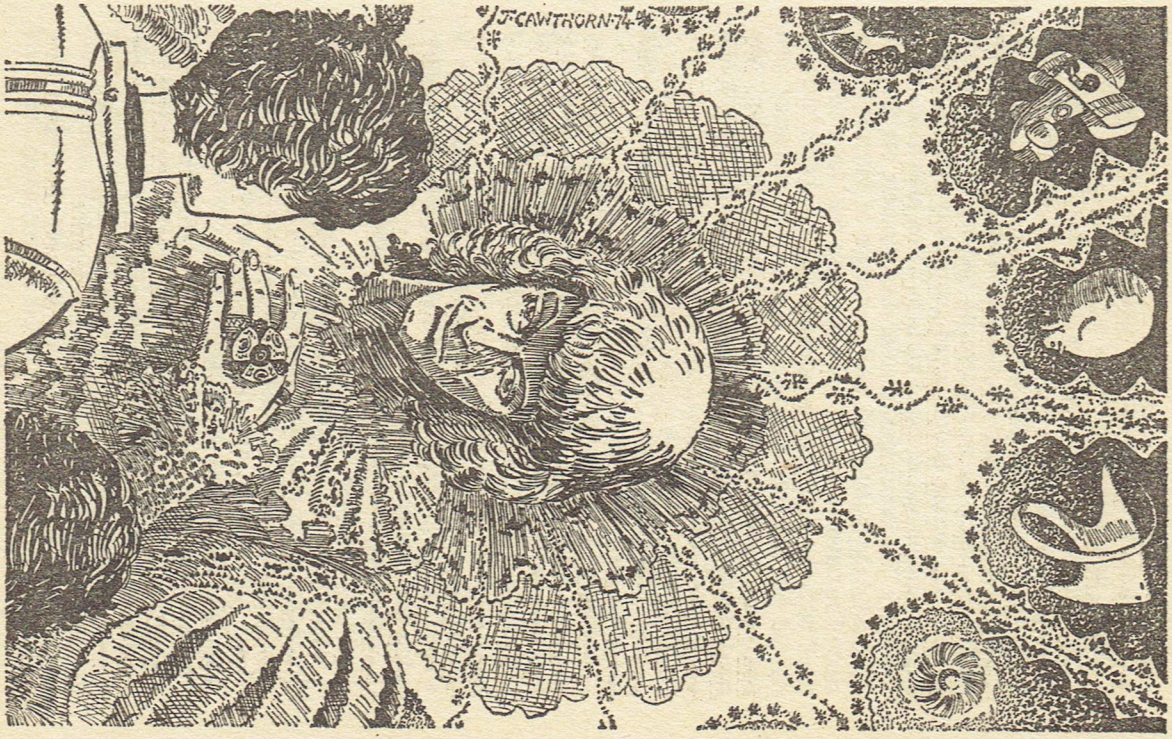
'They must stretch for miles!' hissed Miss Ming, hesitant between Dafnish and Snuffles and the host she admired. 'Aren't they altogether gloomier than Bishop Castle's, eerier than Guru Guru's?'

'They seem very similar to me,' coldly said Dafnish Armatuce looking hungrily about her for a branching tunnel down which, with luck, she might escape for a short while.

'Oh, you judge without seeing properly. You close your eyes, as always, to the experience.'

Dafnish Armatuce wondered, momentarily, how much of her self-esteem she might have to relinquish to purchase the good-will of a potential ally, someone willing to rescue her from her remorseless leech, but she dismissed the notion, knowing herself incapable of paying the price.

'Snuffles is enjoying himself – aren't you, dear,' said Miss Ming pointedly.


J. CAWTHORN 74

Snuffles nodded.

'You think they're the best you've seen, don't you?'

Again, he nodded.

'A child's eye!' She became mystical. 'They take for granted what we have to train ourselves to look at. Oh, how I *wish* I was a little girl again!'

Sweet Orb Mace, in loose, navy-blue draperies, waved his torch expansively as he recognized Dafnish Armatuce and her son. His accent had changed completely since their last meeting and he had dropped his lisp. 'Good afternoon, time-travellers. The twists and turns of these tunnels, are they not tremendously tantalizing? Such a tangle of intricate transits!' The caverns echoed his alliterative tees so as to seem filled with the ticking of a thousand tiny clocks. A bow; he offered her his arm. Desperate, she took it, uncaring, just then, that Snuffles remained behind with Miss Ming. She needed a respite, for both their sakes. 'And how do you find the grottos?' he inquired.

'Grotesque,' she said.

'Aha!' He brightened. 'You see! You learn! Shall we ogle the gorgeous gulfs together?'

She failed to take his meaning. He paused, waiting for her response. None came. His sigh was politely stifled. The passage widened and became higher. There was a murmur of compliment, but the Duke of Queens silenced it with a modest hand.

'This is a discovery, not an invention. I came upon it while I worked. You'll note it's limestone, and natural limestone was thought extinct.'

Their fingers went to the smooth, damp rock and it received a reverential stroke.

Sometimes in silhouette, sometimes gleaming and dramatic in the flamelight, the Duke of Queens indicated rock formations which must have lain here since before the Dawn Age: ghastly, smooth, rounded, almost organic in appearance, the limestone dripped with moisture, exuding a musty smell which reminded Dafnish Armatuce, and only Dafnish Armatuce, of a mouldering cadaver, as if this was all that remained of the original Earth, rotting and forgotten. It began to occur to her that it would be long before they were able to leave the caverns; the walls seemed, suddenly, to exert a pressure of their own, and she experienced something of the panic she had felt before, when the crowd

had become too dense. She clung to Sweet Orb Mace, who would rather have gone on. She knew that she bored him, but she must have reassurance, some sort of anchor. The party moved: she felt that it pushed her where she did not want to go. She had a strong desire to turn back, to seek the place where they had entered the maze; she did half-turn, but was confronted by the grinning face of Miss Ming so she allowed herself to be carried forward.

Sweet Orb Mace had made an effort to resume the conversation, on different lines: '... would not believe how jealous Brannart Morphail was. But he shall not have it. I was the first to discover it – and you – and while he is welcome to make a reproduction, I shall hold the original. There are few like it.'

'Like it?'

'Your time-machine.'

'You have it?'

'I have always had it. It's in my collection.'

'I assumed it lost or destroyed. When I went back to seek it, it had gone, and no one knew where.'

'I must admit to a certain deception, for I knew how desperately Brannart would want it for himself. I hid it. But now it is the pride of my collection and on display.'

'The machine is the property of the Armatuce,' she said gently. 'By rights, it should be in my care.'

'But you have no further use for it, surely!'

She did not possess sufficient strength for argument. She allowed him his assumption. From behind her, there came an unexpected giggle. She dared to look. Miss Ming was bent low, showing Snuffles a fragment of rock she had picked up. Snuffles beamed and shook with laughter as Miss Ming indicated features in the piece of rock.

'Isn't it the image of Doctor Volospion?'

Snuffles saw that his mother watched. 'Look, mama! Doctor Volospion to the life!'

She failed to note the resemblance. The rock was oddly shaped, certainly, and she supposed that it might, if held at an angle, roughly resemble a human face.

'I hadn't realized Doctor Volospion was so old!' giggled Ming, and Snuffles exploded with laughter.

'Can't you see it, mama?'

Her face softened; she smiled, not at the joke (for there was none, in her view), but in response to his innocent joy.

Miss Ming's sense of humour was evidently completely compatible with her son's: the unbearable woman had succeeded in making the boy happy, perhaps for the first time since their arrival. All at once Dafnish Armatuce felt grateful to Miss Ming. The woman had some virtue, if she could make a child laugh so thoroughly, so boisterously.

The caverns took up the sound of the laughter so that it grew first louder, then softer, until finally it faded in some deep and far-off gallery.

Now Miss Ming was dancing with the boy, singing some sort of nonsense song, also concerning Doctor Volospion. And Snuffles chuckled and gasped and all but wept with delight, and whispered jokes which made miss Ming, in turn, scream with laughter. 'Ooh! You *naughty* boy!' She noticed that Mother observed them. 'Your son – he's sharper than you think, Dafnish!'

Infected, Dafnish Armatuce found that she smiled still more. She realized that hers was not only a smile of maternal pleasure, but a smile of relief. She felt free of Ming. Having transferred her attentions to the boy, the woman acquired an altogether pleasanter personality. Perhaps because she was so immature Miss Ming was one of those who only relaxed in the company of children. Whatever the cause of this change, Dafnish Armatuce was profoundly grateful for it. She, too, relaxed.

Stronger light lay ahead as the cavern grew wider. Now they all stood in a vast chamber whose curved roof was a canopy of milky green jade through which sunlight (filtered, delicate, subtly coloured) fell, illuminating rock-carved chairs and benches of the subtlest marble and richest obsidian, while luminous moss and ivy mingled on the walls and floor, revealing little clusters of pale blue and yellow primroses.

'What a perfect spot for a fairy feast!' cried Miss Ming, hand in hand with Snuffles. 'We can have fun here, can't we, Prince Snuffles?' Her heavy body was almost graceful as she danced, her green and purple petticoats frothing over sparkling, diamante stockings. 'I'm the Elf Queen. Ask me what you wish and it shall be granted.'

Buoyed by her exuberance, Snuffles was beside himself with glee. Dafnish Armatuce stood back with a deep sigh, quietly revelling in the sight of her son's flushed, jolly cheeks, his darting eyes. It had concerned her that Snuffles

had no children with whom he could play. Now he had found someone. If only Miss Ming had earlier discovered her affinity – what was evidently her real affinity – with Snuffles, how much better it might have been for everyone, thought Dafnish.

Her attention was drawn to Doctor Volospion. In a costume of, for him, unusual simplicity (black and silver) he capered upon one of the tables with the leopard-spotted woman called Mistress Christia, while the rest of the guests, the Duke of Queens amongst them, clapped in time to the music of the jig Doctor Volospion played upon some archaic stringed instrument tucked beneath his goateed chin.

Unusually lighthearted, Dafnish Armatuce was tempted to join them, but she checked the impulse, tolerantly enough, contenting herself with her silent pleasure at the sight of Snuffles and Miss Ming who, even now, were climbing upon the table.

Soon all but Dafnish were dancing.

6
In Which Dafnish Armatuce Enjoys A Little Freedom

HAVING PERMITTED HER boy a generous frolic with his newfound friend, Dafnish Armatuce expressed genuine thanks to Miss Ming for devoting so much of her time to the lad's pleasure.

As flushed and happy as Snuffles, looking almost as attractive, Miss Ming declared: 'Nonsense! It was Snuffles who entertained me. He made me feel young again.' She hugged him. 'Thank you for a lovely day, Snuffles.'

'Shall I see you tomorrow, Miss Ming?'

'That's up to mama.'

'I had planned a visit to the Uranian Remains . . .' began Dafnish. 'However, I suppose—'

'Why don't you visit your dull old Remains on your own and let Snuffles and I go out to play together.' Miss Ming became embarrassing again as she made a little girl face and curtsied. 'If you please, Mrs Armatuce.'

'He'll exhaust you, surely.'

'Not at all. He makes me feel properly, fully alive.'

Dafnish Armatuce tried to disguise the slightly con-

descending note which crept into her voice, for it now became poignantly plain that the poor creature had never really wanted to grow up at all. Understanding this, Dafnish could allow herself to be kind. 'Perhaps for an hour or two, then.'

'Wonderful! Would you like that, Snuffles?'

'Oh, yes! Thank you, Miss Ming!'

'You are doing him good, Miss Ming, I think.'

'He's doing *me* good, Dafnish. And it will give *you* a chance to be by yourself and relax for a bit, eh?' Her tone of criticism, of false concern, did not offend Dafnish as much as usual. She inclined her head.

'That's settled, then. I'll pick you up tomorrow, Snuffles. And I'll be thinking of some jolly games we can play, eh?'

'Oh, yes!'

They strolled across the undulating turf to where the aircars waited. Most of the other guests had already gone. Dafnish Armatuce helped her son into their car, which was fashioned in the shape of a huge apple-half, red and green, and, astonished that the woman had made no attempt to return with them to Canaria, bid Miss Ming a friendly farewell.

Snuffles leaned from the car as it rose into the pink and amber sky, waving to Miss Ming until she was out of sight.

'You are happy, Snuffles?' asked Dafnish as he settled himself into his cushions.

'I never had a nicer day, mama. It's funny, isn't it, but I used not to like Miss Ming at all, when she kept hanging around us. I thought she wanted to be your friend, but really she wanted to be mine. Do you think that's so?'

'It seems to be true. I'm glad you enjoyed today and you shall play with Miss Ming often. But I beg you to remember, my boy, that you are an Armatuce. One day you must become an adult and take my place, and serve.'

His laughter was frankly astonished. 'Oh, mama! You don't really think we'll ever go back to Armatuce, do you? It's impossible. Anyway, it's nicer here. There's a lot more to do. It's more exciting. And there's plenty to eat.'

'I have always seen the attraction this world holds for a boy, Snuffles. However when you are mature you will recognize it for what it is. I have your good at heart. Your moral development is my responsibility (though I grant you your

right to enjoy the delights of childhood while you may) but if I feel that you are forgetting . . .'

'I shan't forget, mama.' He dismissed her fears. They were passing over the tops of some blue-black clouds shot through with strands of gleaming grey. He studied them. 'Don't you think Miss Ming a marvellous lady, though?'

'She has an affinity with children, obviously. I should not have suspected that side to her character. I have modified my opinion of her.'

Dafnish did not let Snuffles see her frown as she contemplated her motives in allowing him freedom that would be sheer licence in Armatuce. Events must take their own course, for a while; then she might determine how good or bad were the effects of Miss Ming's company upon her son.

The mesa, red sandstone and tall, on which stood golden, cage-shaped Castle Canaria, came into view; the aircar lost height, speeding a few feet above the waving, yellow corn which grew here the year round, aiming for the dark entrance at the base of the cliff.

'You must try to remember, Snuffles,' she added, while the car took its old place in the row of oddly assorted companions (none of which Lord Jagged ever seemed to use), 'that Miss Ming regrets becoming an adult. That she wishes she was still, like you, a child. You may find, therefore, a tendency in her to try to make you suppress your maturer thoughts. In my company, I feel, you thought too much as an adult – but in hers, you may come to think too much as a child. Do you follow me?'

But Snuffles, played out, had fallen asleep. Tenderly she raised him in her arms and began to walk (she refused to fly) up the ramp towards the main part of the castle.

Through rooms hung in draperies of different shades of soft brown or yellow, she carried her child, through the great Hall of Antiquities, until she came to her own apartments where mechanical servants received the boy, changed his clothes for night attire and put him to bed. She sat on a chair beside him, watching the servants move gently about the room, and she tenderly stroked his fair curls, so, save for colour, like her own (as was his face), and yearned a trifle for Armatuce and home. It was as she rose to go to her chamber, adjoining his, that she saw a figure standing in the entrance. She knew a second's alarm, then laughed. 'Lord Jagged. You are back!'

He bowed. There was a weariness in his face she had never noted before.

'Was your journey hard?'

'It had its interests. The fabric of Time, those Laws we have always regarded as immutable ...' He hesitated, perhaps realizing that he spoke to himself.

He was dressed in clothes of a pearly grey colour, of stiffer material than he usually preferred. She felt that they suited him better, were more in keeping with the temperament she detected behind the insouciant exterior. Did he stagger as he walked? She put out a hand to help but he did not notice it.

'You have been travelling in Time? How can that be?'

'Those of us who are indigenous to the End of Time are more fortunate than most. Chronos tolerates us, perhaps because we have no preconceptions of what the past should be. No, I am weary. It is an easier matter to go back to a chosen point from one's own Era. If one goes forward, one can never go all the way back. Oh, I babble. I should not be speaking at all. I would tempt you.'

'Tempt me?'

'To try to return. The dangers are the same, but the checks against those dangers are less rigid. I'll say no more. Forgive me. I will *not* say more.'

She walked beside him, past her own rooms, down the brown and yellow corridor, eager for further information. But he was silent and determined to remain so. At his door he paused, leaning with one hand against the lintel, head bowed. 'Forgive me,' he said again. 'I wish you good-night.'

She could not in all humanity detain him, no matter how great her curiosity. But the morning would come: here, at Canaria, the morning would come, for Lord Jagged chose to regulate his hours according to the age-old movements of the Earth and the Sun, and when it did, she would demand that it was her right to know if there was any possibility of return to Armatuce.

Thus it was that she slept scarcely at all that night and rose early, with the first vermilion flush of dawn, to note that Snuffles still slept soundly, to hover close by Jagged's door in the hope that he would rise early, though the evidence of last night denied this hope, she knew. Robot servants prowled past her, preparing the great house for the morning, ignoring her as she paced impatiently to the breakfast room

with its wide windows and its views of fields, hills and trees, so like a world that had existed before Cataclysm, before Armatuce, and which none of her folk would ever have expected to see again. In most things Lord Jagged's tastes harked to the planet's youth.

The morning grew late. Snuffles appeared, hungry for the Dawn Age food the robots produced at his command, and proceeded to eat the equivalent of an Armatuce's monthly provisions. She had to restrain her impulse to stop him, to warn him that he must look forward to changing his habits, that his holiday could well be over. Dawn Age *kipper* followed antique *kedgeree*, to be succeeded by *sausages* and *cheese* the whole washed down with primitive *tea*. She felt unusually hungry, but the time for her daily meal was still hours away. Still Jagged did not come, and she knew it was ever his affectation, when at Canaria, to breakfast each morning (he had always eaten solid food, even before the fashion for it). She returned to the passage, saw that his door was open, dared to glance in, saw no-one.

'Where is Master?' she inquired of an entering servant.

The machine hesitated. 'Lord Jagged has returned to his work, my lady. To his laboratories, his engines.'

'And where are they?'

'I do not know.'

So Jagged was gone again. Elusive Jagged had disappeared, bearing with him the knowledge which could mean escape to Armatuce.

She found that she was clenching her hands in the folds of the white smock she wore. She relaxed her fingers, took possession of her emotions. Very well, she would wait. And, in the meantime, she had her new freedom.

Dafnish Armatuce returned to the breakfast room and saw that Miss Ming had arrived and was arranging sausages and broccoli on a plate to make some sort of caricature. Snuffles, mouth stuffed, spluttered. Miss Ming snorted through her nose.

'Good morning, good morning!' she trilled as she saw Dafnish. For an instant, she stared at bare shoulders and nightdress with her old, heated expression, but it was swiftly banished. 'We're going swimming today, my boyfriend and me!'

'You'll be careful.' She touched her son's cheek. She was warmed by his warmth; she was happy.

'What can happen to him here?' Miss Ming smiled. 'Don't worry. I'll look after him – and he'll look after me – won't you, my little man?'

Snuffles grinned. 'Fear not, princess, you are safe with me.'

She clasped her hands together, piping: 'Oh, sir, you are so *strong*!'

Dafnish Armatuce shook her head, more amused than disturbed by her antics. She found herself thinking of Miss Ming as a child, rather than as an adult; she could no longer condemn her.

They left in the apple-shaped aircar, flying south towards the sea. Dafnish watched until they were out of sight before she returned to her apartments. As she changed her clothes she listened obsessively for a hint of Lord Jagged's return. She was tempted to remain at Canaria and wait for him, to beg him to aid her find Armatuce again, if only for a moment, so that she might warn others of their danger and show those nearest to her that she lived; but she resisted the impulse; it would be foolish to waste perhaps the only opportunity she had to seek the silent and remote places and be alone.

Walking down to where the aircars lay, she reflected upon the irony of her situation. Without apparent subtlety Miss Ming had first denied her the freedom she was now granting. Dafnish was impressed by the woman's power. But she lacked the inclination to brood on the matter, at this time; instead, she relished her freedom.

She climbed into a boat shaped like a swooping, sand-coloured sphynx. Miss Ming and Snuffles had gone south. She spoke to the boat, a single word: 'North.'

And northward it took her, over the sentient, senile cities, the dusty plains, the ground-down mountains, the decaying forests, the ruins and the crumbling follies, to settle in a green valley through which a silver river ran and whose flanks were spotted with hawthorn and rowan and where a few beasts (what if they were mechanical?) grazed on grass which crunched as they pulled it from the soft earth, the sound all but drowned by the splashing of small waterfalls, sighing as the river made its winding way to a miniature and secluded lake at the far end of the valley.

Here she lay with her back against the turf, spreadeagled and displayed to the grey sky through which the sun's rays

weakly filtered. And she sang one of the simple hymns of the Armatuce she had learned as a child and which she thought forgotten by her. And then, unobserved, she allowed herself to weep.

7
In Which A Man is Made

LORD JAGGED REMAINED away from Canaria for many days, but Dafnish Armatuce was patient. Every morning Miss Ming would take Snuffles on some new jaunt and was punctual in arriving, careful to return at the agreed hour, when a joyful boy would be reunited with a mother who was perhaps not so unrelaxed as she had once been; then Miss Ming, with the air of one who has performed a pleasant duty, would retire, leaving them to spend the remainder of the afternoon together. If Dafnish Armatuce thought she detected an unwelcome change in her son's attitude to certain values she held dear, she told herself that this was unreasonable fear, that she would be harming the boy's development if she interfered too much with his ideas. She hardly listened to his words, as he described his latest escapades with his friend, but the animation in his voice was music, and the sparkle in his eye was sweet to see, and experience, she told herself, would teach him reverence.

She returned to her private valley time after time, glad that whoever had created it had forgotten it or had, for some other reason, omitted to dissimilate it. Here, and only here, could she show the whole Dafnish Armatuce to the world, for here there were none to judge her, to quiz her as to why she spoke or sang, laughed or wept. Her favourite maxims she told to trees; her secret fears were confided to flocks of sheep; and stones were audience to her hopes or dreams. Long for Armatuce she might, but she did not despair.

Her confidence repaired, she was also able to visit those she chose, and most frequently she visited Sweet Orb Mace, who welcomed her, observing to his friends that she was much improved, that she had learned to accept what life at the End of Time could offer. A few fellow time-travellers, also noticing this improvement, guessed that she had found a lover and that her lover was none other than haughty Lord

Jagged. As a consequence she was often questioned as to her host's whereabouts (for there was always such speculation where Lord Jagged was concerned). But, while she was not aware of the rumours, she kept her own counsel and added no flax to Dame Gossip's wheel. She courted Sweet Orb Mace (another, but less heavily backed, contender for the title Lover) for the simple reason that he possessed her time machine. He allowed her to inspect it, to linger in its cabin when she wished. She reassured him: she could not attempt to use it, her concern for Snuffles' well-being overriding any desire she might have to return to Armatuce. But, privately, she hoped; and should it be foolish to hope, against all evidence, then Dafnish Armatuce was foolish.

If she had not found happiness, she had found a certain contentment, during the month which passed, and this gave her greater tolerance for herself, as well as for their society. Two more time-travellers arrived in that month and, perhaps unluckier than she, were snapped up, one for Doctor Volospion's menagerie which he was patiently restocking, one for My Lady Charlotina's great collection. Dafnish spoke to both, and both agreed that they had little difficulty reaching the Future but that the Past (meaning their own period) had been denied them. She refused to be depressed by the information; she consoled herself with the prospect of Jagged's help.

This equilibrium might have been maintained for many more such months had not Miss Ming betrayed (in Dafnish's terms) her trust.

It happened that Dafnish Armatuce, returning from visiting Brannart Morphail, the scientist (a visit cut short by the old misanthrope himself), passed in her air car over an area of parkland still occupied by the remnants of small Gothic palaces and towns which had been constructed, during a recent fad for minatures, by the Duke of Queens, and there she observed two figures which she recognized as those of Snuffles and Miss Ming, doubtless playing one of their fanciful games. Noting that it was almost time for Miss Ming to bring Snuffles home, Dafnish decided that she would save Miss Ming the trouble and collect him there and then. So the sphynx-car sank to Earth at her command and she crossed a flower-strewn lawn to bend and enter the dim interior of the little chateau into which she had seen them go as she landed.

Having no wish to take them by surprise, she called out to them, but came upon them almost immediately, to discover Miss Ming dabbing hastily at Snuffles' face. In the poor light it was difficult to see why she dabbed, but Dafnish assumed that the lad had, as usual, been eating some confection of which she might have disapproved.

She chuckled. 'Oh, dear. What have you two been up to while my back was turned?' (This whimsicality more for Miss Ming's sake than her son's). And she reached out her hand to the boy, whose guilty glance at Miss Ming seemed more imploring than was necessary, and she led him into the sunlight.

She quelled the distaste she felt for the long red robes of velvet and lace in which Miss Ming had clothed him (Miss Ming herself wore tights and doublet) but could not resist a light: 'What would they make of you in Armatuce?' and wondered why he kept his face from her.

Turning to Miss Ming, who had a peculiar expression upon her own features, she began, 'I'll take him—' And then her voice died as she saw the smeared rouge, the mascara, the eye-shadow, the paint with which Miss Ming had turned the child's face into a parody of a female adult's.

Shocked, she trembled, unable to speak, staring at Miss Ming in accusation and horror.

Miss Ming tried to laugh. 'We were playing Princes and Princesses. There was no harm meant . . .'

The boy began to protest. 'Mama, it was only a game.'

All she could do was gasp, 'Too far. Too far', as she dragged him to the aircar. She pushed him roughly in, climbed in herself and stood confronting the ridiculous woman. She tensed herself to reduce the shaking in her body and she drew a deep breath. 'Miss Ming,' she said carefully, 'you need not call tomorrow.'

'I hardly think,' said Miss Ming. 'I mean, I feel you're over-reacting, aren't you? What's wrong with a little fantasy?'

'This,' indicating the cosmetics on the frightened face, 'is not what children do!'

'Of course they do. They love to dress up and play at being big people.'

'I thought, Miss Ming, you played at children. You are a corrupt, foolish woman. I concede that you are unaware of your folly, but I cannot have my child influenced any longer

by it. I admit my own stupidity, also. I have been lazy. I allowed myself to believe that your nonsense could do Snuffles no harm.'

'Harm? You're over-stating . . .'

'I am not. I saw you. I saw the guilt. And I saw guilt on my boy's face. There was never guilt there before, in all the years of his life.'

'I've nothing to be ashamed of!' protested Miss Ming as the aircar rose over her head. 'You're reacting like some frustrated old maid. What's the matter, isn't Lord Jagged—?' The rest faded and they were on course again for Canaria.

Metal servants gently bathed the boy as soon as they arrived. Slowly the cosmetics disappeared from his skin and Dafnish Armatuce looked at him with new eyes. She saw a pale boy, a boy who had become too fat; she saw lines of self-indulgence in his face; she detected signs of greed and arrogance in his defiant gaze. Had all this been put there by Miss Ming? No, she could not blame the silly woman. The fault was her own. Careful not to impose the strictures upon him which she imposed upon herself, she had allowed him to indulge appetites which, perhaps, she secretly wished to indulge. In the name of Love and Tolerance she, not Ming, had betrayed Trust.

'I have been unfair,' she murmured as the robots wrapped him in towels. 'I have not done my duty to you Snuffles.'

'You'll let me play with Miss Ming tomorrow, mama?'

She strove to see in him that virtue she had always cherished, but it was gone. Had it gone from her, too?

'No,' she said quietly.

The boy became savage. 'Mama! You must! She's my only friend!'

'She is no friend.'

'She loves me. You do not!'

'You are that part of myself I am allowed to love,' she said. 'That is the way of the Armatuce. But perhaps you speak truth, perhaps I do not really love anything.' She sighed and lowered her head. She had, she thought, become too used to crying. Now the tears threatened when they had no right to come.

He wheedled. 'Then you will let me play with Miss Ming?'

'I must restore your character,' she said firmly. 'Miss

Ming is banished.'

'No!'

'My duty . . .'

'Your duty is to yourself, not to me. Let me go free!'

'You *are* myself. The only way in which I could give you freedom is to let you come to adult status . . .'

'Then do so. Give me my life-right.'

'I cannot. It serves the Armatuce. The race. We have to go back. At least we must try.'

'You go. Leave me.'

'That is impossible. If I were to perish, you would have no means of sustenance. Without me, you would die!'

'You are selfish, mama! We can never go back to Armatuce.'

'Oh, Snuffles! Do you feel nothing for that part of you which is your mother?'

He shrugged. 'Why don't you let me play with Miss Ming?'

'Because she will turn you into a copy of her fatuous, silly self.'

'And you would rather I was a copy of a prude like you. Miss Ming is right. You should find yourself a friend and forget me. If I am doomed to remain a child, then at least let me spend my days with whom I choose!'

'You will sleep now, Snuffles. If you wish to continue this debate, we shall do so in the morning.'

He sulked, but the argument, the effort of thinking in this way, had tired him. He allowed the robots to lead him off.

Dafnish Armatuce also was tired. Already she was debating the wisdom of allowing herself to react as she had done. No good was served by insulting the self-justifying Miss Ming; the boy lacked real understanding of the principles involved. She had been guilty of uncontrolled behaviour. She had failed, after all, to maintain her determination, her ideals. In Armatuce there would be no question of her next decision, she would have applied for adult status for her son and, if it had been granted, so settled the matter. But here . . .

And was she justified in judging Miss Ming a worse influence than herself? Perhaps Miss Ming, in this world, prepared Snuffles for survival? But she could not support such an essentially cynical view. Miss Ming was disliked by all, renowned for her stupidity. Lord Jagged would make a

better mentor; Sweet Orb Mace, indeed, would make a better mentor than Miss Ming.

All the old confusion swam back into her mind, and she regretted bitterly her misguided tolerance in allowing Miss Ming to influence the boy. But still she felt no conviction; still she wondered whether self-interest, loneliness – even jealousy – had dictated her actions. Never before had she known such turmoil of conscience.

That night, the sleep of Dafnish Armatuce was again disturbed, and there were dreams, vague, prophetic and terrible, from which she woke into a reality scarcely less frightening. Before dawn, she fell asleep again, dreaming of her husband and her co-workers in Armatuce. Did they condemn her? It seemed so.

She became aware, as she slept, that there was pressure on her legs. She tried to move them, but something blocked them. She opened her eyes, sought the obstruction, and saw that Miss Ming sat there. She was prim today. She wore black and blue; muted, apologetic colours. Her eyes were downcast. She twisted at a cuff.

'I came to apologize,' said Miss Ming.

'There is no need.' Her head ached; the muscles in her back were knotted. She rubbed her face. 'It was my fault, not yours.'

'I was carried away It was so delightful, you see, for me. As a girl I had no chums.'

'I understand. But,' more gently, 'you still intrude, Miss Ming.'

'I know you too, must be very lonely. Perhaps you resent the fact that your son has a friend in me. I don't mean to be rude, but I've thought it over lots. I feel I should speak out. You shouldn't be unkind to Snuffles.'

'I have been. I shall not be in future.'

Miss Ming frowned. 'I thought of a way to help. It would give you more freedom to live your own life. And I'm sure Snuffles would be pleased . . .'

'I know what to do, Miss Ming.'

'You wouldn't punish him! Surely!'

'There is no such thing as punishment in Armatuce. But I must strengthen his character.'

A tear gleamed. Miss Ming let it fall. 'It's all my fault. But we were good friends, Dafnish, just as you and I could be good friends, if you'd only . . .'

'I need no friends. I have Armatuce.'

'You need me!' The woman lurched forward, making a clumsy attempt to embrace her. 'You need me!'

The wail was pathetic and Dafnish Armatuce was moved to pity as she pushed Miss Ming by her shoulders until she had resumed her original position on the bed. 'I do not, Miss Ming.'

'The boy stands between us. If only you'd let him grow up normally!'

'Is that what you were trying to achieve?'

'No! We were both misguided. I sought to please *you*, don't you see? You're so proud, such an egotist. And this is what I get. Oh, yes, I was a fool.'

'The customs of the Armatuce are such,' said Dafnish evenly, 'that special procedures must be taken before a child is allowed adult status. There is no waste, in Armatuce.'

'But this is *not* Armatuce.' Miss Ming was sobbing violently. 'You could be happy here, with me, if you'd only let me love you. I don't ask much. I don't expect love in return, not yet. But, in time . . .'

'The thought is revolting to me!'

'You suppress your normal emotions, that's all!'

She said gently: 'I am an Armatuce. That means much to me. I should be obliged, Miss Ming, if . . .'

'I'm going!' The woman rose, dabbing at her eyes. 'I could help. Doctor Volospion would help us both. I could . . .'

'Please, Miss Ming.'

Miss Ming looked up imploringly. 'Could I see Snuffles? One last time?'

Dafnish relented. 'To say good-bye to the child? Yes. Perhaps you could help me—'

'Anything!'

'Tell him to remember his destiny. The destiny of an Armatuce.'

'Will he understand?'

'I hope so.'

'I'll help. I *want* to help.'

'Thank you.'

Miss Ming walked unsteadily from the room. Dafnish Armatuce heard her footsteps in the corridor, heard her enter Snuffles' chamber, heard the child's exclamation of pleasure. She drew a deep breath and let it leave her slowly. With

considerable effort she got up, washed and dressed, judging now that Miss Ming had had a fair allotment of time with the boy.

As she entered the brown and yellow hall, she glanced across to Lord Jagged's door. It was open. She hesitated, and as she did so, Lord Jagged appeared, looking less tired than he had done before, but more thoughtful.

'Lord Jagged!'

'Aha, the admirable Dafnish!' His smile was soft, almost melancholy. 'Do you enjoy your stay at Canaria? Is all to your liking?'

'It is perfect, Lord Jagged, but I would go home.'

'You cannot. Are you still unconvinced?'

'When we last met – that night – you said something concerning the fabric of Time. The laws, hitherto regarded as immutable, were not operating as expected?'

'I was weary. I should not have spoken.'

'But you did. Therefore can I not request a fuller explanation?'

'I would raise hope where none should be permitted.'

'Can I not judge?'

He shrugged, his high, grey collar almost swallowing the lower half of his face. His slim hands fingered his lower lip. 'Very well, but I must ask secrecy from you.'

'You have it. I am an Armatuce.'

'There is little I can tell you, save this: Of late, the sturdy, relentless structure of Time which has always, so far as we know, obeyed certain grim laws of its own, has begun to show instabilities. Men *have* returned to the past and remained there for much longer periods than was thought possible. By contravening the Laws of Time, they have further weakened them. There are disruptions – distortions – anomalies. I hope to discover the true cause, but every passage through Time threatens the fabric further, producing paradoxes which previously, Time refused to allow. So far, no major disaster has occurred – history remains history – but there is a danger that history itself will be distorted and then – well, we all might suddenly vanish as if we had never been!'

'Is that possible? I have listened to such speculation, but it has always seemed pointless.'

'Who knows if it is possible? But can we take the risk? If, say, you were to return to Armatuce and tell them what the

future held, would that not alter the future? You are familiar with these arguments, of course.'

'Of course. But I would tell them nothing of your world. It would be too disturbing.'

'And your boy? Children are not so discreet.'

'He is an Armatuce. He would be silent.'

'No, no. You risk your lives by moving against the current.'

'Our lives are for Armatuce. They serve no purpose here.'

'That is a difficult philosophy for one such as I to comprehend.'

'Let me try!'

'Your boy would go with you?'

'Of course. He would have to.'

'You'd subject him to the same dangers?'

'Here, his soul is endangered. Soon he will be incapable of giving service. His life will be worthless.'

'It is a harsh materialist assessment of worth, surely?'

'It is the way of the Armatuce.'

'Besides, there is the question of a time vessel.'

'My own is ready. I have access to it.'

'There are only certain opportunities, when the structure wavers . . .'

'I should wait for one. In the machine.'

'Could you not leave the child, at any rate?'

'He would not be able to exist without me. I grant his life-right. He is part of me.'

'Maternal instincts . . .'

'More than that!'

'If you say so.' He shook his head. 'It is not my nature to influence another's decisions, in the normal course of things. Besides, no two consciences are alike, particularly when divorced by a million or two years.' He shook his head. 'The fabric is unstable, even now.'

'Let me take my son and leave! Now! Now!'

'You fear something more than the strangeness of our world.' He looked shrewdly into her face, 'What is it that you fear, Dafnish Armatuce?'

'I do not know. Myself? Miss Ming? It cannot be. I do not know, Lord Jagged.'

'Miss Ming? What harm could that woman do but bore you to distraction? Miss Ming?'

'She – she has been paying court to me. And, in a way, to my child. In my mind, she has become the greatest threat upon the face of this planet. It is monstrous of me to permit such notions to flourish, but I do. And because she inspires them, I hate her. And because I hate her, why, I detect something in myself which must resemble her. And if I resemble her, how can I judge her? I, Dafnish Armatuce of the Armatuce, must be at fault.'

'This is complicated reasoning. Perhaps too complicated for sanity.'

'Oh, yes, Lord Jagged, I could be mad. I have considered the possibility. It's a likely one. But mad by whose standards? If I can go back to Armatuce, let Armatuce judge me. That is what I rely upon.'

'I'll agree to debate this further,' he said. 'You are in great pain, are you not, Dafnish Armatuce?'

'In moral agony. I admit it.'

He licked his upper lip, deliberating. 'So strange, to us. I had looked forward to conversations with you.'

'You should have stayed here, then, at Canaria.'

'I would have liked that, but there are certain very pressing matters, you know. Some of us serve, Dafnish Armatuce, in our individual ways, to the best of our poor abilities.' His quiet laughter was self-deprecating. 'Shall we breakfast together?'

'Snuffles?'

'Let him join us when it suits him.'

'Miss Ming is with him. They say their farewells.'

'Then give them the time they need.'

She was uncertain of the wisdom of this, but with the hope of escape, she could afford to be more generous to Miss Ming. 'Very well.'

As they sat together in the breakfast-room, she said: 'You do not believe that Miss Ming is evil, do you, Lord Jagged?' She watched him eat, having contented herself with the treat of a slice of toast.

'Evil is a word, an idea, which has very little resonance at the End of Time, I'm afraid. Crime does not exist, for us.'

'But crime exists here.'

'For you, Dafnish Armatuce, perhaps. But not for us.'

She looked up. She thought she had seen something move past the window, but she was tired; her eyes were faulty. She

gave him her attention again. He had finished his breakfast and was rising, wiping his lips. 'There must be victims, you see,' he added.

She could not follow his arguments. He had become elusive once more, almost introspective. His mind considered different, to him more important, problems.

'I must go to the boy,' she said.

All at once she had his full attention. His grey, intelligent eyes penetrated her. 'I have been priviliged, Dafnish Armatuce,' he said soberly, 'to entertain you as my guest.'

Did she blush then? She had never blushed before.

He did not accompany her back to the apartments, but made his apologies and entered the bowels of the building, about his own business again. She went swiftly to the room, but it was empty.

'Snuffles!' She called out as she made her way to her own chamber. 'Miss Ming.'

They were gone.

She returned to the breakfast room. They were not there. She ran, panting, to the aircar hangar. She ran through it into the open, standing waist-high in the corn, questing for Miss Ming's own car. The blue sky was deserted. She knew, as she had really known since finding her son's room absented, that she had seen them leaving, seen the car as it flashed past the window.

She calmed herself. Reason told her that Miss Ming was merely taking Snuffles on a last impulsive expedition. It was, of course, what she might have suspected of the silly woman. But the dread would not dissipate. An image of the boy's painted features became almost tangible before her eyes. Her lips twisted, conquering her ability to arrange them, and it seemed that frost ate at the marrow of her bones. Fingers caught in hair, legs shook. Her glance was everywhere and she saw nothing but that painted face.

'Snuffles!'

There was a sound. She wheeled. A robot went by bearing the remains of the breakfast.

'Lord Jagged!'

She was alone.

She began to run through the yellow and brown corridors until she reached the hangar. She climbed into her aircar and sat there, unable to give it instructions, unable to decide in

which direction she should search first. The miniature palaces of yesterday? Were they not a favourite playground for the pair? She told the car its destination, ordered maximum speed.

But the Gothic village was deserted. She searched every turret, every hall into which she could squeeze her body, and she called their names until her voice cracked. At last she clambered back into her car. She recalled that Miss Ming was still resident at Doctor Volospion's menagerie.

'Doctor Volospion's,' she told the car.

Doctor Volospion's dwelling stood upon several cliffs of white marble and blue basalt, its various wings linked by slender, curving bridges of the same materials. Minarets, domes, conical towers, skyscraper blocks, sloping roofs and windows filled with some reflective but transparent material gave it an appearance of considerable antiquity, though it was actually only a few days old. Dafnish Armatuce had seen it once before, but she had never visited it, and now her difficulty lay in discovering the appropriate entrance.

It took many panic-filled minutes of circling about before she was hailed, from the roof of one of the skyscrapers, by Doctor Volospion himself, resplendant in rippling green silks, his skin coloured to match. 'Dafnish Armatuce! Have you come to accept my tryst? O, rarest of beauties, my heart is cast already – see – at your feet.' And he gestured, twisting a ring. She looked down, kicking the pulsing, bloody thing aside. 'I seek my Snuffles,' she cried. 'And Miss Ming. Are they here?'

'They were. To arrange your surprise. You'll be pleased. You'll be pleased. But have patience – come to me, splendid one.'

'Surprise? What have they done?'

'Oh, I cannot tell you. It would spoil it for you. I was able to help. I once specialized in engineering, you know. Sweet Orb Mace owes much to me.'

'Explain yourself, Doctor Volospion.'

'Perhaps, when the confidences of the bed-chamber are exchanged . . .'

'Where did they go?'

'Back. To Canaria. It was for you. Miss Ming was overjoyed by what I was able to accomplish. The work of a moment, of course, but the skill is in the swiftness.' With a wave of his hand, he changed his costume to roaring red.

The light of the flames flooded his face with shadow. But she had left him.

As she fled back to Canaria, she thought she heard Doctor Volospion's laughter; and she knew that her mind could not be her own if she detected mockery in his mirth.

On her right the insubstantial buildings of Djer streamed past, writhing with gloomy colour, muttering to themselves as they strove to recall some forgotten function, some lost experience, recreating, from a memory partially disintegrated, indistinct outlines of buildings, beasts or men, calling out fragments of song or scientific formulae; almost piteous, this place, which had once served Man proudly, in the spirit with which she served the Armatuce, so that she permitted herself a pang of understanding, for she and the city shared a common grief.

'Ah, how much better it might have been had we stayed there,' she said aloud.

The city cried out to her as if in reply, as if imploringly:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

She did not understand the meaning of the words, but she replied: 'You could have helped me, but I was afraid of you. I feared your variety, your wealth.' Then the car had borne her on and soon Canaria's graceful cage loomed into view, glittering in sparse sunshine, its gold all pale.

With tense impatience she stood stiffly in the car while it docked, until she could leap free, running up the great ramp, through the dwarfing portals, down halls which echoed a magnified voice, calling for her boy.

It was when she had pushed open the heavy doors of Lord Jagged's Hall of Antiquities that she saw three figures standing at the far end, beneath a wall mounted with a hundred examples of heavy Dawn Age furniture. They appeared to be discussing a large piece in dark wood, set with mirrors, brass and mother-of-pearl, full of small drawers and pigeonholes from which imitation doves poked their little heads and crooned. Elsewhere were displayed fabrics, cooking utensils, vehicles, weapons, technical apparatus, entertainment structures, musical instruments, clothing from man-

kind's first few thousand years of true planetary dominance.

The three she saw were all adults and she guessed initially that they might, themselves, be exhibits, but as she approached she saw, with lifting heart, that one of them was Lord Jagged and the other was Miss Ming. Her anger with Miss Ming turned to annoyance and she experienced growing relief. The third figure, she did not recognize. He was typical of those who inhabited the End of Time; a foppish, overdressed, posturing youth, doubtless some acquaintance of Lord Jagged's.

'Miss Ming!'

Three heads turned.

'You took Snuffles. Where is he now?'

'We went to visit Doctor Volospion, dearest Dafnish. We thought you would not notice. You, yourself, gave me the idea, when you told me to remind Snuffles of his destiny. It's my present to you.' She fluttered winsome lashes. 'Because I care so much for you. A tribute of my admiration for the wonderful way you've tried to do your best for your son. Well, Dafnish, I have put your misery at an end. No more sacrifices for you!'

Dafnish Armatuce did not listen, for the tone was as familiar to her as it was distasteful. 'Where is Snuffles now?' she repeated.

The youth, standing behind Miss Ming, laughed, but Lord Jagged was frowning.

Miss Ming's oversweet smile spread across her pallid face. 'I have done you a favour, Dafnish. It's a surprise, dear.' Two clammy hands tried to fold themselves around one of Dafnish's, but she pulled away. Miss Ming had to be content with clinging to an arm. 'I know you'll be pleased. It's what you've looked forward to, what you've worked for. And it means real freedom for us.'

'Freedom? What do you mean? Where is my Snuffles?'

Again, the stranger laughed, spreading his arms wide, showing off exotic garments – blue moleskin tabard stitched with silver, shirt of brown velvet with brocaded cuffs, puffed out at the shoulders to a height of at least two feet, hose which curled with snakes of varicoloured light, boots whose feet were the heads of living, glaring dragons, the whole smelling strongly of musk – and pouting in his peacock pride. 'Here, mama!'

She stared.

The youth waltzed forward, the smile languid, the eyes half-closed. '*I* am your son! It is my destiny come to fulfillment at last. Miss Ming has made a man of me!'

Miss Ming preened herself, murmuring with false modesty: 'With Doctor Volospion's help. My idea – his execution.'

Dafnish Armatuce swayed on her feet as she stared. The face was longer, more effeminate, the eyes large, darker, luminous, the hair pure blond; but there was something of Snuffles, still, something of herself, there. There were emeralds in his lobes. His brows had been slimmed and their line exaggerated; the lips, though naturally red, were too full and too bright.

Dafnish Armatuce groaned and her fingers fled to cover her face. A hand touched her shoulder. She shook it off and Lord Jagged apologized.

Miss Ming's voice celebrated the spirit of comfiness: 'It's a shock, of course, at first, until you understand what it means. You don't have to die!'

'Die?' She looked with loathing upon Miss Ming's complacent features.

'He is a man and you are free. Snuffles explained something of your customs to me.'

'Customs! It is more than custom, Miss Ming. How can this be? What of his life-right? He has no soul!'

'Such superstitions,' declared Miss Ming, 'are of little consequence at the End of Time.'

'I have not transferred the life-right! He remains a shadow until that day! But even that is scarcely important at this moment – look what you have made of him! Look!'

'You really are very silly, mother,' said Snuffles, his voice softening in something close to kindness. 'They can do anything here. They can change their shapes to whatever they wish. They can be children, if they want to be, or beasts, or even plants. Whatever fancy dictates. I am the same personality, but I have grown up, at last! Sixty years was too long. I have earned my maturity.'

'You remain an infant!' she spoke through her teeth. 'Like your fatuous and self-called friend. Miss Ming, he must be restored to his proper body. We leave, as soon as we may, for Armatuce.'

Miss Ming was openly incredulous and condescending. 'Leave? To be killed or stranded?'

Snuffles affected superciliousness. 'Leave?' he echoed. 'For Armatuce? Mother, it's impossible. Besides, I have no intention of returning.' He leaned against the rusted remains of a Nash Rambler and shared (or thought he shared) a conspiritorial wink with Miss Ming and Lord Jagged. 'I shall stay.'

'But,' (her lips were dry), 'your life-right . . .'

'Here, I do not need my life-right. Keep it, mother. I do not want your personality, your ridiculous prejudices. Why should I wish to inherit them, when I have seen so much? Here, at the End of Time, I can be myself – an individual, not an Armatuce!'

'His destiny?' Dafnish rounded on Miss Ming. 'You thought I meant *that*?'

'Oh, you . . .' Miss Ming's blue eyes, bovine and dazed, began to fill.

'I could change him to his original shape,' began Lord Jagged, but Dafnish Armatuce shook her head in misery.

'It is too late, Lord Jagged. What is there left?'

'But this is intolerable for you.' There was a hint of unusual emotion in Lord Jagged's voice. 'This woman is not one of us. She acts without wit or intelligence. There is no resonance in these actions of hers.'

'You would still say evil does not exist here?'

'If vulgar imitation of art is "evil", then perhaps I agree with you.'

Dafnish Armatuce was drained. She could not move. Her shoulder twitched a little in what might have been a shrug. 'Responsibility leaves me,' she said, 'and I feel the loss. Who knows, but that I did use it as armour against experience.' She sighed, addressing her son. 'If adult you be, then make an adult's decision. Be an Armatuce, recall your Maxims, consider your Duty.' She was pleading and she could not keep her voice steady. 'Will you return with me to Armatuce? To serve?'

'To serve fools? That would make a fool of me, would it not? Look about you! This is the way the race is destined to live, mother. Here—' he spread decorated hands to indicate the world – 'here is my destiny, too!'

'Oh, Snuffles . . .' Her head fell forward and her body trembled with her silent sobbing. '*Snuffles*!'

'That name's offensive to me, mother. Snuffles is dead. I am now the Margrave of Wolverhampton, who shall wander

the world, impressing his magnificence on All! My own choice, the name, with Miss Ming's assistance concerning the details. A fine name, an excellent ambition. Thus I take my place in society, my only duty to delight my friends, my only maxim 'Extravagance in Everything!', and I shall give service to myself alone! I shall amaze everyone with my inventions and events. You shall learn to be proud of me, mama!'

She shook her head. 'All my pride is gone.'

Several ancient clocks began to chime at once and through the din she heard Lord Jagged's voice murmuring in her ear. 'The fabric of Time is particularly weak now. Your chances are at their best.'

She knew that this was mercy, but she sighed. 'If he came, what point? My whole life has been dedicated to preparing for the moment when my son would become an adult, taking my knowledge, my experience, my Duty. Shall I present our Armatuce with – with what he is now?'

The youth had heard some of this and now he raised a contemptuous shoulder to her while Miss Ming said urgently: 'You cannot go! You must not! I did it for you, so that you could be happy. So that we could enjoy a full friendship. There is no obstacle.'

Dafnish's laughter drove the woman back. Fingers in mouth, Miss Ming cracked a nail with her teeth and the shadow of terror came and went across her face.

Dafnish spoke in an undertone. 'You have killed my son, Miss Ming. You have made of my whole life a travesty. Whether that shell you call "my son" survives or not, whether it should be moulded once more into the original likeness, it is of no importance any longer. I am the Armatuce and the Armatuce is me. You have poisoned at least one branch of that tree which is the Armatuce, whose roots bind the world, but I am not disconsolate; I know other branches will grow. But I must protect the roots, lest they be poisoned. I have a responsibility now which supercedes all others. I must return. I must warn my folk never to send another Armatuce to the End of Time. It is evident that our time-travelling experiments threaten our survival, our security. You assure me that – that the boy can live without his life-right, that remaining part of my being which, at my death, I would pass on to him, so that he could live. Very well, I leave him to you and depart.'

Miss Ming wailed: 'You can't! You'll be killed! I love you!'

The youth held some kind of hayfork at arms length, inspecting its balance and workmanship, apparently unconcerned. Dafnish took a step towards him. 'Snuffles . . .'

'I am not "Snuffles".'

'Then, stranger, I bid you farewell.' She had recovered something of her dignity. Her small body was still tense, her oval face still pale. She controlled herself. She was an Armatuce again.

'You'll be *killed*!' shrieked Miss Ming, but Dafnish ignored her. 'At best Time will fling you back to us. What good will the journey do you?'

'The Armatuce shall be warned. There is a chance of that?' The question was for Lord Jagged.

'A slight one. Only because the Laws of Time have already been transgressed. I have learned something of a great conjunction, of other layers of reality which intersect with ours, which suggests you might return, for a moment, anyway, since the Laws need not be so firmly enforced.'

'Then I go now.'

He raised a warning hand. 'But, Dafnish Armatuce, Miss Ming is right. There is little probability Time will let you survive.'

'I must try. I presume that Sweet Orb Mace, who has my timeship, knows nothing of this disruption, will take no precautions to keep me in your age?'

'Oh, certainly! Nothing.'

'Then I thank you, Lord Jagged, for your hospitality. I'll require it no longer and you may let Snuffles go to Doctor Volospion's. You are a good man. You would make a worthy Armatuce.'

He bowed. 'You flatter me . . .'

'Flattery is unknown in Armatuce. Farewell.'

She began to walk back the way she had come, past row upon row, rank upon rank of antiquities, past the collected mementoes of a score of Ages, as if, already, she marched, resolute and noble, through Time itself.

Lord Jagged seemed about to speak, but then he fell silent, his expression unusually immobile, his eyes narrowed as he watched her march. Slowly, he reached a fine hand to his long cheek and his fingers explored his face, just below the eye, as if he sought something there but failed to find it.

Miss Ming blew her nose and bawled:

'Oh, I've ruined everything. She was looking forward to the day you grew up, Snuffles! I *know* she was!'

'Margrave,' he murmured, to correct her. He made as if to take a step in pursuit, but changed his mind. He smoothed the pile of his tabard. 'She'll be back.'

'She'll realize her mistake?' Saucer eyes begged comfort from their owner's creation.

The Margrave of Wolverhampton had found a mirror in a silver frame. He was pleased with what he saw. He spoke absently to his companion.

'Possibly. And if she should reach Armatuce, she'll be better off. You have me for a friend, instead. Shall I call you Mother?'

Mavis Ming uttered a wordless yelp. Impatiently the Margrave of Wolverhampton stroked her lank hair. 'She would never know how to enjoy herself. No Armatuce would. I am the first. Why should sacrifices be made pointlessly?'

Lord Jagged turned and confronted him. Lord Jagged was grim. 'She has much, your mother, that is of value. You shall never have that now.'

'My inheritance, you mean?' The Margrave's sneer was not altogether accomplished. 'My life-right? What use is it here? Thanks, old man, but no thanks!' It was one of Miss Ming's expressions. The Margrave acknowledged the origin by grinning at her for approval. She laughed through tears, but then, again, was seized:

'What if she dies!'

'She would have had to have given life up, for me, when we returned. She loses nothing.'

'She passes her whole life to you?' said Jagged, revelation dawning. 'Her *whole* life?'

'Yes. In Armatuce, but not here. I don't need the life-force. There she would be absorbed into me, then I would change, becoming a man, but incorporating her "soul". What was of use to me in her body would also be used. Nothing is wasted in Armatuce. But this way is much better, for now only a small part of her is in me – the part she infused when I was made – and I become an individual. We both have freedom, though it will take her time to realize it.'

'You are symbiots?'

'Of sorts, yes.'

'But surely,' said Jagged, 'if she dies before she transfers the life-right to you, you are still dependant on the life-force emanating from her being?'

'I would be, in Armatuce. But here, I'm my own man.'

Miss Ming said accusingly: 'You should have tried to stop her, Lord Jagged.'

'You said yourself she was free, Miss Ming.'

'Not to destroy herself!' A fresh wail.

'But to become your slave?'

'Oh, that's nonsense, Lord Jagged.' Another noisy blowing of the nose. 'You're trouble is, you don't understand real emotions at all.'

His smile as he looked down at her was twisted and strange.

'I loved her,' said Miss Ming defiantly.

8
The Return to Armatuce

ALONE IN HER machine, her helm once more upon her head, her protective suit once again armouring her body, Dafnish Armatuce quelled pain, at the sight of Snuffles' empty chair, and concentrated upon her instruments. All was ready.

She adjusted her harness, tightening it. She reached for the seven buttons inset on the chair's arm; she pressed a sequence of four. Green light rolled in waves across her vision, subtly altering to blue and then to black. Dials sang out their information, a murmuring rose to a shout: the ship was moving. She was going back through Time.

She watched for the pink light and the red, which would warn her that the ship was malfunctioning or that it was off course: the colours did not falter. She moved steadily towards her goal. Her head ached, but that was to be expected; neuralgia consumed her body (also anticipated); but the peculiar sense of unease was new, and her stare went too frequently to the small chair beneath the main console. To distract her attention, she brought in the vision screens earlier than was absolutely necessary. Outside was a predominantly grey mist, broken occasionally by bright flashes or patches of blackness; sometimes she thought she could distinguish objects for fractions of a second, but they never

stayed for long enough for her to identify them. The instruments were more interesting. They showed that she moved back through Time at a rate of one minute to the thousand years. The instruments were crude, she knew, but she had already traversed seven thousand years and it would be many more minutes before she came to Armatuce. The machine had automatic devices built into it so that it would return to its original resting place a few moments after it had, so far as the observers in Armatuce were aware, departed. As best she could, she refused to let her thoughts dwell on her return. She would have to lie, and she had never lied before. She would have to admit to having abandoned her boy and she would know disgrace, she would no longer be required to serve. Yet she knew that she *would* serve, if only she were allowed to warn them against further expeditions into the future. She would be content. Yet still her heart remained heavy. It was obvious that she, too, had been corrupted. She would demand isolation, in Armatuce, so that she would not corrupt others.

A shadow darkened the vision screens for a few seconds, then the grey, sparkling mist came back.

She heard herself speaking. 'It was not betrayal. He, too, was betrayed. I must not blame him.'

She had become selfish; she wanted her boy for herself, for comfort. Therefore, she reasoned, she did not deserve him. She must forget . . .

The machine shuddered, but no pink light came. Physical agony made her bite her lip, but the machine maintained its backward course.

It became difficult to breathe. At first she blamed the respirator, but she saw it functioned perfectly. With considerable effort she made herself breathe more slowly, felt her heartbeat resume its normal rhythm. Why did she persist in experiencing that same panic she had first experienced at the End of Time – the sense of being trapped? No one had known claustrophobia in Armatuce for centuries. How could they? Such phobias had been eliminated.

Ten minutes had passed. She was tempted to increase the machine's speed, but such a step would be dangerous. For the sake of the Armatuce, she must not risk her chances of getting home.

She recalled her son's disdainful words, remembered all the others who had told her that the sacrifices of the Arma-

tuce were no longer valid. They had been valid once; they had saved the world, continued the race, passing life to life, building a huge fund of wisdom and knowledge. Like ants, she thought. Well, the ants survived. They and Man were virtually all that had survived the cataclysm. Was it not arrogant to assume that Man had any more to offer than the ant?

Five more minutes went by. The pain was worse, but it was not so sharp. Her sight was a little blurred, but she was able to see that the machine's passage through Time was steady.

Her moods seemed to change rapidly. One moment she was consoled and hopeful; at another she would sink into despair and be forced to fight against such useless emotions as regret and anger. She could not carry such things back to Armatuce! It would be Sin. She strove to recall some suitable Maxim, but none came to her.

The machine lurched, paused, and then it continued. Another six minutes had gone by. The pain suddenly became so intense that she lost consciousness. She had expected nothing else.

She awoke, her ears filled with the protesting whining of the timeship. She opened her eyes to pink, oscillating light. She blinked and peered at the instruments. All were at zero. It meant that she was back.

Hastily, with clumsy fingers, she freed herself of her harness. The vision screen showed the white laboratory, the pale-faced, black-clad figures of her compatriots. They were very still.

She operated the mechanism to raise the hatch, climbed urgently through, crying out: 'Armatuce! Armatuce! Beware of the Future!' She was desperate to warn them in case Time snatched her from her own age before she could complete her chosen task, her last Service.

'Armatuce! The Future holds Despair! Send no more ships!' She stood half-out of the hatch, waving to attract their attention, but they remained absolutely immobile. None saw her, none heard her, none breathed. Yet they were not statues. She recognized her husband among them. They lived, yet they were frozen!

'Armatuce! Beware the Future!'

The machine began to shake. The scene wavered and she thought she detected the faintest light of recognition in her husband's eye.

'We both live!' she cried, anxious to give him hope.

Then the machine lurched and she lost her footing, was swallowed by it. The hatch slammed shut above her head. She crawled to the speaking apparatus. 'Armatuce! Send no more ships!' The pink light flared to red. Heat increased. The machine roared.

Her mouth became so dry that she could hardly speak at all. She whispered: 'Beware the Future . . .' and then she was burning, shivering, and the red light was fading to pink, then to green, as the machine surged forward again, leaving Armatuce behind.

She screamed. They had not seen her. Time had stopped. She dragged herself back to the chair and flung herself into it. She tried to pull her harness round her, but she lacked the strength. She pressed the four buttons to reverse the machine's impetus, forcing it against that remorseless current.

'Oh, Armatuce . . .'

She knew, then, that she could survive if she allowed the machine to float, as it were, upon the forward flow of Time, but her loyalty to Armatuce was too great. Again she pressed the buttons, bringing a return of the pink light, but she saw the indicators begin to reverse.

She staggered from her chair, each breath like liquid fire, and adjusted every subsidiary control to the reverse position. The machine shrieked at her, as if it pleaded for its own life, but it obeyed. Again the laboratory flashed upon the vision screen. She saw her husband. He was moving sluggishly.

Something seemed to burst in her atrophied womb; tears etched her skin like corrosive acid. Her hair was on fire.

She found the speaking apparatus again. 'Snuffles,' she whispered. 'Armatuce. Future.'

And she looked back to the screen; it was filled with crimson. Then she felt her bones tearing through her flesh, her organs rupturing, and she gave herself up, in peace, to the pain.

9
In Which Miss Ming Claims a Keepsake

ADAPTABILITY, SURELY, IS the real secret of survival?' The new Margrave of Wolverhampton seemed anxious to impress his unwilling host. Lord Jagged had been silent since Dafnish Armatuce's departure. 'I mean, that's why people like my mother are doomed,' continued the youth. 'They can't bear change. She could have been perfectly content here, if she'd listened to reason. Couldn't she, Lord Jagged?'

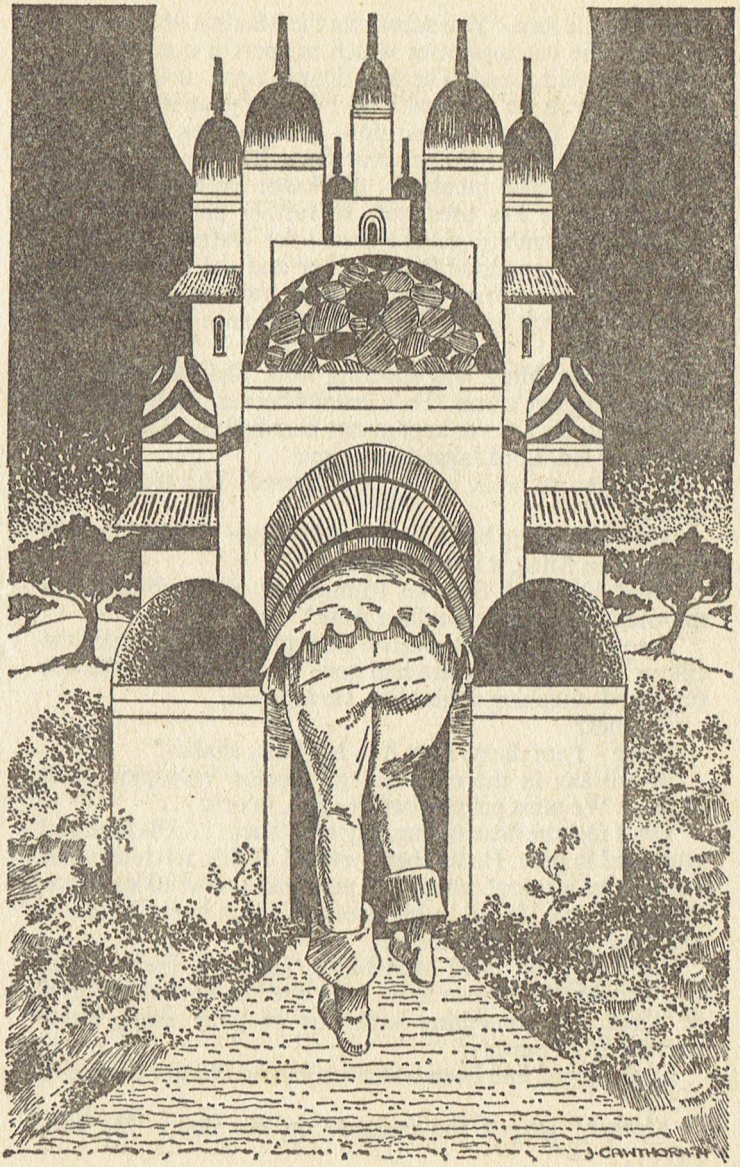
Lord Jagged was sprawled in an ancient steel armchair, refusing to give his affirmation to these protestations. Miss Ming had at last dried her eyes, hopefully for the final time. She inspected a 40th century wall-hanging, feeling the delicate cloth with thumb and forefinger.

'I mean, that whole business about controlling the population. It wasn't necessary in Armatuce. It hadn't been for hundreds of years. There was wealth everywhere, but we weren't allowed to touch it. We never had enough to *eat*!' This last, plaintive, remark caused Lord Jagged to look up. Encouraged, the Margrave became expansive: 'The symbiosis, the ritual passing on of the life-force from one to another. It came about because children couldn't be produced naturally. I was made in a metal tub! She threw in a bit of her – what? – her soul? Her "self"? Call it what you like. And there I was – forced to remain, once I'd grown a little, a child for sixty years! Oh, I was content enough, certainly, until I came here and saw what life could be like. If it hadn't been for Miss Ming . . .'

Lord Jagged sighed and closed his eyes.

'Think what you like!' The Margrave's silks rustled as he put a defiant hand to his hip. 'Miss Ming's done me a lot of good and could have done Mother good, too. Whose fault is it? I was doomed to be linked to her until some complacent, ludicrous committee decided I could become an adult, but my mama would have to die so that I could inherit the precious – and probably non-existent – life-force! I'd have been a copy of her, little more. Great for her ego, eh? Lousy for mine.'

'And now you utter the coarse rhetoric of a Miss Ming!' Lord Jagged rose from his chair, an unusual bit-


J. CAWTHORN

terness in his tone. 'You substitute the Maxims of the Armatuce for the catch-phrases which support a conspiracy of selfishness and greed. There is dignity here, at the End of Time, but you do not ape that, because your mother also had dignity. You are vulgar now, little Snuffles, as no child can ever be vulgar. Do you not sense it? Can you not see how that wretched inhabitant of Doctor Volospion's third-rate menagerie has used you, to further her own stupid, short-sighted ambitions. She lusted for Dafnish Armatuce and thought you stood between her and the object of her desires. So she turned you into this travesty of maturity, with no more wit or originality or intelligence than she, herself, possesses.'

'Oh!' Miss Ming was sneering now. She caught at the young Margrave's arm. 'He's jealous because he wanted her for himself. He's never kept guests here before. Don't take it out on the lad, Lord Jagged, or on me!'

He began to walk away. She crowed. The truth hurts, doesn't it?'

Without looking back, he paused. 'When couched in your terms, Miss Ming, it must always hurt.'

'Aha! You see!' She was triumphant. She embraced her monster. 'Time to go, Snuffles, dear.'

The youth was unresponsive. The ruby lips had turned the colour of ivory, the lustre had gone from the huge eyes. He staggered, clutching at his head. He moaned.

'Snuffles?'

'Marg – I am dizzy. I am hot. My body shakes.'

'A mistake in the engineering? Doctor Volospion can't have . . . We must get you back to him, in case . . .'

'Oh, I feel the flesh fading. My substance . . .' His face had crumpled in pain. He lurched forward. A dry, retching noise came from a throat which had acquired the wrinkles of extreme old age. He fell to his knees. His skin began to crack. She tried to pull him to his feet.

'Lord Jagged!' cried Miss Ming. 'Help me. He's ill. Oh, why should this happen to me? No one can be ill at the End of Time. Do something with one of your rings. Draw strength from the city.'

Lord Jagged had been watching, but he did not choose to move.

'Mother,' gasped the creature on the floor. 'My life-right . . .'

'He's dying! Help him, Lord Jagged! Save him!'

Lord Jagged seemed to be measuring his steps as he advanced slowly towards them. He stopped and looked without pity at Snuffles as he moved feebly in clothes too large for him. 'They were completely symbiotic, then,' mused Jagged. 'See, Miss Ming – Dafnish Armatuce must be dead – killed somewhere on the megaflow – escaping from this world. Or was she driven from it? Dafnish Armatuce is dead – and that part of her which was her son – a shadow, as she said – dies, too. Snuffles was never an individual, as we understand it.'

'It can't be. He's all I have left! Oh!' She leaned forward in horror, for the body was disintegrating rapidly, becoming fine, brown dust, leaving nothing but an empty suit of moleskin, velvet and brocade. The hose ceased to writhe with light; the dragon shoes scarcely hissed.

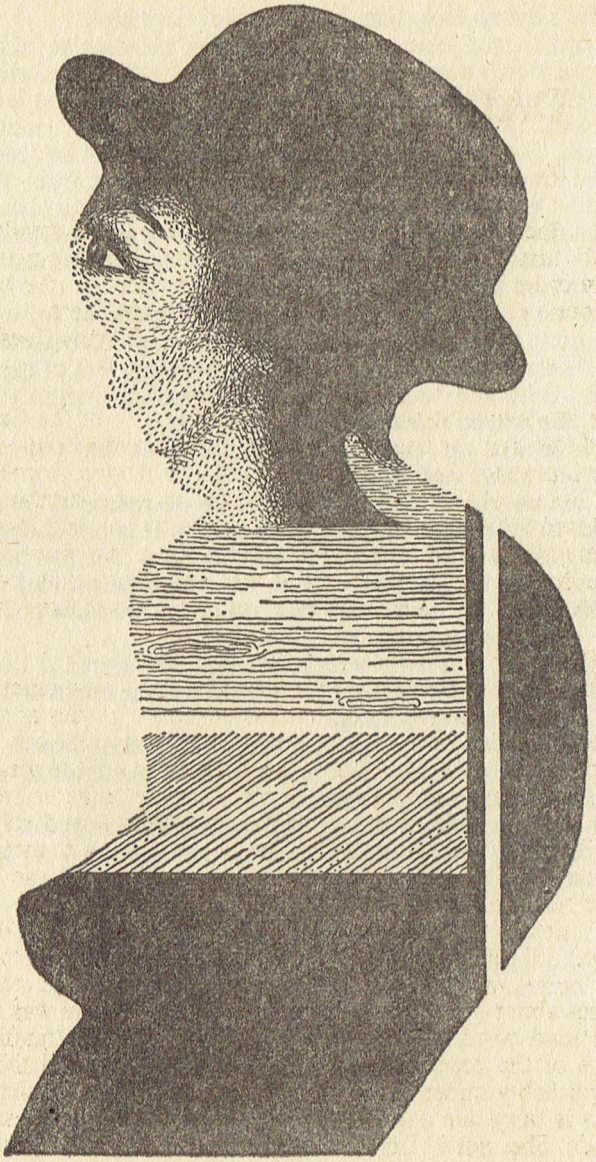
She looked up anxiously at the tall man. 'But you can resurrect him, Lord Jagged.'

'I am not sure I could. Besides, I see no reason to do so. There is little there to bring back to life. It is not Dafnish Armatuce. If it were, I would not hesitate. But her body burns somewhere between the end of one moment and the beginning of the next – and this, this is all we have of her now. Dying, she reclaims her son.'

Miss Ming shuddered with frustration. She glared at Lord Jagged, hating him, tensed as if, physically, she might attack him. But she had no courage.

Lord Jagged pursed his lips, then drew a deep breath of the musty air. He left her in his Hall of Antiquities, returning to his mysterious labours.

Later, Miss Ming stood up and unclenched her hand. On her palm lay a little pile of brown dust. She put it in her pocket, for a keepsake.



DADDY'S GIRL

by JOANNA RUSS

> ... their sons and brothers' need to debase so totally all that was previously sacred (Nature and Women) in order to experience themselves as divine, in order to found a civilization based on their own sacredness.
>
> (Phyllis Chesler)

MY MOTHER'S COUNTRY: the body and garden of the Great Goddess, fair, ornamental, tended; I can wander forever in Her lap under the sun of Her face, in a cultivated place like the Botanical Gardens of my childhood where everything is suffused with the divine personality, regal, wide, and lovely. Everything's here – pineapples from Java, Norway pine, greenhouses like tropical igloos, the long wide lawns, camomile meadows veiled with hair, lawns that look like – and are – the dancing-grounds of angels.

The fatherland is another place.

If Mother is Being, Daddy, is *nada* the flaw, the crack at the center of the universe, the illusion that implodes as you look at it, the glittery thing you thought was real but it's made out of nothing; seduction, emptiness, cold, the brightness of rooms without air. Terrible energy radiates from this. It's the state of being falsified. I have a friend called Linda and Linda lives in this world, not I. Last autumn Linda and I were riding into the fatherland inside the big blue bell of a snowstorm – that light is a sign of sorcery.

'Visit me?' says Linda. 'I'll get a babysitter. I'll get divorced. I'll get an abortion.' Linda and I were riding on talking horses who put their heads together and said nasty things about us; in all that whirling whiteness there was not one kind word. Linda rode bad sidesaddle. The familiar signs of the road swam by, humped shapes buried indistinguishably under snow: murder, adultery, incest, suicide. This is fairy-tale country. 'I wonder what we'll find,' says Linda. She, not I. Linda is what the French call *rondelet*;

she's young, foolish, and sinfully pretty. She wipes the magic snow off her sandals and the cleft between her breasts; her shoulders and bosom are bare. She's all female. In my father's country I can never remember the motherland because my father's country has what's called *invalidation*, so although I know where I'm going I don't know why, or rather the reason I do know has a very hollow ring to it and I think I may have forgotten, i.e. confusion in the middle of the snowstorm.

Am I going there to be a governess?

Snow settles thickly on Linda's horn-rimmed glasses.

When I was very young – eleven or twelve years old – I walked into that light and recognized in it my personal destiny. I walked into my eleven-year-old's bedroom and saw the air turn blue between the frosted windowpanes – Jack Frost at work. It was very, very cold. My destiny is waiting for me outside this whirling glass ball. Up ahead is a flagged courtyard where I will get off my horse, blowing on my fingers and wishing I were a man; I'll gather up my skirts and crinoline and the little box that came with me from Miss Swithin's; I'll tie the crackling ribbons of my bonnet. Menstruation, Victoriana, marriage, anaemia, women's troubles. I mustn't. Nursing my dead father. So many paintings in which a woman adores a dead male divinity. Pictures of domestic unhappiness. Hatboxes, Emily Brontë owned a square carnelian brooch, which she kept with manuscripts in a blue box. There are times Linda makes me throw up because she has no mind at all; I don't mean that she's mindless, actually, but her amazing bare buttocks are somehow always triumphant over her face; my poor friend has just a faint glaze of consciousness like the stuff they put on a ham, a constant innocent surprise (she's very trusting), a perpetual temptation to forcing her. And she has enormous stamina; she can live through anything – beat her with a padded coat hanger and minutes later she's fresh and rosy. I have been through so many dramatic scenes with Linda; she's in a pretty gingham dress (neat but provocative) which they tear off, they put her into a stupid affair of velvet tags and leather straps which lets her body hang out all over; they hold her down, pulling her legs apart, and every man in the place rams himself into her (it's a treat) with ecstatic ohs! and ahs! (she, not I) bruising her, violating her, hurting her, using her, swilling up her round, round, round, jiggling,

wretched parts with their exquisite slight taste of stupidity. She, not I.

She has no sexual thoughts. This is very important to understand. She's a dish of ice cream. Divinity hits her between the legs and dazes her. When she's in her bafflement, when the syrup of sacrifice rises from the modest temple (she, not I) in Linda's vagina and totally obscures her brain, then you can 'have' Linda. You can even pretend to talk to Linda. I've done it myself, at least in imagination, beating her like a gong, as the saying goes, bursting with itchy, nervous, unhappy desire (that's the kind of appetite for her, isn't it?) And enjoying her thoroughly, crying out hot wench, hot wench, but if her temple is convulsed in ruin and horror, that still was not she. None of it gets into her head.

She has some vague feeling for jewellery.

(In my dreams I keep trying to get under the surface of the sea but can't; the waves miss me or the water dries up as I run into it, or I pretend I'm in it but know I'm not or the summery sea takes one look and revolts into a reverse tsunami because it's not my personal destiny to get wet. I even row on dry land, in fact between the white lines painted on a parking lot, quite hopelessly.

Linda means 'lovely'. Doesn't it?

I want to breathe water and go home.)

When we reached the courtyard I saw that this time the scene of my personal destiny was to be a castle, a huge home. Fields cancelled, gone quite suddenly, replaced by a human habitation; the interaction of snow with stone, snow with glass. If you are born without the sacred totem, what do you do, what do you do? This basso profundo daydream dreamed by so many in the public prints that it must be true. The servants took my horse and I strode over the flagged yard (snow whirling into the flames of the torches on the wall, making them sputter), flicking my gloves against stone, wrought iron, massive oak, slapping my gloves with one hand against the palm of the other. I'm tall and ugly. I don't bother about what happens to Linda. Perhaps this place is a Home, although it's miles from anywhere; no need in that case to put iron bars on the windows. I used to escape from places like this nightly, met once by Linda (who in my dream was wearing Garbo slacks and an enormous sun-hat) in some sort of outbuilding, a shed or something. Somewhere in this very complicated blueprint is an apartment I

know well: a pretty, middle-class place nicely decorated, with the living-room floor (well-varnished and polished) buckling drastically over a sort of wooden hump, as if there were something heaving up from underneath, and a shack or lean-to built on the back with all sorts of gardening and carpentry tools rusting away in it because it's so wet, the walls running with water and the floor covered with slime. The darkness here is, as usual, absolute, more an abstract condition or state of mind than the real thing. I follow a servant up the raw stone stairs – and we need servants, otherwise how could we be magnified? – although I'm quite used to doing the floors myself on hands and knees. It (the servant, the thing, the person, the hunchbacked what-do-you-call-it) leaves me in a firelit room where the walls sweat moisture, it's so cold, and I sit down on a bench before that visual flame which warms nothing but the pupils of my eyes. There's a book on an inlaid table set right on the stone floor, a little book with a medieval, enamelled cross on the cover; I pick it up and read:

like a wastebasket

Who or what is like a wastebasket?

There's something in this book I don't like, so I put it down – you know, something that shocks me although I can't remember what. I don't like reading about such things: love, pain, a constricted unhappiness.

I had always wanted a man's griefs, his passions, his boredom, even to be emptied into me

There's something outside, beyond the archway of the door.

Refusing to feed my hidden vanity, my sulkiness, my individualism, X neglects everything I demand; he takes my head in his hands kindly but impersonally, because I'm only a means to a sensation, after all

How can things be so vivid to the eye and so absent in every other way?

The two of them, X and Y, fussing over me, but really through me or past me while standing me against that very expensive office desk, communicating with each other by means of my abused body like two executives talking into the dictaphone or over the secretary's head, casually enjoying a bit of fluff, so to speak, and my poor mind caught between, the victim of a little bit of vanity (my own), to be removed without mercy if I show the slightest symptom of

having any sensations, so I must be as blank as the telephone or the rug

What's the good of not reading the book if I can't help reading the book?

No tears of shame or joy. No sounds. I'll let it out inside, the only place they like it. As X, who is one zero, shoves me one way and talks over my dumb breasts to another zero, Y, who's in my mouth

I know I'm foolish. Ashamed to be caught day-dreaming.

You know, I'm obsessed with the servant problem – I mean getting hunchbacks to serve us, cripples, idiots, the insane, women – all kinds of unfit persons. Persons below the law. The trouble is, there's no one else. There really is someone outside this room; I've fallen in love so often with unseen presences that I can tell when they're going to pop up; I mean, of course, a man outside the room with a torch, which makes his radiance precede him, and who has come to tell me I don't know what; that I ought to be rescuing Linda from something or other (the second thing she's good for). And I remember walking on the battlements here in clothes I'd stolen, men's clothes, isolated like a god in my own fancies, distorted and magnified by the fog in which everything became glitteringly visible. Everyone who saw me desired me. Although no one desires me or loves me now, someone exists in the fatherland whose very name would make my heart stop; I'm afraid even to look up from this bench on which I sit. A tree trunk. A pre-Colombian sun god. A masked suit of armour, fretted with gold. The characteristic emotion of the fatherland is that feeling called by men *anguish*, by women *love*, and here in my little room in my tower, lit by a cold fire, reading, terribly nostalgic, remembering, dead, quite insane, a reincarnation of a Victorian ladies' maid, I turn and burn, I underestimate myself, I put my head in my hands, I long with all my soul to be staked, immolated, torn to pieces, suicided, to be stabbed repeatedly, to be repeatedly impaled. Tears of desire and anguish, although I am so tall and so friendless and so ugly. They were all unattractive, those legions of unloved sisters and fatherless girls, spinsters without hope, sick women in crinolines who nursed their fathers through mortal illnesses and never even got into pornography books. I think I'll get out; I could easily fool the guard outside the door, that

hunchbacked rochester or watson or whatever-you-call-it (they're all over the place), who can be fooled by the crudest male impersonation. I will be so damned nonchalant, so recklessly brave, so brilliantly intellectual even in my page's costume (an alto). And Linda takes the heat off me, if only for a little while. So I'll get up and go. Looking for love.

I was quite alone through all this, of course.

Stone stairs: each riser a different thought. Sometimes I saw three soldiers playing dice for my heart, sometimes a woman I know, a friend of mine, brushing her little daughter's hair. Such different scenes. The halls of this chateau are lit by naked, unfrosted light bulbs or sometimes with oil-dip lamps, or torches, or candles. To go travelling for love makes you a very vulnerable pilgrim. I thought that on the stairs I might meet Him, or that He might be walking down a passage, and these conjectures made me sick at heart. Girl in snowstorm, running away from castle. Girl in jungle, running away from verandah. Girl in moonlight, running away from mansion. That terrible presence that knocks you down. Fate. Kismet. I saw a great many things.

In one stone room myself as a five-year-old playing cards alone; the child turns, revealing that Its face is covered with ice or metal, some kind of mask or (horrible!) It grew that way.

A butcher shop set up inside the stone walls of this castle, with the meat-cutter in his bloodstained apron winking energetically at me to show that he's jollying me along, he likes me. What do you want, honey? I bet you read books, ha ha. I bet you go to school. I know you don't mind my talking to you like this. Hell, she doesn't mind. Don't look so down, honey. I'll take care of you. He winks spasmodically like a demented machine, he can't stop, and the other women streetwalkers lean against the walls of the room in various attitudes of dislike and boredom. They've seen it all before, they don't care. His murderer's hand on mine.

A woman in a long skirt combing out her daughter's hair. A big brown-and-white dog lies snoozing by the stone fireplace and the amber Persian cats curl up in a chair by the embroidery frame. It's very quiet. The woman catches sight of me and smiles as if she knew something but won't tell me what it is; she looks up at me, amused; she'd rather be silent as my mother was while combing out my tangledy child's hair, as my cousin complained about having to be still while

my mother's sister combed the snarls out of her long, curly, red hair, as some day I will set my daughter between my knees and comb her hair. We know something.

A man all in black reading in a room full of books, shelves set right into the stone walls; he's turning the pages under a shaded electric lamp. Dry, sensible, and competent. Who are you? He's amused: 'I have the same name as you but I'm the lucky one.'

It's hopeless. I'll never find Him. And I need Him so desperately. Right in the middle of the empty, lit-up corridor my palms sweat with fear, I get dizzy, my throat dries up; the very air is glittering with a dry, horrible desire. I'm nobody. I'm nothing. It's so humiliating to be me. I want to be taken out of myself, life is unbearable if I'm not, so I yearn for water, for Him; I almost lie down right here on the stone floor of the corridor; I want to curl up and die. The corrida of the horridor. Corridor. His absence: malicious and prying. A sterilization, lack of sound. I remember what it was like to be without Him at sixteen, knowing that romance danced all around me but that He wouldn't come, that somehow I blighted it, that I had a bad touch. Night after night I've fled down these halls, out of my mind with fear, trying to get out when I should have been trying to get in, carrying my shameful parts with me, of which the worst was: *I don't really want to be here.* They're right when they say it's the most important thing in your life. *I'm no better than the others.* I don't want to miss it, so I start running, like all those girls on the covers of paperback books who are running from mad wives in attics or dead wives in closets; I go zipping through the halls of the fatherland and in my blindness, with a dry grin of terror and repulsion *am catapulted through a crimson velvet drape into a scene of wild sexual license, everyone masked, naked, faceless, impersonally powerful except for the boys and girls spreadeagled, bent over, who are being pierced hard or worked at hard and who are not being consulted. Their anxious, pathetic, pained, little faces. Perhaps my ambidextrous smile will save me.*

Don't you want to be—?

Yes, I said (but do I have to go through all this?)

Made solemn by suffering, with my anxious little monkey-face all pursed up, I offered to him my delicate little bits of skin, my nether face, the quizzical palms of my

hands, all my small thoughts. He battered them to pieces. I put my face in my hands and wept. This dreadful, mechanical business, shes on their backs, hes on all fours, so much human misery. I wouldn't mind if it was just a solid and dependable prick; I wouldn't mind if I could hold on to it and come one two three four five times just like that. I don't want this edgy, subtle love that pierces to the marrow of my bones. Over my head I heard: I like boys; it's tighter. He took it out before I was ready and I wriggled like an eel, though I didn't want to; another appeared and I came. Have I violated etiquette? They fucked me in the ass and it hurt badly. Part of my clothes are gone, so I walk through it all in my long black aphrodisiac stockings and no pants, my dumb bush of hair showing dejectedly in front. It's a blight, desire in the secret parts everyone can see, my nether lips preparing to speak, stirring slowly, the tongue beginning to swell. There are dominators between me and the door. I took weak hold of a boy I did not know, but nothing happened; I think he will change in a moment (as I shake him pettishly by the shoulders), he'll go limp, his flesh will flow and change, he'll turn under my hands into a young woman, her face slender, her eyes violet-dim, little rolls of plumpness under her breasts and around her thighs. Chubby Linda.

I'm embracing a mirror.

For heaven's sake, put your clothes on! she says.

Dreaming of being kidnapped by pirates (I was eleven).

Movies.

Love comix.

The way it was: Dad helping Mother across the street because she was so weak and stupid she might get killed. His picking up jars by their tops and then blaming her for not screwing them on tight enough. His turning to me at the dinner table after he had finished all his food and saying, 'Don't eat so fast. You'll get an ulcer.' I remember a woman in a restaurant at the next table from us who had fresh flowers twined in her and her two little daughters' hair (honest) and a husband who said nothing. The matriarch talked endlessly to her two little girls because the three of them were so sensitive and beautiful and her husband obviously wasn't; she pointed out to her admiring girls how pretty and stylish mother and I were. The man sat there and said nothing, the indispensable, crucial, lay figure.

That's what I am. That's what I'm for. Am I even that?

I think the Man I'm looking for, the Governor who controls this castle, will be somewhere at its highest point. He doesn't own it, He haunts it. I think I own it. I want to look up at Him imploringly and timidly; I want to say, 'Do you need me?' I want to say, 'Let me do something for you.' We'll sit together in front of the fire, I with my dreaming head on His knee, and I'll be necessary to Him. All these thoughts are clichés, but that's life. I'm going up a sort of circular stairway, the treads of which are metal and therefore slippery. I could lie and say that the stairway is full of ghosts, but they were exhausted long ago; everything like that has already happened. I've been making my nightly pilgrimage for years and now only the reality is left.

With one exception: I think the ghost of my father is haunting these stairs. I can remember him so well – I can remember so many things. Queer to think that in those days he was younger than I am now. When I was five he took me out in a canoe and picked wild orchids for me. He made fishing flies by hand with a jeweller's loupe and tweezers, working on bits of tufted fluff as delicate as thoughts. He had bright eyes and a big nose (like mine), which I thought was beautiful. I made a shrine for his photograph with cardboard backing and two candles when I was twelve. He forgave my mother for being a woman because she was also a saint, but I betrayed him; I grew up. He liked to talk about history and epidemiology. When I was a little girl I believed that it was he who made the sun come up every morning; I didn't believe it off my own bat but because he told me so. He gave me a Dumbo doll when I was four (that's the Disney elephant made out of grey plush) because we both had big ears and we would both learn to fly.

You know who's behind that door.

I want to see what he'll say to me this time. He always says something interesting.

I open the door and there he is, with his jeweller's loupe in his eye, working with tweezers and a needle and thread.

He looks up unsympathetically. 'Don't touch anything.'

I wait. Petulant and bitter, a little old man with exophthalmic eyes and the white sideburns and whiskers of the Emperor Franz Josef, my father works with his bits of thread. He is, in some way that I don't understand, a failure. He's embittered by the world's refractoriness, by his

mother's strength, by the treachery of his daughter. He looks up and says crossly, 'I don't like the way you sit. Your thighs are too fat.'

That's first. He's muttering to himself, something about A Beautiful Blonde who drove the wrong way down a one-way street. Ha ha. He's really nobody. He lives here, in my head.

'You,' he says sulkily, 'have been chosen to be Commander General of the whole universe.' He lifts his lip cruelly in a smile, gloating over what comes next. 'But you're not going to get the job.

'Do you know why?'

I say nothing.

'You're not going to get the job,' says my father with immense, self-righteous pleasure, '*because they can't provide bathroom facilities for girls*!' He starts laughing like a crow that used to live next to us in the country, the pet of the people down the road; it would get terribly stirred up and would hop around its cage with a hoarse, loud caw, trying to eat the bars or worry at them with its beak, excited and gratified over things none of us could understand. Who knows what makes a crow happy or sad?

And that's my father.

My God, but it's *cold* in the fatherland! Bitter cold even inside the castle; I had to wrap myself in my cloak and when I met Linda on the next landing down (long past that door, now shut) the wind outside flung a gust through the trefoil window that covered us with stinging snow. It stuns you; it makes your ears ring. Linda must have had an experience like mine; she crossed her arms and beat them against her chest to keep warm. 'Oh fuck it,' she said bitterly. 'Oh fuck it, the hell with it. It's not worth it.'

'Where'd you get the fur coat?' I said. (That was one swell fur coat.)

'Stole it.' She coughed, breathed on her glasses and then polished them on the lapel of her fur – bear, as I remember. She jerked a fist across her throat to indicate what she'd done to somebody (or maybe only what she'd like to do), then staggered comically around the landing with her tongue stuck out and her eyes crossed. 'Blotto,' she said. We kissed good-bye because we were going separate ways. 'Will you write?' we said. 'Oh, do write.' Down the freezing halls of the fatherland – or man's land – where rime spreads in poetic, furry stain over the stone floor, out between the bars

of the back gate, around the edge of a vast, dark, frozen pond, and crawling on our stomachs through a hole in the last stone wall where Linda lost her fur hat. There was a blizzard you could not face into, now that the magic was gone, trees that lashed at you, and the iron-hard furrows of the potato fields of my father's country where maidens in the springtime (which never comes) may gather (if you'll excuse the expression) very small potatoes indeed.

How did I get out?

I said Good-bye, Good-bye.

I walked through the door. The door to the motherland can be a door in a construction fence that leads nowhere, a door inside a closet that leads to a hidey-hole, a door in the brick front of a house on a street in a town in any part of the world. The trick is to get inside oneself. The Great Goddess puts me between Her knees and combs my hair night and day. Striding over the crests of the grassy hills with Her panthers, she causes the grass to stretch precariously between its grasping toe and its one drinking eye, trying to be with Her; trees lean toward Her dishevelled with desire. As the fish is in the sea and the sea is in the fish, so we live and move and have our being. It's colourless in the swimming mist, clear and thin-drawn, here where it's infinite, as colour comes back to things from Her bright face. Her pine-cones, Her spear, Her sandals, Her twisted snakes. Time runs differently in the two places, and as my father creates around Him perpetual night, so Her days and night naturally progress, and now Her sun rises clear of the hills. Linda rises too, nymphlike from the grass, embodied out of a stream, hung about with watches, knapsacks, wallets, extra socks, canteens, and collapsible drinking-cups, all the trophies of travel. 'Have I had adventures!' she says. 'It took me ten years to get home.' She pitches a tent, washes her socks, builds a fire, shears a sheep, ploughs a homestead, delivers a baby, sets up a collapsible typewriter, digs a field toilet, and holding a wetted finger up to the wind, accurately predicts the weather for the next twenty-four hours. 'Have I got things to tell you!' she says. Delighted, I settle down on the grass and prepare to listen. It's going to be a long, leisurely feast. She Herself is listening, one vast, attentive radiant Ear bending over the hills. We're in Her lap this pale, fresh, chilly, summer dawn.

At last.

THE HAMMER OF EVIL

or
Career Opportunities at the Pascal Business School

JOHN SLADEK

THROUGH THE BARRED window is a blue Magritte sky. I've told them, I'm as innocent as any angel that ever danced on the head of any pin. They can't keep me.

'Getting out of here?' Professor Rice grins. 'Nothing easier. I can leave anytime I like.'

'I know, I know. It's all how you look at it. Professor, if you've said that once, you must have said it a thousand ti—'

The meter in the wall clicks, and a printed card slips out. It reads: *Surely you mean that, if he has said it a thousand times, he must have said it once. Otherwise explain.*

They, the Acamarians, are pretty hot on explanations. I throw the card on the heap in the corner. Some lucky prisoner has the makings of a card house. Not me, I'm ready for execution. When I tell them I have nothing to lose, they ask me to explain.

'If I close my eyes, the world goes. (All but the smell of my unwashed cellmate.) You can't kill me, or I'll take the world with me. You can destroy my soul, but my body will go marching on.' That usually impresses them, especially when I march around the cell with my eyes shut.

When that fails, I can always tell them that past and future are all the same to me.

The cell door clangs open theatrically. A new man is thrown in. I am wary, for two reasons: (a) His ugliness. The yellow teeth, blackheads in ears, greased-down black hair with white dandruff, fat neck with boils – could he be an agent, trying

for sympathy? (b) Anyway, he smells. Could be a way of breaking me down. They don't know the secret resources of Yuri Trumbull, though.

'Hello. They got you, too?'

I nod. Nods are safe, they give them information only one bit at a time. An old trick I learned from an Apache programmer. Trumbull is wily. My companion offers his hand. Scabs.

'Don't you know me?' he says. 'I know I'm not at my best, but—'

'Professor Rice!' I haven't seen him for, what, fifteen years. Professor Rice, of the good old Pascal Business School. 'What a coincidence!' More of their work, I'm thinking. But I know all about coincidences. I'm an actuary. Professor Rice is an antiquary. The Acamarians caught him in the Antarctic, digging up – why am I telling all these silly lies?

'So they got you, too,' he says again. 'My star pupil.' He sits on his bunk, marking territory with a noisy fart. 'Where was it?'

I begin inventing the past, as it really was. 'At work. I had just calculated the life expectancy of a Mormon waiter whose mother cans her own rhubarb, and a bricklayer who races his catamaran. The Mormon lives longer.'

'Fascinating. How much longer?'

Yuri Trumbull isn't saying. Wouldn't they just like to get their tentacles (or claws or whatever they have) on that vital piece of inside information!

'I finished, and my pocket calculator read 808,327,338. Bob Deal, at the next desk, started rambling on about probabilities. "I've got six reports here," he said, "from different places. Six people who took out life insurance, effective midnight June sixth. One minute later, each of them was killed by lightning. Incredible."

' "I believe it,' I said.

'Bob has a short temper, it has something to do with his wooden neck. "Listen, it's about as likely as all the air in this room rushing over to one side and leaving a vacuum. Not impossible, but not bloody likely, either. There's devilry in it."

'I looked at my pocket calculator upside down. It read BEELZEBOB. "Hey Bob, here's a funny coincidence for you!"

'He didn't answer. All the air had rushed away from his

part of the room, leaving a vacuum. Well, I took the hint. Ever since, I've been a devout—'

'Mormon?'

'No, bricklayer. It's the sincerest form of prayer, according to my wife.'

Professor Rice blew his nose and looked at his handkerchief thoughtfully, like a customer at the hors-d'oeuvres table. 'I didn't know you were married.'

'My prayers have not been answered, no. But who knows? A few more bricks . . . As he suffocated, Bob wrote down the combination to the wall safe on his blotter. I opened the wall safe and looked through it to a blue Magritte sky. Blue, I tell you!'

He offered me a sandwich. Staring at his black fingernails, I declined.

'Taking a light carbine from the office wall, I crawled into the safe and on through. Magritte country, all right. A lot of men in bowler hats standing around, striking poses. I could fairly smell the green apples. This could only be London. The wind was from the south-southeast at a steady—'

'Get to the telegram part,' he said, spitting crumbs.

How did he know about that? Was he inventing my past?

'It was handed to me from a train window. It said, A CRUST OF BREAD IS BETTER THAN NOTHING. NOTHING IS BETTER THAN HEAVEN. So it was you who sent it?'

'I couldn't leave the train,' he protested. 'I was investigating a murder – or its opposite, really.'

I'll work that into my past somehow. I'm in the driver's seat again.

I first knew Professor Rice as a brisk, white-toothed young teacher, leading the Statistical Anomaly seminar. Very advanced stuff, for kids who only wanted to sell insurance.

'Trumbull, let's have that paper on The Prisoner's Dilemma.'

Game theory. Two men are captured by the enemy, and questioned separately. If, say A confesses, and B doesn't, A will be freed, given a huge reward and treated as a hero. B will be shot. If both men confess, they'll serve life sentences at hard labour. If both keep their mouths shut, they'll be released. What should B do?

We have been questioned separately, the Professor and I. What did he tell them? That I was his star pupil? Or that he found the conclusions of my paper invalid?

'Professor Rice, have you actually seen them face-to-face?'

'Of course not, my boy.' The patronizing tone. 'No one has actually seen the Acamarians. That's partly how they keep their power. Talk about culture shock! Frankly, this invasion is getting on my nerves. No, we have to take their existence on faith. Oh, did I tell you I'm writing a novel about God?'

Years after our seminar, I met him on a tube train. He crosses London every day, to an office in the financial district. There he works on his long-awaited novel. Even then, I could see the signs of deterioration: the nap coming off his bowler, glasses taped together at the temple. He held a clipboard, and seemed to be counting the passengers. I invent the conversation:

'Hello, Professor. What's this?'

'Working over a theory, Trumbull. Counting the number of people who get on and off. At every station, more people get off the train than on. Curious, eh?'

'Every station? That's impossible.'

He made a face. 'Please. Never use that word. There are two perfectly plausible explanations. (a) People are being generated right inside this carriage, somehow. (b) The word "more" doesn't mean what it used to mean.'

I counted the passengers at the next station.

'Your theory's wrong. I just saw three people get into this carriage, and only one got out.'

'You didn't see the others, then? That *is* fascinating.'

Fascinating, his favourite word. He hisses it, sticking out the yellow lower teeth. He is fascinated by paradoxes, and by found bits of his own excessive body dirt.

A sad decline: shiny bowler and hallucinations.

He yawns, exposing food, exhaling the smell of death. What could be more unlikely, in any universe, than being locked into a cell with this living corpse? Otherwise, it wouldn't be so bad: smooth grey-stone walls, wooden bunks, not bad. The food could improve, especially the *pollo soppresso*. Rice prefers his packed lunches (where does he get them?), thin tomato-margarine sandwiches, he bites the dry crusts,

better than heaven, he throws the scraps on the floor.

'Do they let you smoke here?' He rolls a dirty little rag of a cigarette. 'Go on. You saw men in bowlers.'

'They rushed me, brandishing their umbrellas. How was I to know they were making for a train? I opened fire.'

'But it didn't work?'

'I see you know this country well, Professor. In order to reach the heart of a businessman dressed as Kafka, the bullet must first get halfway to him. Then it must go half the remaining distance, and so on, an infinite number of smaller and smaller steps. It's all too much for the bullet, so it gives up. Motion is impossible.'

'All things are possible with God,' he counters.

The next card asks him to elaborate.

'God can do anything. He could even cure poor old Zeno's dreams of impotence. I refer to Zeno the Greek philosopher, and not to Zeno the highly literate English prisoner.'

He receives a THANK YOU card, the first I've seen.

'The bullet fell from the end of the gun and rolled around on the platform. One of the commuters tripped and fell down on it, and it lodged in his heart. So I'm here for a murder I didn't commit.'

'A likely story,' says Rice. He means it; his very boils are bursting with approbation. 'My own case is similar. I'm an antiquary, as you know. While digging in the Antarctic, I happened to find two rare old bronze coins. A Greek piece marked *51 B.C.*, and a British coin marked 'George I'. These have proved fraudulent, and they say I planted them myself. They produced three witnesses who swear they saw me do it. I offered to produce thirty who would swear they didn't see me do it, but there; the guilty are always caught, you know.'

A card asks for explanation.

'If a man is guilty, he is always caught for his crimes. Another way of saying the same thing is, if a man is not caught, he's not guilty. We have only to look around and find a man who's never been caught. Is he innocent? Of course he is. There are millions of uncaught, innocent men. Samuel Butler, to name but three.'

'So I was caught.' He drops the ragged cigarette and digs a finger in his ear. 'The interrogation was odd. They asked me all about an old problem from the seminar.'

I'm not listening. Bread is better than heaven, is it? The lazy loaves drift quietly across our sky. Really they're Acamarian spacecraft, I suppose, powered by sheer nerve. Our nerve is gone, we're the suppressed chickens. I want out. I want the clean smell of fresh deodorant again. Is it true that, merely by using spray deodorants, humanity destroyed the Earth's ozone layer? And did that open the way to our invaders? I must look it all up in the prison library, before dawn, and the firing squad.

'A prisoner is told by the governor that he'll be hanged one day in the coming week, but not on any day he's expecting it.' He's rambling again. 'Now he knows he can't be executed on Saturday. If they haven't killed him on any of the other six days, they can't kill him on the seventh, when he'll be certainly expecting it. So Saturday is out.'

Why do so many paradoxes involve prisoners and hanging?

'By the same reasoning, Friday is out. Since it has to be one of the six days, it can't be the sixth, because he must expect it by then. Friday is out, Thursday is out, and so on. He eliminates each day until he's left with only Sunday. But they can't hang him then, either, because he now expects it. So they can't hang him at all.'

The Acamarians aren't too bright. They really don't see the rest of it. Our prisoner reasons that they can't hang him on any day of the week, so he's never expecting it. So they can hang him anytime.

'They want answers,' says my cell-mate. 'Tell them nothing.'

The interrogation room is like the first-class compartment of a luxury flight. You scrunch down in your comfortable seat with your earphones. If they like your answers, they show you movies. I've seen both of their excellent, all-family selections: *Keys of the Kingdom* (Gregory Peck meets God) and *My Friend Flicka* (Roddy MacDowall meets horse).

Under intensive interrogation, and bribed with chicken and butter, I tell them about prisoners A, B and C.

'The governor tells them that two will hang, and one will be set free. A says to the governor, "Tell me the name of one

of the other men who will hang. If both of them are going to be hanged, just tell me either name."

'The governor says, "B will hang."

'A now sees that his survival chances have increased. Earlier, he had one chance in three of surviving. Now, either C or himself will go free, so his chances are one in two.

' "Wait," says the governor. "Suppose I said C instead of B."

' "My chances will still improve in the same way."

' "Supose I said nothing at all, then."

' "It's still the same. You'd be suppressing one name or the other, and, no matter which, my chances would still be one in two." '

This baffles them. They can't see why the governor is in the story at all. A could simply imagine a governor coming to him and speaking a name. So A's chances of survival are always one in two?

'That's right,' I lie. Why do I enjoy lying to them? They're doing their best.

I finally ask Professor Rice to put his escape plan into action.

'All right. Look at the corner of the cell. There, see where the ceiling and floor corners are? Now, why do they have to be inside corners? Couldn't they just possibly be the outside corners of a crooked cube?'

I stare at them until they are. We jump back, avoiding the big lop-sided cube as it falls over. We're free.

Two other freed prisoners rush over to thank him. They even shake his hand.

'I'm A,' says the taller. 'This is my cell-mate, B. I'm afraid C was crushed beneath a big stone block. Good thing his insurance coverage started a few minutes ago.'

The four of us get on a train (and five get off). Professor Rice finds his clipboard on the floor and makes a note.

I feel I've heard A's story before: 'B and I are related. We hang around together, doing odd jobs. You know, chopping wood, pumping water in and out of tanks. Or racing. We race a lot. Rowboats, upstream and downstream, stuff like that. Good clean fun.'

What is it I like about A so much?

'Fun!' B has the shoulder slump of a born loser. 'Like if I

ride a bike from X to Y, A has to race me in a car, passing me at—'

'That's not fair,' A says. 'You generally have twice as many apples as I do, before you give me half the—'

'Give, give give! It's been the same ever since you were as many years old as I am younger than you were when—'

'Ignore him.' A turns to me. 'It all goes back to our parents, a lawyer and a model. They met at a footrace. The lawyer could go faster uphill and on the level, but mother was faster on the downhill parts. So naturally mother won.'

Professor Rice does not look up from his work. 'I take it you mean the lawyer was your mother.'

B, still sulking, says, 'A's not my brother, you know.'

I feel it's true.

'It's true!' Professor Rice is fascinated. 'I calculate the number of passengers generated within this carriage as exactly – uh, I have the figures here – exactly *one*.'

I hate to say it. 'Professor, have you counted yourself?'

He adjusts his taped glasses, turns over the pages on his clipboard for a moment or two. Finally he says:

'Have I told you about my novel?'

The train wheels begin to scream. I know what's happened: The tracks are getting narrower as we near the horizon.

I get out alone at the next station (No one gets in). Along the deserted platform, I hear voices from the exit tunnels. Going alone through the tunnel, I hear feet and voices on the escalators.

No one is on the escalators. No one in the ticket-collector's box, where I find his burning cigarette on the shelf. Outside there are traffic noises, murmuring mobs of shoppers, the cry of a newspaper man. But of course when I get there, it's to see: abandoned cars; a stack of papers peeling off and blowing away; an ice-cream cone on the pavement, just starting to melt. London, perhaps the world, is one big *Mary Celeste*, with everyone suddenly out to lunch.

Professor Rice's office is here, in a blue glass tower where brokers and lawyers, on a normal day, might sit and reason with one another.

All I can find of his novel is in the typewriter:

'If I'm God,' said God, who was, 'then why can't I do anything I like? Why can't I lock myself in a prison from which even I can't escape?'

He found this, like all questions, rhetorical.

'I know the answer to that one,' he cried, paring his fingernails. 'The answer is, even *I* can't contradict myself. Ha!'

Ha indeed. One crummy idea, in a half-dozen lines, and that cribbed from Aquinas. Nor any explanation of the fingernails (Can the Infinite grow?) Why can't God contradict himself, anyway?

I look out over the blue city. At any moment, the alien invasion could begin. For centuries, the hordes of Acamar have been on the way; levering themselves slowly through space; hand-over-hand (if they have hands) along weightless ropes, through frictionless pulleys, dragged along by perpetual motion . . .

When the first few loaves appear in the sky, I begin the incantation:

'A certain barber of Acamar shaves all the Acamarians who do not shave themselves. Does he shave himself?'

They think it over and mail a card to me: *Can there be such a barber?*

There can't. He twinkles out of existence.

Taking a deep breath, I say, 'If a barber does not exist, neither do his customers.'

No one on Acamar shaves himself. Already plumes of smoke trail from a few loaves, before sunset the fields will be full of warm toast: fodder for the gentle, lowing, purple beasts.

PATAGONIA'S DELICIOUS FILLING STATION

THREE ONE-ACT PLAYS

by BRIAN W. ALDISS

The Crowded Cities of Patagonia

The setting is abstract in a chunky way, though one does not notice this at first, since the lighting is low. A chunky rose garden is suggested. Albie *and* Jill *are alone.*

Albie: Do you really believe in the nineteenth century?

Jill: I've got a picture of it at home, and the founder of our family was born in it. Isn't that proof?

Albie: I was speaking metaphysically.

Jill: Either you're not well again or you're working up to something. Are you trying to seduce me, because if so you're going the wrong way about it. Women like flattery, not metaphysics.

Albie: So much for sophistication. Okay, then, strip!

Jill: What do you mean, strip?

Albie: Take your clothes off. Reveal your lovely body to me.

Jill: I would, but I really don't see what this has to do with the nineteenth century. It's irrelevant. You might as well say 'the crowded cities of Patagonia'.

Albie: I might not. Such a phrase never entered my head, I am damned sure of that.

Jill: Don't sound so proud. It's probably a phrase that has entered nobody's head before.

Albie: That's something that amazes me about the human

race. They are able to invent, quite spontaneously, phrases – thoughts – which have previously had no existence. The crowded cities of Patagonia . . . as far as I know, Patagonia has no crowded cities, and yet the mere phrase conjures them up, grand stagnant, funereal, prone to moth.

Jill: It's a part of the Argentine, isn't it?

Albie: That's totally irrelevant. Though I love the tone of your voice. Here you and I are, talking about the crowded cities of Patagonia – probably the only people in the world to do so – and one can't help feeling that in some way we may be giving those phantasmal cities an objective existence. Can't you even believe that you catch their magical names . . .

Enter Voici *and* Amarantha, *two charming girls of dark complexion, who wander across the stage hand-in-hand.*

Voici: . . . and the pleasure of meeting you again, dear Amarantha. I'm really glad to be back here. The cities of Patagonia are so crowded, and the climate is dreadful—

Amarantha: But I'm sure you were kept by a rich man and lived in a lovely house.

Voici: Not at all. I was married to a dealer in sheep's cheeses, who lived in one of the less desirable slums of Punta Arenas, where the rooms are the size of small wardrobes and lack air-conditioning and all sanitary conveniences. We had two rooms and a parrot, which we shared with another family.

Amarantha: Poor thing, I don't suppose you got much embroidery done!

Voici: Oh, but I did. They are mad about pornographic cushion covers in Punta Arenas, and I virtually supported us when there was a slump in sheep's cheese by embroidering rape scenes in appliqué . . .

Albie: Pardon me, young ladies, but do you happen to be talking about the crowded cities of Patagonia?

Amarantha: (*laughing*) Of course not. We were talking about rape.

(*Exit left*)

Albie: (*scratching head*) That's all the younger generation thinks about – pleasure. Still, what else is there, when you get down to it?

Jill: There's always sheep's cheese—

Albie: There's been a slump in that lately, I hear.

Jill: And the human race.

Albie: There's certainly been a boom in that lately. That's why the cities are so crowded—

Jill: The cities of Patagonia?

Albie: Well, yes, now you mention it. Just to recite their names makes one feel claustrophobic: Comodoro Rivadavia, Nahuel Haupi, Sarmiento, where they speak Welsh, Rio Gallegos, where two million people died in a fire last year.

Jill: You're making all this up. Nobody speaks Welsh down there. They speak Spanish if they speak anything.

Albie: In Comodoro Rivadavia, half the population is mute and speaks nothing. The mutes have gained control of the City Council, and passed a law forbidding anyone to speak between sunrise and sunset.

Jill: What a lovely quiet city in which to live.

Albie: Yes, until sunset. Then the vocal half of the population retaliates by shouting all night. The Shouting Nights of Comodoro Rivadavia are famous all over South America.

Enter George *and* Toscannino, *two charming fellows of light complexion, who wander across the stage hand-in-pocket.*

George: ... and how delighted I am to see you again, dear Toscannino. Where have you been these past months?

Toscannino: I've been shouting, as a matter of fact.

George: Shooting?

Toscannino: No, shouting. I took a trip to the crowded cities of Patagonia because I particularly wanted to experience the Shouting Nights of Comodoro Rivadavia. They were beyond all expectation. I drove along the R69 from Colonia las Hera, and we could hear the noise even before we left the autopista. Most thrilling. The White Nights of Leningrad just don't compare.

George: You surprise me. But by temperament I am a man easy to surprise. I was born in Astonishment City, Oregon. What do they shout, down there in this paradise called Comodoro Rivadavia?

Toscannino: They have various shouts. Their folk shouts are much favoured. But I suppose that what really draws

the tourists are the grand old guild shouts. Sometimes a guild may have as many as four or five shouts, which have been handed down from mouth to mouth for many generations.

George: It sounds like an absolute utopia if one cares for shouting.

Albie: It's quiet as hell in the daytime.

Toscannino: You keep out of this. I'm telling this story.

George: What are these shouts? Can you give me an example?

Toscannino: I fear I haven't a very good shouting voice. It needs years of practice. But – the sheep-cheese-dealers' guild, for instance. They will shout, 'Sheep's cheese!' or 'Fresh from the ewe!', or 'Full of vitamins!' It's very beautiful.

George: It sounds a bit noisy. I mean, particularly in a crowded city . . .

Toscannino: Not a bit of it. You soon get used to it. In any case, you can rest up during the day, when sun rises and silence falls. And there are always pedlars moving through the night-time throng, selling gaily coloured ear-plugs.

George: There is a thriving ear-plug industry in Astonishment City, Oregon. We utilize over four hundred billion tons of plastic annually, and export to over one hundred and twenty countries all round the globe . . .

(*Exit left*)

Jill: They didn't say anything about speaking Welsh, did they?

Albie: You are a literal-minded young lady. Take your clothes off!

Jill: I presume you don't mean that literally?

Albie: Every word of it.

Jill strips. She has a beautiful body and a pleasing abundance of pubic hair. On her left breast is tattooed the name 'Astonishment City, Oregon'.

Albie: That's what really amazes me about the human race – half of them are female!

CURTAIN

A DELICIOUS CIRCLE

A treadmill in Lower Montreal, shortly after the coronation. Georgia *is working the treadmill, while her boy friend* Lars *feeds the moles.*

Georgia: I couldn't help overhearing that bedtime story you were reading your younger brother Mark last night. I thought it was rather unsuitable for a child of six.

Lars: But children of six are very fond of *moules marinières.*

Georgia: Not to that extent, surely!

Lars: Oh well, if you're going to argue ... (*Hangs himself*)

Georgia: Life is essentially tragic. When I woke this morning, I knew something awful was going to happen. No, that was yesterday.

Enter Ben Blackmale

Ben: Morning, miss, couldn't help overhearing what you were saying because I was listening out in the wings. By a coincidence, I myself also dreamed that I was walking with the king yesterday.

Georgia: What's that got to do with Lars's death?

Ben: The king is also fond of *moules marinières.*

Georgia: That remark could only possibly have meaning if the king was a boy of six.

Ben: Now don't you go working yourself up into a rage. He's a father of six. Not that I envy him in any way. I have two bouncing children myself – Anita, aged nine, and Bert, seven. We called him Bert because he was always allergic to strawberries. I work hard to support them – you know how expensive strawberries are. Life's a treadmill.

Georgia: (*stepping out of her treadmill*) That's a stupid remark. If life was a treadmill, then I would just have left

life in preference for Lower Montreal.

Ben: (*hanging head*) It was only a figure of speech. My old mother used to use it every day, and we never corrected her. 'Life's a treadmill', she'd say. She used to have to embroider erotic cushion covers for the Patagonian trade.

Georgia: So much for social history.

Enter Police Detective Sergeant Buenos Aires

Buenos: (*to Georgia*) Excuse me, miss, I wonder if you would mind looking at this photograph and telling me if you can—

Georgia: (*screams*)

Buenos: Sorry, wrong photograph. (*Produces another photo*) Could you tell me if you have seen a man looking like this.

Georgia: (*pointing at Ben*) It's he!

Buenos: (*going over to Ben*) Excuse me, sir, but I have a warrant for your arrest on a charge of erotic cushion cover smuggling between here and Patagonia. I also understand that you were born under the zodiacal sign Taurus.

Ben: No, I'm Ursa the Bear.

Buenos: Liar, there's no such sign. It's just a figure of speech.

Ben: So much for my attempts at disguise. (*Runs away*)

Buenos shoots him.

Buenos: I do hope you don't mind the bloodshed, miss.

Georgia: Not at all. If you want it, it's over there, behind the woodshed.

Buenos: That's the second lover of yours to die in the last half hour. You must be of a very phlegmatic disposition.

Georgia: As a matter of fact, I was born in Phlegmatica, Oregon – a city, incidentally, of some 7,544 inhabitants at the last count. I don't know if you have visited Phlegmatica but, as you enter the city, a large board proclaims: 'PHLEGMATICA CITY, Home of September Beans, Sage of Phlegmatica. Strangers Welcome'.

Buenos: (*scratching his head*) I've stayed in that city any number of times and I don't recall any such sign.

Georgia: So much for your powers of detection. Anyhow,

September Beans was my maternal grandfather, and a very maternal old man he was in his sawn-off caftans and white frilly drawers. He wrote an essay for the local paper every week for sixty-six years, besides a book of poems entitled 'Just Ordinary folk', published in a hardbound edition.

Buenos: Was that a collection of verse celebrating, mainly in common metre with a rhyme scheme *abab*, the virtues of dullness?

Georgia: It also had a sonnet or two, as I remember.

Buenos: Including one commencing 'Now charms the peristyle and now the arch'? I bought a copy of that little book in the drug store, and have treasured it ever since, but I still don't recall that godammed sign you mention.

Georgia: I didn't like you much when you first came on. I still think you are pretty stupid, as a matter of fact, but I am beginning to warm to you. Would you care to come in for a drink?

Buenos: I'm on duty, miss. Somewhere between here and Patagonia there are a awful lot of erotic cushion cover smugglers to apprehend.

(*Exits*)

Georgia: It's funny the people you meet. All add something to one's life-experience. Each one has that special something of his own, though I must say it's not very often they yield it. I'm lucky that I'm such an out-going person. I never let my troubles get me down. I never let my boy friends get me down. Still a virgin at thirty-three. Still, as long as I'm happy in my own way. I mean, life takes some figuring out. These are difficult times. There aren't so many treadmills left. People should take more care what they say to others – we're all very easily hurt. It's nice to be sensitive, but it doesn't do to be too sensitive. I try never to take offence if I can help it, although you have to stand up for your own rights. Really, it's a matter of striking a balance. Perhaps that's the secret of life. Or perhaps life hasn't got a secret. Everyone seems to think life has a secret, and they're disappointed when they never find out what it is; perhaps they'd be even more disappointed if they found that there wasn't a secret at all . . . It's very important not to become cynical as you grow older. I do still trust people, though I have been hurt quite often –

well, now and again. I was hurt when Lars hanged himself in a pique . . . I've forgotten now what the trouble was, it was something so petty.

Gee, they're going to come and ask me why Lars hanged himself and I'm not going to be able to remember. I'm going to look pretty silly! 'I've forgotten', I'll have to say. 'You can't have forgotten,' they'll say. They'll be furious – particularly Lar's wife, Meg. I'll just have to invent a reason. 'Lars couldn't recollect the sign outside Phlegmatica City', I'll say. But then that sounds a pretty trivial reason for suicide to anyone who doesn't know Phlegmatica.

Of course, if that nice detective's put on the case, he'll understand because he's been to Phlegmatica. But then I can't use that excuse on him because he'll recognize that it wasn't Lars but he himself who couldn't recollect the sign . . . What a nightmare of lies I am getting myself involved in. Maybe I should kill myself – that would solve everything.

On the other hand, why should I commit suicide just to please other people? I do believe that it is important to please other people, but there are limits. One shouldn't say so, but you only please other people for your own sake – I mean, like, you hope that by making yourself pleasing that they'll be keener to please you. It's the opposite to a vicious circle; it's a delicious circle. And there would be no point in pleasing other people if you weren't around to catch the benefit. It's a philosophical point. I don't know what to do. I've always said life was rather philosophical . . . My maternal grandfather said that too. If Lars had met him, Lars might still be alive now. On the other hand, if Lars were still alive, I might never have met that charming detective . . . Life is really a mystery . . .

CURTAIN

DISHONESTIES OF A LONELY FILLING STATION

A filling station outside a Patagonian city. Regina Blackmale *and* Sam Prenderghast *climb out of their car and whistle to the filling station* Attendant.

Sam: Can I have some gasoline.

Attendant: Better put your headlights on, sir. There's a solar eclipse in progress.

Sam: What do you mean, solar eclipse? Ever since I've been in Patagonia, there's been nothing but trouble. First my wrist watch broke, then Regina got a cold – now a solar eclipse. What do you get out of it?

Attendant: You like to buy sunglasses, sir?

Regina: Tell him how crowded the cities were, Sam. Tell him about how we had to share an apartment with some damnfool sheep-cheese dealer and his wife in Punta Arenas. Go on, tell him!

Sam: Stop nagging, you bag! He'd never believe us.

Attendant: Oh yes, I would. (*Removes wig*) Perhaps now you recognize me. I am that very sheep's cheese dealer you referred to. Even the erotic cushion cover trade failed in the last two months and my wife left me, so I had to take this miserable job.

Sam: A likely story! Where did your wife go?

Attendant: Lower Montreal.

Sam and Regina: (*unison*) But that's where we're going!

Attendant: You won't get far in this eclipse. Why not wait till it's over? It only lasts three minutes and fifty-one seconds. Meanwhile, let me tell you what pleasure it was to have you staying in my house. I know it wasn't palatial, but—

Regina: Palatial, my arse! It stank of sheep-cheese! A crummeir joint I never did see. Mind you, I don't blame you – you're just a native. I blame my stupid oaf of a husband here. 'Do we have to go to Punta Arenas?' I kept asking

him. 'Yes, we do,' he kept saying. I wanted to go to Comodoro Rivadavia – it's so much bigger and the shops are better, despite all the shouting at night, which – as you'd imagine – I just *loathe*.

Attendant: Look, lady, all the cities of Patagonia are crowded, one the same as the other. But that's no reason for you to knock the shouting in Comodoro Rivadavia. Didn't you ever hear the filling-stationmen's guild's cry at two o'clock in the morning? (*Shouts*) 'Gasolin-o! Nice and smelly! Gasolin-o!' Ah, beautiful . . .

Sam: Thanks, Mack, but no more local colour just now. We've got a long journey ahead, and, as you may have noticed, my wife is not in the best of tempers. Just fill me in on this eclipse, will you?

Attendant: (*producing booklet*) Buy this, sir. 'Complete Guide to Solar and Lunar Eclipses Between Now and Year Two Thousand, with Table of Equinoxes and an Appendix on the End of the World'. Only fifteen krapotniks.

Sam: You rogue! It's a forgery – you had it printed specially for this occasion. You Patagonians are all alike.

(*Enter* Police Detective Inspector Buenos Aires)

Buenos: Excuse me, sir, but I believe your name is Samuel Aniseed Penderghast, alias Aoscannino Scrubbs. I am a detective inspector and I wish to question you with regard to some erotic cushion covers missing from the ducal palace of Sarmiento, where they speak Welsh.

(*Exit* Sam *and* Regina, *running*)

Attendant: You nearly nabbed them then. (*Restores wig to head*)

Buenos: It's a long way to Lower Montreal on foot. I'll get them yet. And my thanks to you for your part in the affair. That eclipse was a brilliant idea. How did you manage it?

Attendant: (*looking up*) It's one of my old sombreros. The only difficulty was borrowing the cables I needed to moor it between here and the sun.

Buenos: You needed two more, did you? One looks fine to me. And I liked your shouting very much. 'Gasolin-o!' Is that authentic, by the way?

Attendant: Nowadays, to be frank, it is truly difficult to say

what is authentic. Tourism has spelt the death of the spontaneous, even in a remote land like our beloved Patagonia. But, yes, I learned the cry of the filling-station-men's guild from the lips of my old uncle Dives, who was himself born in Comodoro Rivadavia – whereas I was born in the cold and windy regions of the pampa de los Terromontes. But that's neither here nor there; besides, my uncle is dead. Allow me to sell you a copy of 'The Shouts of the Shouting Nights of Comodoro Rivadavia, with an Afterword on the Silence of the Days'. Only fifteen krapotniks.

Buenos: (*examining booklet*) You rogue, it's a forgery! I'll give you five Krapotniks.

Attendant: Done! (*Money changes hands*)

Black sedan enters forecourt. Lavinia Borg *steps out.*

Lavinia: Can you tell me how far it is to Punta Arenas?

Buenos: Punta Arenas is closed, madam, owing to overcrowding. Your best plan is to go back the way you came and turn left at Argentina.

Lavinia: I recognize you. Last night I had a melancholy dream. I dreamed I was playing a guitar beside an old stone well, and two birds alighted beside me. They chirped to the tune I was playing. Then I happened to glance down the well and there you were, drowning in perfect silence rather than interrupt the melody.

Buenos: (*scratching his head*) Did you fish me out?

Lavinia: I woke up with a terrible thirst. Then I ran to the bathroom and vomited. We had had some travelling friends to dine with us during the evening and they had brought some food which disagreed with me. I thought I would drive down to Punta Arenas today, where I understand the food is really good. So much for my personal history.

Buenos: To be frank, there's a food shortage down there.

Attendant: There's even a shortage of sheep's cheese.

Buenos: Come home with me, dear lady, and I will provide you with the meal of your dreams. I am a detective inspector, and consequently rather a hard case, but the sight of your beauty has softened me to such an extent that I am prepared to offer *moules marinières* and white wine in return for your company.

Lavinia: Would I have to sleep with you?

Buenos: Christ, you don't think I'd feed you *moules marinières* for nothing, do you? I'm not that simple! There are laws of hospitality, after all. Look, lady, I may be only a detective inspector but I have my feelings same as you, don't I? Of course you'd have to sleep with me

Attendant: You'd have to sleep with me, too; I live with him.

Lavinia: It's a deal. I warn you that I suffer from a disease that men usually find repellent, but that is no obstacle to me. I'm only slightly bothered by the thought that I dreamed you were drowned last night. Let's go.

(*All exit. Enter* Regina)

Regina: (*calling*) Sam! Sam! Where's the idiot gone? Jesus, we're back at this ghastly filling station again. At least that fool sheep-cheese dealer isn't here. We could maybe settle down right here and make the place cosy, sell gasoline, make ourselves a fortune.

(*Red sedan draws up in forecourt*)

(*Shouts*) Gasolin-o! Nice and smelly! Gasolin-o!

CURTAIN

MAESTRO

by GILES GORDON

THE PIANIST WALKED on to the platform to only a smattering of applause, the odd left hand banging the palm of the odd right hand, perhaps to keep warm in the cold hall, and keep the blood circulating in the body. Then the clapping stopped, the last set of palms ceasing to beat, vibrate, echo in the mind. He sat on the stool, pulled it and himself a little towards the instrument, then pushed the stool and himself back slightly. It may have ended up in precisely the position where it began. The gesture may have been less for physical comfort than for psychological reasons. How could I know? I neither knew the pianist from Adam nor was I sitting close enough to the platform to be able to observe the minutest movement. He shook his fingers, his hands, a few times, holding them above the keyboard as if shaking water off them and on to the instrument, anointing it with some essential lotion. His face, in so far as the profile was representative of the three dimensional visage, was motionless, rapt. It was reassuring to observe such childlike concentration in the expression of a man aged between thirty and forty.

He tilted his head a bit, towards the audience. Not to look at individual members of it, to meet eyes with eyes, but to indicate that he was ready to commence when they were ready for him to begin. His ear was cupped towards us, as if to catch any stray and unwelcome sounds, to absorb them silently before he began. Someone coughed, as if nervously challenged to do so by the angle of the pianist's ear and head, and the aggression implied. He waited for the man to get it over with, to cease coughing (no woman would cough in such an abandoned manner). Though the man who coughed had paid for his ticket, had paid to hear the man on the platform play, there was no question as to which of them

– pianist or member of the audience – was in command. The coughing fell away. There was a splutter, a stutter of coughing a few rows from the front but it was smothered nearly as soon as it began.

Once more the fingers were poised above the keyboard. The five hundred, six hundred people in the hall held their breath – all that indrawing of breath at the same time – their lives, for a second, a moment of time, a few seconds how long in clock time is unimportant. Their identities were suspended, missing, in limbo. They ceased, individually and collectively, to exist because they had brought so much intensity to bear on the situation. Then in the silence, into the silence rather than against it, his hand, his left hand, came down, his fingers then his right hand, the two hands, both of them, and music, the notes, the sounds floated away as I tried to listen, I was there to listen, in advance of listening I had paid to listen, I tried to listen, I concentrated on listening, the note, notes, sounds, sounds – stop, full stop, full point before I, after both of them, the first two notes, finger tips touching the keyboard, stop, oh Christ, this is, was, too much, relax, relax, back to the beginning, please, the fingers above the keyboard, the concentration, withdraw.

Look, he played the first note, with a finger – one of ten – on a key, white or black, no white, definitely white, of that I am certain. How do I know, sitting where I was, as far back as row M? I just know. But as I was relishing that note, mouthing it in the air, feeling its flavour, he played a second note. I didn't, at that time, want to hear it. My life, the chemicals contained within my body, my head – emotions, desires and intellect – couldn't at that moment accommodate the second note. The first still lived, had its being. The second note was neither more nor less significant in itself than the first but it followed so quickly upon the first that I couldn't think about it, in actuality, in the physical world, and in my mind's eye, I couldn't listen to it in its solitary glory. Yet the combination of the first two notes, the one after the other, the second immediately after the first, the two together to all intents and ... was, simply, devasting. Will that suffice, an adequate word to try to signify the exquisiteness of the sound produced?

If those two notes had been all, I might have grown to know them, to absorb them into my being, my knowledge and understanding of life, art. Mentally, I would have built

an open space around me and I would have listened to them, heard them again and again. They would have given me sustenance, fulfilled me. I would have listened, and heard. But, but, but, but, and more quickly than the first of those buts can be spoken, a third note followed the second, and a fourth the third, and the fingers were above the keyboard and they came down, kept coming down, and a fifth note and a sixth, seventh, eighth – stop, please, stop – and a ninth – stop, stop, stop – and a tenth – you're destroying it, the creation – eleventh, thirty-eighth, seventy-third, one hundred and – stop – first. Heavy, heavy breathing. Stop. Oh God. The waste. Stop. Maestro. Please. *Please.*

I was standing up in the hall, holding out my right hand and arm as if I were a traffic policeman. I was facing the pianist from thirteen rows back, and my companion was tugging at the hem of my jacket, pulling it with absurd force, trying to make me sit down, but neither her strength nor anyone else's would have been able to restrain me. And the hands, the fingers went on playing, the keys were touched, the notes oozed out, soared up and away, a confusion of sweetness and clarity, intensity and indistinctness emanating from the hands, the keyboard, the instrument. And in the hall, six hundred faces in serious, pedantic rows looked round and focused upon my face, and those behind me had to make do with the back of my head. They were, I could tell (my companion kept pulling, tugging my jacket), shocked, appalled, outraged at my behaviour but I could not concern myself with that, I could not care, I could not have the music ruined – nothing less – in this way.

My companion, with her hitherto free hand, seized one of the sleeves of my jacket and I wriggled out of the garment, then in my shirt sleeves thrust out my right hand in front of me again, begging the pianist to take notice of me, of my protest, begging him to stop and I was shouting at him, at least my mouth was open wide, opening and closing as if I were shouting, the lips parting and coming together slowly, as if the words were being projected across a great distance. And when I brought my lips together after expelling the words, the notes which hung in the air, about the hall, were not finding their way into my mouth, my head and my being. They were not concerned with me, and I wanted them to be. I needed them, they had to become mine.

The audience was increasingly menacing, between

clenched teeth they told me to shush, be quiet, shut up, desist, piss off, get out. One or two individuals were standing up, leaning in my direction as if they wished to do me physical harm. They made grotesque sounds, contorted and twisted their faces into ugly, improbable shapes. The ferocity, the venom, the near hysteria was frightening. Had I not been concentrating upon the pianist's fingers, the ravishment at the front of the hall, on the platform, very likely I would have been more alarmed and concerned than I was. No, I won't shush, I can't shush. Maestro, maestro, stop. My hands were now both over my ears, I couldn't bear to listen to another note, not one, I couldn't bear to have it forced into my hearing, have it waft through the air so that I couldn't avoid it. And he went on playing, as if unaware of my discontent, my unhappiness and despair, as if he alone was both making the music and listening to it. My appealing to him, the urgency and importance of my action, had somehow not penetrated to his person, though everyone else in the hall seemed aware of my presence.

Stop, I shouted, as if the veil of the temple was being rent, which in every sense it was. Around me, five, six hundred faces drew in breath, gasped, were aghast, understanding that the decline of the second Roman Empire was nigh, that the end of the world might well be at hand. Involuntarily I began to cry – certainly did more than snivel – a proper weep, not the way a grown-up is supposed to behave in public or even, ducky, in private, but I was in public and the notes were still being played, oh God, oh God, they were still being played, I had long, long ago, ages ago at the beginning of the world, lost count of how many notes there had been, and the pianist's hands, those ten fingers now surely beginning to become a little sticky, were still producing those sounds, that surfeit of beauty. Those notes that hung in the air for an instant, then soared, filled the room, the hall, as if birds each more beautiful than any previously created were – invisible to the human eye – flying around the hall yet reaching to their own heaven, oblivious to our, my, response. As soon as one was created it was snuffed out, softly smothered, even in the memory extinguished by another, and another, and on and on and. And there were, of course – *of course* – too many, it was intolerable, all this beauty being taken for granted, tastefully absorbed.

I shouted at the pianist (what more could I do?), but he

played on The notes, the bloody notes. I besought him to stop, to let me listen, even if no one else wanted to, to hear again those two, twenty, two hundred, two thousand notes, however many there were and had been, however few there were, to let me hear them individually, one by one. First one. Then another: after I had heard the first for as long as I needed to hear it, allowing my mind to obtain from it all it had to give, to feed upon it until I was replete, content. I wanted them, one by one, enshrined in marble – but no, I wanted them liquid, as notes, sounds, as themselves, not as replicas, oh no, no, no. They existed out of time, away from solidity. I couldn't listen to the next notes, the subsequent ones as I was still mourning the earlier ones, the first ones, the first one.

My companion, white with rage and embarrassment, was pulling at my shirt tail, whispering noisily to me, asking me what the hell I thought I was doing. If it wasn't clear to her, if she didn't feel at least something of what I felt, I doubted whether she was the girl for me. Five hundred, six hundred faces were looking at me – if looks could kill I was dead five hundred, six hundred times, ha – and I was standing there, tears pouring down my face, and if my mouth and ears could have cried, and my nostrils, they'd have cried as well. I was shaking my head, over and over again, all the time now, backwards and forwards like a metronome but not in time to the music, far, far too slow for that, and my sex was disappearing into my arse or through my navel, I wasn't clear of the direction or the purpose, it was unimportant. My spirit was endeavouring to leave my body. Stop, stop, maestro. The notes went on, spilled out. That my body was still in one piece, that I still understood that I had a mind, should not be held against me, should not be laid at my door. And the fingers, the two hands, were still – always – making the notes, the sounds, they were touching the keyboard; weren't they?

Did I then have my first moment of doubt? The fingers were moving up and down, touching the keys, black and white, striking them, yet I no longer, if I ever had, heard a sound, the faces were no longer looking at me, they were looking towards the front of the hall, to the piano and the pianist there. And his body, his movements were in control, his discipline was impeccable, yes, impeccable. Between pieces he would stand up, bow, leave the platform, return, sit

down again at the stool, play another piece, more notes. Wipe the sweat off his brow and fingers with a huge white handkerchief. Smile and bow a lot, and play again. The notes had undermined my equilibrium, destroyed my self.

They began again, I could hear them. *Could* hear them? Did hear them. Couldn't block them out. Stop, stop, stop, I shouted, shaking my head (shaking my head again, yes? I'd done it before?), crying, crying again, crying still. There's a limit to the amount of beauty the human frame can stand, once it begins to accept that what it is experiencing is, in its way, perfect. And the tears were pouring in streams down my cheeks, my naked body. For my clothes were shed without my having been aware of removing them, or of having had them removed by my companion or by anyone else. Not a button could I remember loosening. And I was crawling on the floor, I had adopted a crawling position that is, akin to a beast of the field or of the jungle, siren seduced by the notes, ravished from afar, and my genitals were beneath me, hanging down, dissolving, dissolved, they too affected by the shrinking of the universe. And the audience faced the front, the platform, appreciating the music. Appreciating it, I ask you. There were smiles, even of ecstasy, on some of their faces, and some had musical scores on their laps. My companion listened with a rapt, glazed expression. Neither she nor anyone else in the hall seemed aware of where I was, the state I enjoyed. Which was as well. Which was right; and said something, more than something, for the pianist and the music played.

And the bugger played on (he took another bow, applause, and played on), my torturer. The exquisiteness, the perfection, the expansion of human potential was intolerable. He was immaculate in evening dress, none of your jeans and tee-shirt. His face was expressionless, vapid; didn't he care? And I crawled towards him on my hands the floor was dusty) and knees (the boards were splintery) and I was getting nowhere, no nearer, and the notes kept coming – stop, stop, stop – and I realized that I wasn't moving or if I was the platform was moving away from me at the same speed at which I was approaching it and that to say the least was unlikely or at any rate I gave it the benefit of the doubt.

I acknowledged that I was too overcome to progress backwards or forwards and I remained in my monkey run

position, a beast in an alien land trying and failing to understand the code of the place. And the music squeezed out, sensuously, filled the air precisely, and I lowered my thighs and arms towards the ground without being aware of doing so, I lay flat on the boards, reaching down to their level. I didn't want to feel any more. I wanted to become inanimate. I beat the boards with my knuckles, my fists, but there was no sound, I made no effect. The music from the platform smothered and stifled my ludicrous gesture. My head shook, and I was no longer myself, I was no longer anyone, let alone someone. But as I could think so far, as I could rationalize the situation to that extent, was I in fact still myself, the self I had been or had become? Who was I? I must have become more than I was, entirely because of the notes, those sounds.

The music stopped. Again, or for the first time: I no longer knew or cared. The fingers, the hands were removed from the keyboard, the instrument. No new notes filled the air though all those which had sounded, had happened, packed my head, a jumble and jaggle of allusive noises, kaleidoscopically seen and experienced through a prism. Every left palm in the hall, except for mine and the pianist's, seemed to be striking every right palm. The man at the piano stood up, pushed back a little the stool upon which he had sat. He turned slightly to face the audience, bowed stiffly, as if it wasn't something he was accustomed to doing. The applause continued, there was the odd idiotic shout of 'Bravo' and 'Hurrah'. He bowed again, then nipped off the platform as if he were a mouse escaping to its hole. Almost as soon as he was away he was back, the applause continued as if it was being regulated for radio transmission. Hurrah, Bravo, and Hurrah again. He left the platform for the last time (being unable to take it with him, huh?) and the lights in the hall were dimmed. The audience began to leave, those of it which hadn't already shuffled away to catch trains, buses or in some cases taxis. The hall emptied.

A man, probably the caretaker, walked on to the platform in his shirt sleeves. He closed the top of the piano, banged down the lid. I was left in the hall, lying on the floor, on my belly at one with the dust. My companion hadn't even, before she departed, said good-bye, wished me well – or ill. If I had embarrassed her, I was sorry about that. But there's more to life than minor embarrassments. The caretaker

turned off the remaining lights in the hall, and went out. He hadn't noticed me, there on the floor, below the chairs, nor my clothes on one of the seats.

I was alone with the notes, every one that had been played. They had come to me, to envelop me. Or if that was asking too much, one of them, just one. I needed to concentrate upon it to my dying day. I began to cry again. Was it hopeless? Was it too much to ask? Couldn't I hear one note? Couldn't it become me, and me it? I heard a door bang shut, then there was silence again. Silence. Not a sound, no noise. Certainly no notes, no music. I had even stopped crying.

THE ILLUSIONIST

by GILES GORDON

ZINGARI COMBED HIS hair, all the while observing the effect in the mirror. It was really absurd to keep on combing it this way and that, shifting the parting a fraction to the left, to the right, his fingers moving a few strands of hair up or down, but he wanted to get it absolutely correct. Not because he was particularly vain, at least no more so than most men in his world, but because he needed his self-respect, he lived off it, and to him well groomed hair was part of it. He would have it right, so he would think, then he'd be irritated by a single hair which seemed out of place. He'd adjust the recalcitrant hair, and every time this happened it seemed to destroy the total effect so that he would have to start from scratch again. He worked on it for half an hour, quite oblivious to time passing, the world growing older. The time could be spent differently, but more usefully? Who was to say.

'You can't go on doing your hair for ever,' said Anna, one of the two women in the room. Her accent and the way she spoke the words suggested that she wasn't British.

He didn't reply, went on doing his hair. Anna and Sarah, a year or two younger than Anna, listlessly watched him. They'd nothing else in particular to do at the time. Sooner or later he would be finished. It didn't matter when. He didn't have to work today and neither did they. The three of them worked together though the two women did things on their own as well. He'd finish his hair before dark, before nightfall. They'd pass the evening together, in the same room. They might eat a little, and read, or think, or listen to the radio, or watch television, or drink, or talk. Even a combination of these activities, but it was unlikely that they'd talk much. They'd done their talking over

the years. They knew, the three of them, where they stood in relation to one another. If they did talk, it was unlikely that what was said would contribute anything new to their relationship. And at the end of the evening they'd go to bed, the three of them to separate beds, two of them in the same room, the third in another room. They never knew until they decided on any particular night when it was time for them to go to bed who would sleep in the room on his or her own. It varied from night to night, depending on who most wanted to be alone. Had they had three rooms each of them would have had a separate one. As it was, none of them could claim any of the rooms as his or hers.

Zingari abandoned work on his hair. He sighed. It never turned out to be as exact, as dramatic, as definitive as he imagined it would be. In spite of what he regarded as the grotesqueness of his features, whenever he began to comb his hair he believed that he would by the time he put the comb down transform himself, his image. That it never came out this way didn't worry him unduly. At least he had tried, made the most of what his mother or God had given him. Next time maybe he would achieve perfection.

He was wearing his maroon velvet suit with the patterns on it and a purple cravat. Why he had it on today, indeed why he was concerned with the state of his hair on a day when he wasn't performing, was unclear. All he was doing was contributing towards the earlier demise of his outfit, and a new one wouldn't come cheaply, not that the one he was wearing had. In fact, the tailor who had made it to Zingari's specifications had died a year ago, though Zingari did not yet know this.

He rubbed his hands together, a nervous rather than self-conscious gesture. For a man in his profession, he was in many respects lacking in self-confidence. Sarah, her legs in white fish-net tights, lay on the green velvet sofa. As well as the tights, she wore a sequined bra – hardly an outfit designed for the cold February day, or to inspire it. The flesh that showed, through the diamonds of the tights and elsewhere on her body, was extremely white, and seemed to have a flaky texture: it didn't look as if it sustained itself but, rather, had given up the struggle. Yet the woman appeared strong enough, even healthy in a spare sort of way.

She looked at Zingari. He raised his left eyebrow. He'd intended to lift both but the right one seemed impassive, as

if it had lost the will to continue functioning. Whether he was aware that only one eyebrow had risen Sarah didn't know, nor was she going to ask. The answer, whether affirmative or negative, would be an embarrassment. It would pose further questions, and then more. That was the trouble with questions, they led on to other things. Dark areas would be revealed that weren't worth revealing.

He bowed his head slightly, a tiny gesture of movement the chin pointed in the direction of his chest. The way he made the gesture indicated that there was complicity between them, that he accepted that she knew what was expected of her. It was a silent language not intended to exclude others; least of all Anna, certainly not her. That she wasn't watching was coincidental. Had she been looking, Zingari's gesture to Sarah would have been no different. Though there was more than an element of the time honoured, of custom about his gesture, he didn't look as if he necessarily expected Sarah to accede to his request. After all, they weren't working today, not that it was a Saturday or a Sunday.

Sarah moved her head slowly, to look at Anna sitting on the rocking chair near the window. She had been rocking backwards and forwards, looking out of the window but not appearing to be much interested in what met her eyes, what they tracked down. She wore a full length mauve dress, the colour of blackcurrant yogurt. It covered every part of her body except for her hands and what came above the adam's apple, the neck and the head.

She sensed that Sarah was turning to look at her, and she looked from the window, into the room to meet her eyes. She hadn't been thinking about it, anticipating the look, but as soon as Sarah wanted to look at her Anna was aware of the fact. They weren't sisters, not even particularly friends, except that working together for a number of years had made them know certain things about each other. There was understanding between them, and Zingari. Their eyes met, held for a few seconds. They made no attempt to hide their look from the man. He watched Sarah look up at Anna, and Anna move her head round on its neck to look at Sarah looking at her. No outward facial gesture, no change of features accompanied the looks.

Anna turned away again, to resume her rocking and looking out of the window, her observation of another world.

Their world when they were in it, part of it, but not now, when they were in their own room. Zingari had ceased to rub his hands together though he stood, like an opera singer in front of the curtain mesmerized by the applause he's received and no longer capable of acknowledging the audience's response, with his hands clasped together at chest height. Sarah stood up, and walked over to the long, thin, rectangular box, roughly the proportions of a coffin, supported on what at first seemed to be six legs. In fact there were eight, two sets of two at the centre, so close together that each set could readily be mistaken for one leg.

The box was painted scarlet, and appeared to be made of wood. Though there was so much paraphernalia in the room, as if it were an antique shop or a Victorian stage set with science fiction trappings, Sarah went straight towards this perhaps surprising piece of furniture. With little difficulty, she pulled the colourful coffin on stilts towards the middle of the room. Zingari moved a few steps in its direction but a little hesitantly, as if approaching an altar whose god he was apprehensive of. The box was, or appeared to be, bisected at the centre. There were two hinged lids, one covering one half, the other the other. Sarah opened one of the lids, and allowed it to hang down the side of the box. Zingari opened the other. The box was empty. Neither of them seemed to expect it to be anything else.

She looked at him, he again made his slight bowing gesture with his chin, and she climbed up into the box. It must have been four feet above the ground but her movement was quick, incisive. It was as if for the first time life meant something to her, was more than lethargy and waiting. Zingari supported her elbow with one hand, her other hand leant against a pile of books and a plaster Corinthian column. Inside, she lay down in the box, shifting her body until she was comfortable. She moved and behaved as if she occupied a luxurious bed.

'Won't you help?' said Zingari, turning his head in Anna's direction. There was so little conviction in his voice that he can't have believed that she would. Why then did he ask her? He could only be humiliated by the refusal. For the relationship between them to retain its equilibrium, was it necessary for him to have her put him down?

She shook her head slowly, in time with the rocking of the chair, the movement of her body, but didn't look round to

see if the gesture had been observed. She knew he was looking at her, and that he would know her response almost inevitably would have been what it was. She went on seeing what she saw or imagined she saw outside the window. Maybe she believed that something wondrous would appear which would justify her patience, her vigil, something so unexpected – so original – that she couldn't imagine what it might be. Which was the world that mattered, the one within the room or the one outside the window? She rocked, rocked.

Sarah lay in the box. From one end of it her head and neck protruded, from the other end her feet. Zingari lowered on to her, first around her neck, then around her ankles, what looked like pieces from mediaeval stocks. He banged them into place. They framed her limbs and seemed to make it impossible for her to move or be moved. He closed both lids, bolted them shut. Then he produced, from where they leant against a Jacobean wardrobe or a good imitation of one, two almost square sheets of thin metal. Without ceremony he inserted them into the middle of the box, through the centre of the body, the living person, into and through Sarah. There was perhaps an inch of space left between the two metal plates. Sarah lay there – presumably there was nothing else she could do. Her eyes were open and she blinked occasionally, as she would have done had she been lying on the sofa still, or standing up.

Then Zingari held a huge saw, almost as long as he was tall. It had dozens of teeth, and there was no doubt but that they were sharp. He stood by the centre of the box and began to saw through it. No one in the room said anything. Sarah was hardly in a position to look, Anna didn't look. A number of chips of wood and shavings flew from the box as it was cut into. He completed the task quickly, as if the wood had been primed to co-operate. Otherwise, even with as strong and sharp a saw as Zingari wielded, it would surely have taken him five minutes or more to divide the box in two. He put the saw down, leaning it against the wardrobe.

'What's the point of going through that when there's no audience?' said Anna, obviously not considering herself an audience, and not troubling to look round.

Sarah still blinked her eyes in the normal way. Though as alive as before, there was no question but that she was now in two pieces.

'It's not as if you've just discovered how to do it,' Anna added, as Zingari hadn't responded.

'I just wanted to do it,' he said. 'My mind was working on certain problems.'

'Problems?' said Anna. 'That's a new one. What kind of problems?' She shot her head round quickly to look at him as soon as she had stopped speaking. Her eyes searched his face, completely ignored Sarah.

'Oh, nothing. Nothing of any interest. Private problems.'

Her features tensed and froze, her lips puckered. She turned away from Zingari, still not taking in a view of Sarah, severed in her severed box. She peered out of the window, ruthlessly.

Zingari seemed unaware of her annoyance, or chose to ignore it. He smiled down at Sarah, encouragingly.

'Ready?' he said.

Inside her body, her head, she nodded, her mind assented, though because her head was locked in position she gave no outward indication of having heard the question.

With both hands, his large palms clutching the lower half of the box, he pulled it away from the top half. He drew it towards the door of the room but not so close that, had the door been opened from without, it would have struck the box, the lower part of Sarah's body. The room wasn't particularly big though all the stuff in it made it seem smaller than it was. The two parts of the box, Sarah's torso and her legs, were about ten feet apart.

'I never want to sign another autograph as long as I live,' said Zingari, quietly, unaggressively.

Anna relaxed her facial muscles. She didn't dislike the man. She didn't feel anything about him.

'O.K.,' she said, almost soothingly. 'All you have to do is tell them. They only expect you to do it because you've always done it.'

'You don't think some of them come just to get my autograph? Because they know I'll sign my name for anyone who's prepared to wait for it?'

'What, and not to watch the act? No, of course not.'

'But my autograph is the only positive thing those kids take away with them from the show.'

'Oh, come off it. They see what they see, or what they think they see. They only want your autograph *because*

they've seen you do what you do, or not as the case may be. Without having seen you at work, the autograph would be meaningless to them, worthless. They wouldn't even want it. Don't you agree, Sarah?'

Sarah agreed but said nothing. Neither part of her moved.

'Here I am, getting older every year, and nothing to show for it except my signature on thousands of programmes. It's ludicrous,' said Zingari.

'You know you enjoy it,' said Anna, starting to rock again but looking at him.

'Yes, I enjoy it. I suppose I do. Some times more than others. But I'd like people to . . . oh, accept me as I really am. The adults in the audience don't *believe* what they see. They think it's all done with mirrors, false bottoms, trap doors, double boxes, substitutes. They're no longer surprised by the improbable, they just assume it hasn't happened, that it's all . . . an illusion. That's the word they like to use.'

Anna couldn't answer that. She knew what he said was true. But every man is an artist, she remembered her father once telling her, and how many are permitted to bear the label? Certainly not the grocer, the accountant, not even the teacher or the piano tuner. Those permitted by society to believe themselves artists are living an illusion. It makes it possible for them to avoid facing up to the real world, the world of mundane, routine responsibilities where money has to be found to buy food, to pay the rent, to clothe the children. At least Zingari, and for that matter Sarah and herself, had no immediate dependants, though this was not consciously by choice.

Anna gave a sharp shake to her head. She paused, in her mind, her train of disparate thought. She didn't know what she was thinking, she'd no right to assume things about Zingari and Sarah. They were themselves, their lives were their own. At least, she supposed, up to a certain point.

'No more autographs, then?' said Zingari, wearily, as if it didn't matter to him one way or another yet both women knew that it did, desperately. He needed to prove to himself by writing his name repeatedly, by permitting his name – not merely printed by a cold, anonymous machine – to enter and remain in the homes of many of the thousands and thousands of people who watched him at work, that he existed,

that he wasn't merely a figment of his own imagination, or of theirs. But then he remembered that he had no imagination. Only his audiences had that, and one audience might comprise five hundred people: they couldn't all imagine him, could they? And in the same way? It was *his* life that was rational, logical, ordinary. If he allowed himself to indulge in flights of fancy he wouldn't, for instance, be able to put Sarah together again.

'If that's what you want,' said Anna. 'No more autographs.'

She knew that he had reached a watershed in his life, and she knew that Sarah would realize this as well. He was – willingly, voluntarily – discarding his greatest prop. A prop of his own making, no one else's. And yet he could still be himself, become himself; and continue to exercise his skills. He looked at Sarah, at the half of her with the head, at what he had done to her. There she was, in two parts of the room, in two parts. Oh, maybe it was alright, maybe he could go on. He didn't want to get another job. He wasn't trained for anything else. What could he do?

He pushed the half of the box containing her feet and legs towards the half of the box with her head and the remainder of her body, and brought them together. He made certain they were perfectly aligned. Then he undid the stocks-like pieces at each end, allowing her neck and ankles to move. Next he removed the two metal plates from the centre of the box, first one, then the other. He opened the two lids, simultaneously, one with each hand. Inside the box Sarah began to move her limbs, to assemble her identity. She lifted herself up on her elbows, and started to climb out. Zingari helped her down. Standing on the carpet, she looked at her body not to see that she was in one piece – she knew that she was – but to check if sawdust or shavings were on her. Then she walked to the sofa, unintentionally arranging herself in the position she had previously occupied.

Zingari walked across to the mirror. His hair seemed a bit out of place. He began to comb it. Anna sensed Sarah move her head to look at her, perhaps only to see if she was still looking out of the window. Anna turned round to look into the room, to meet Sarah's eyes. Their eyes held, their lips smiled a little. Zingari went on combing his hair.

NARRATIVE OF MASKS

CHARLES PARTINGTON

"The skin peeled off me every morning. My sister used to get a fire shovel full of skin each morning out of my bed."

WILLIAM DOBELL

PRIDING HAD LONG since abandoned trying to rationalize why he continued seeing the psychiatrist. Dr. Dattas for his part had realized several months ago that he was incapable of helping his younger patient in any medical capacity. Yet illogically their meetings continued.

Obviously they found each other interesting. Unfortunately friction existed between them.

Dr. Dattas had introduced a group therapy, convinced that wider personal contact and the sharing of problems would bring about an easing of tensions in his patients. Priding however was convinced that Dattas had instigated the group sessions solely to discomfort him. There was, Priding reflected, obviously more than a suspicion of the sadist in the man. There could be no other explanation.

Priding found the other members of the group nauseating, their revelations embarrassing. The latest session, that same afternoon, had been the worst. It was an experience Priding was determined never to repeat. Now he sat in Dr. Dattas' office and waited.

'You've seen this, of course?' The psychiatrist threw a newspaper on to Priding's lap as he entered the office. It was folded open on a photograph of Priding's wife.

'Yes.' Priding barely glanced at the paper. He was being deliberately difficult. Dattas pretended not to notice.


owers. Each bust
s, raises, lowers.
● Wais widens, shortens, lengthens.
Hips widen, narrow, raise, lower.

'Dianne must be making rapid progress at Jodrell Bank to rate an article in the *Observer*.'

'Meteoric.' Priding yawned. The psychiatrist usually read *The Times*, a publication Priding deplored.

Dattas chuckled, his chins wobbling. Priding watched them, fascinated. There was a moment's silence.

'I was speaking to your wife on the telephone yesterday,' Dattas admitted at last. 'She sounded upset.'

'She told you why of course.' Priding had known this conversation was bound to occur sooner or later. He was resigned to the inevitable.

'She's upset because you went ahead and bought the house in Knutsford without consulting her first.'

'She has seen the house.' Priding reminded him quietly. 'When we viewed the house she said she liked it.'

Dattas sounded slightly exasperated. 'I don't doubt that. But you should still have consulted her before reaching a final decision. There were other properties she wished to look at in the area. I must agree with her, you acted extremely impulsively.'

Priding groaned inwardly. For eight years now he had been waiting to buy this house. Impulsively? Priding struggled to maintain an attitude of relaxed indifference. If only his left eyelid wouldn't insist upon trembling.

Dattas studied him, sensing the tension. He tapped his fingers irritably on the desk top. 'It might be sensible to reconsider, to discuss the purchase with Dianne. If you agreed, I'm sure I could arrange for the transaction to be suspended on medical grounds, until you'd both had time to think about it.'

'I've already thought about it.'

Dattas reached a painful decision. 'I've been speaking to your solicitor too.'

'What did he have to say?'

'He believes you paid an inflated price. I understand he urged you to have the house valued but you wouldn't hear of it. Now taking your mental condition into consideration there would seem to be sufficient justification for . . .'

'Before you say something you might regret, I suggest that you read this.' Priding placed a sheet of foolscap paper on the psychiatrist's desk. He sat down again quickly. He was beginning to feel sick.

Dattas looked at the vaguely familiar heading with suspicion. 'What is it?'

'A summarized report from a colleague of yours. I took the precaution of seeking his professional opinion on my condition. It seems I suffer from occasional periods of depression and suggests that I am of a highly sensitive nature. Nowhere does the phrase "diminished responsibility" occur.' Priding smiled knowingly. 'Of course that's one recompense for being hypersensitive. It does allow certain insights.'

The trembling in his left eye had ceased. Unfortunately it hadn't disappeared. It reappeared in his lower lip.

'Still there's one reason Dianne should be pleased I bought the house.' Priding reflected.

Dattas looked up from the report. 'And what's that?'

'I had to sell my Heth paintings to help buy it.' There were tears in his eyes as Priding left the psychiatrist's offices in King Street and stumbled his way towards the teashop.

The drive leading up to the house was a ruin of collapsed macadam that jarred the front wheels of the car, sending tremors of protest along the steering column. Rhododendrons hedged the path and the dried out evening air seemed alive with bird calls and insect buzzes.

After parking the car, Priding stood watching the daylight drain out of the sky. Shadows gathering beneath the trees spread outwards and the amber lights flickering on along the nearby Macclesfield road added an unnatural pallor to the landscape. The darkness brought no release from the heat.

Walking towards the house, Priding stared in the direction of Jodrell Bank. Its red aircraft warning lights outlined the huge disk. Odd, he thought, how in twilight things appear closer than they actually are.

Dianne's last-minute telephone call had prepared him for the silent empty house. She had sounded more breathless than apologetic. A situation had developed at the telescope and she was needed. There was no one else available. The telephone had clicked on to its receiver at the other end and Priding had found himself listening to a dead line.

Inside the house he searched unfamiliar walls for the light switch. After a moment's fumbling his fingers closed upon it. Instantly the hall was filled with light from the naked

bulb. Behind, spilling beyond the open doorway, his shadow stretched distorted into the darkness.

The telephone call annoyed him. Why tonight? Was this an indication of her feelings? A protest against the house, or an actual emergency at Jodrell Bank? It was a question of interpretation. And the odds were against her. Priding could almost find it amusing. For an intellectual her deceptions were appallingly transparent. She should at least have allowed a measure of uncertainty.

His footsteps echoed along the uncarpeted corridor. His thoughts full of Heth, it was some moments before the absence of furniture registered. What had happened? Had there been a delay with the removal company? Priding dismissed the idea as unlikely. Even in her present mood Dianne would have found it impossible not to mention such a development.

However, despite an unavoidable chaos the kitchen at least appeared fully furnished. Priding closed the door behind him. The familiar objects imparted a distinctly comforting feeling. For the first time the house felt like home.

Dianne had prepared a salad. He ate without enthusiasm. The oppressive heat, the hurried lunch which had ruined his digestion, either of these would have been sufficient to take the edge off his hunger. His lack of appetite was due, however, to a barely admitted excitement, realization that at last he owned the house Heth had lived in it less than ten years ago. Priding was sure that now the intangible elements which had masked Heth's last months of existence would fall into place for him.

The kitchen window looked on to the rear of the house. He opened it and looked out into the darkness. A faint smell of pine drifted across from the copse which marked the end of the garden.

Priding found himself thinking of Enis, Heth's only source of inspiration. No photographs existed of her. Priding knew her face only through the artist's canvasses. Suddenly she seemed very real to him.

Priding turned his thoughts to Heth again, and the hope that something recognizable would still cling to the fabric of the house even after a period of nearly ten years. It was somehow impossible not to believe that a man like Heth

could live in a house and fail to impregnate his presence on the bricks and in the interstices.

A far off murmur of traffic came from the Macclesfield road. Priding stood quite still allowing impressions to wash over him, thinking. After a while he closed the window, pushing the image he had formed of the man to the back of his mind. He felt tired. He made his way up the unfamiliar stairs, searching the empty bedrooms until he found the one containing their bedroom suite. He slept.

Something had wakened him. He lay half-way between sleep and waking, momentarily unsure of his surroundings, his mind confused with dream images.

There was the sound of a car engine throbbing quietly somewhere below, and voices, Dianne's and someone's he almost recognized. Brian's? Priding wasn't sure. It had been a long time.

The voice called 'Good night' and Dianne made an unintelligible reply which brought laughter. The engine roared and a strip of light from the headlights appeared under the bedroom door, ascended the far wall, then vanished as the car turned down the ruined drive.

Priding heard Dianne's footsteps approaching along the gravel path. He heard her open the front door and pause briefly before entering. He listened as she walked steadily down the corridor towards the kitchen.

Sleep dragged at his mind as the minutes slipped past. He waited, eyelids closing, drowning in the warm darkness of the room. Despite himself, he was asleep again before she climbed the stairs to their room.

Priding awoke to bright sunlight. Dianne had already left the bed. He could see the outline of her head on the rumpled pillow beside him. He made his way to the bathroom, washed and shaved, then went downstairs.

Priding was prepared for a tense silence as Dianne made it quite apparent that her presence in this house was not of her choosing. Her periods of aggressive silence were more wearing than any verbal exchange. Knowing how she felt about the house, he entered the kitchen in no doubt about what to expect.

She met him with a smile.

'I'd almost given you up,' she laughed. 'I was coming to wake you. Breakfast's ready.'

Priding nodded and sat down at the table, confused. Dianne placed a plate of fried bacon and tomato before him. Automatically he picked up his knife and fork. He looked up at her, studying her face. 'I must have been tired. I haven't slept that deeply in weeks.'

Dianne nodded, poured out two cups of coffee and sat down beside him. 'The house must be good for you then.' She said it lightly and without malice. She was behaving as though all those furious arguments they'd had since Dianne had discovered the house was a fait accompli had never happened. Dianne was not a creature of impulse. If her attitude had changed towards the house, it should have been gradually. There should have been indications.

Priding stopped eating as the image of Dr. Dattas formed in his mind. Could he have anything to do with this apparent reversal in Dianne's disposition? Had they both agreed that under the circumstances the best policy would be acceptance of the situation?

Dianne noticed the involuntary shaking of his head. 'Something wrong?' she asked, sipping her coffee.

'I was just wondering what had happened to the rest of the furniture. We can't go on living in one bedroom and the kitchen for ever,' he replied blandly.

'I had a brainwave,' Dianne explained. 'I asked the removal men to store the rest of the furniture in the cellar. It's quite dry down there. It shouldn't come to any harm and it will be out of the decorators way while they're working. You know how things get scratched or chipped, or have paint spilled on them. As each room is finished we can have the furniture brought up. Well?'

Priding nodded, pushing his plate away. 'Sounds fine,' he admitted. Though he wouldn't be sure until he'd had an opportunity to inspect the cellar for himself.

Later that day Dianne took the car to go shopping in Macclesfield leaving Priding alone in the house.

Left to his own devices, Priding wandered about the house, inspecting all, of the rooms, looking curiously in the cupboards and recesses, ascending briefly into the attic. He

noticed the dust and the faded old-fashioned wallpapers, the dull paintwork.

He stood at windows of the upper floors, looking down on to the rear garden. His thoughts turned to Heth again. By living in this house, Priding hoped to reach an understanding of the man and his work. Interpretation of style and content was not the key to Heth's art. The intellectuals had discovered that much. Understanding was the key. That was the only way.

The sprawling contours of the rear garden were at odds with the carefully landscaped lawns at the front of the house. There was even a small pool. He hadn't noticed it before. It was located some distance from the house and served no aesthetic or practical purpose. Intuitively he knew Dianne would dislike it.

Something tickled the back of his hand. He looked down and noticed that where the window-pane met the frame a hair was trapped in the peeling paintwork. A long black hair. He stared at it in disbelief, realizing immediately who it had belonged to. Enis, it had to be one of hers!

Taking care not to break it, he eased the hair away from the frame folding it gently into his handkerchief. His hands trembled.

Priding recalled a locket in Dianne's jewellery box. It had a fine gold chain and the detail on the locket face was indecipherable with age. Priding placed the handkerchief containing the strand of hair into his pocket. Dianne would never miss the locket, he decided.

The cellar was dark and the beam from his torch inadequate. Priding hadn't really wanted to go down into the cellar that day but he was concerned about his collection of books. Dampness would be ruinous.

Keeping hold of the loose handrail, he negotiated the worn stone steps, descending on to the flagged cellar floor.

The furniture and the boxes containing his books had been wrapped in grey dust sheets, the familiar shapes taking on disturbing aspects in the dim glow from his torch.

He inspected the walls, ceiling and floor of the first cellar, testing with his free hand for signs of dampness in the rough plaster. He went as far as his dying torch would allow, discovering only small patches of the moulds which exist in

damp and darkness. His books would be safe in the cellars for a limited period. Satisfied, he climbed into the daylight.

Beyond the garden the open fields of Cheshire's farm belt stretched into the horizon. High in the brilliant cloudless sky the sun shimmered the hanging air, reducing far off objects to trembling blurs. Priding walked slowly around the garden.

The pool was an uneasy circle thirty feet in diameter. Its surface was almost overgrown with aquatic plants. An indeterminate area of cracked and drying mud ran down to the water's edge, indicating how much the pool had shrunk in the persisting dry spell. Iridescent dragonflies darted in the still air and the humming of insects filled Priding's ears.

As he gazed at the water, he began to realize that no mere caprice had directed his wandering steps. There was an odd quality about the pool. He sensed that it had a strong attraction for him. While being aware of the obvious implications he still found the dark waters fascinating. He was charmed by the paradox.

Gradually Priding became aware of a temporal disturbance, a decaying hesitation in which the blurred echoes of reality flowed and churned. Indistinct images struggled for recognition, striving to reform the chaos into patterns and concepts more easily assimilated by the psyche. His mind enmeshed, Priding instinctively fled from the pool, to lie trembling in the weed choked grasses, blank-eyed and irrational. Shreds of unease still clung to his mind when later he left the garden and walked towards the house.

The rest of the morning was spent in restless conjecture. He resisted the impulse to return to the cellar and seek out his copy of Heth's third autobiography. He could explore certain parallels later. It was important for now that his mind remain clear. Reading Heth was always an oblique experience.

That something had occurred beside the pool was beyond question. Priding however recognized the problem. Had it been hypostatic or psychosomatic? Without evidence or a secondary observer any observation on his part must remain

theoretical. Though as for the latter, after his encounter with Dr. Dattas' group therapy sessions, he preferred to rely on his own perceptions.

In the afternoon Dianne returned from Macclesfield. If she noticed his withdrawn expression she made no comment.

After a late lunch, Priding engaged a part-time gardener to look after the grounds. Dianne wasn't convinced that Priding had made a wise choice, however she refrained from advertising her doubt. She did not wish to appear prejudiced.

Several times during lunch, Dianne had caught glimpses of the man moving between the trees opposite the french windows. Once his face had appeared, studied the house, then vanished.

Dianne didn't like it.

She suggested that there was something unnatural in the man's behaviour. Priding explained that he was probably reluctant to interrupt their meal, that he would come over when they had finished eating.

When he did approach the house, Dianne's trepidations increased. The man was a hunchback.

During the discussion that followed, Dianne said nothing. While Priding suggested hours and payment. Mr Stallard smiled and nodded agreeably. Her expression, as Mr. Stallard disappeared into the trees again, remained unaffected by his manners. Why did they have to employ a hunchback, it asked?

Priding pretended not to notice. There was nothing to be gained in explaining that Stallard had been Heth's gardener and confidant for the three years before his death.

Priding straightened, wiping his face with a damp handkerchief. He stared inquisitively towards the house. There was still no sign of Dianne. What was she doing on that telephone, he wondered?

Some yards away Mr. Stallard effortlessly worked a sickle against the high grass, his face expressionless. Between them

both, Priding using the more conventional garden shears, they had managed to clear perhaps a third of the front lawn.

Once Priding had turned to catch Stallard watching him. The look in his eyes had been unmistakable. Priding knew then that they were to be intimates. He turned back to cutting the grass with a savage elation.

Throughout the afternoon his thoughts had continually returned to one subject. Heth and the hunchback. Exactly what had their relationship been? Stallard had been more than Heth's gardener, more even than his confidant. This Priding was sure of. A rapport had existed between them, bonding them together while isolating them from others. Priding believed that no one had been closer to Heth than Stallard.

Priding gazed at the house. Dianne was still talking on the telephone. Thoughtfully he traced the thin gold chain hanging around his neck. His fingers rested on the locket containing Enis' strand of hair. He turned and spoke to Stallard.

'You've worked in these gardens before, haven't you?'

The hunchback nodded, his face expressionless. 'Yes, several years ago.' He made as though to return to cutting the grass.

'You do recall your previous employer?'

'Yes, I remember him.'

'It was Heth, wasn't it?' It was the first time Priding had spoked the name in this place.

The hunchback sighed, appearing to study him for a moment. The sickle hung motionless from his gnarled fingers. There was a look in his eyes Priding found hard to decipher. Was it laughter? Did Stallard find some strange humour in that name?

An age passed. They stood looking at each other, unmoving in the hot sun. Priding became aware that the hunchback's lips were moving. The man was speaking almost in a whisper, repeating Heth's words. There could be no mistaking their origin, but for once in his life Priding could make no sense of them.

Standing there in the garden they formed a tableau into which reality penetrated with difficulty. The ritual continued and Priding began to feel apprehensive.

Then suddenly Dianne was calling through the open

french windows, the telephone cradled against one ear, waving for him to come over.

'That sounds fine,' she was saying as Priding entered the house. 'Yes of course, I'd love to. Eight-thirty then.' Dianne put the telephone down and smiled at him. In the distance Stallard had returned to his gardening. Priding stood near the windows, watching.

'That was Pauwels,' Dianne explained. 'I've had an invitation.'

'Oh,' Priding said absently, 'I always thought he maintained a distance?'

'He does usually.' She appeared very self-satisfied.

'An aberration then, or a reassessment?' Even through the thick glass Priding was sure that he could see the hunchback's lips moving.

'There's a meeting once a month in the annex of the Macclesfield Public Library.' Dianne's finger's explored the telephone. 'I've known about them of course, everybody does. But it is a select group. I didn't expect to be included so soon.'

'Liar.' He smiled.

She caught sight of a movement amongst the trees. 'Has Mr. Stallard finished then?' The distaste was still apparent.

'For today, dear. He'll be back.' Priding closed the french windows. 'When is this meeting of yours?'

'Tonight.' She looked at him helplessly. 'I'm afraid you'll be left on your own again.'

Priding stood in the darkness listening to the dying roar of the car travelling away from him down the Macclesfield road. Even after the last reverberations had ebbed into the night, he stood listening, conscious of the silence and the empty fields beyond the garden.

He stared restlessly at the brightly lighted hall, realizing that he didn't want to return to the house just yet. It was cooler outside, and the shadows in the garden held more appeal.

He walked around the side of the house, his shoes crunching on the gravel, then whispering in the grass. Time dragged

and slowed, but his pulse raced. Strange impressions flooded across his mind in the darkness. The power to reason deserted him. For a long time he walked beneath the shadow-held trees.

Moonlight fading and glimmering in the waters of the pool impinged on his retina. He blinked his eyes waking as if from a dream. Unknowingly he had waded into the water up to his knees. He experienced no surprise. Causal motivation held no interest for him at that moment. Tactile sensations were the only reality.

He began to take off his clothes, experiencing for the first time in years a delicious freedom, as if the removing of his clothes had signalled a stripping away of his problems and unacknowledged fears.

He moved deeper into the water, at last floating freely amongst the reeds and lily-pads.

Drifting in the warm waters be began to lose hold of his perceptions. Not sleep, but a state of consciousness cushioned against physical stimuli in which the interval between one pulse beat and the next might be the measure of eternity or the span of a single thought, a moment or a millennium.

Images and illusions washed around in his mind, mere silhouettes of thoughts, obscure and undecipherable but too insistent to be ignored. The alien character of these impressions gave way to a single strengthening image, a shadowy open-mouthed cave surrounded by riotous vegetation. Drawn by an irresistible force it seemed that he penetrated the opening and was immediately aware of a far off subterranean throbbing, a pulsing roar that trembled every muscle in his body and quivered even the walls of the cave. He could find no way out and the heat was growing intolerable. The strange momentum carried him further into the cave which was now so narrow that he could barely move his arms. The throbbing in the walls increased until his whole body was pounding in sympathy with the recurring spasms. There was a sudden release, a moment of violent physical agony during which a face grew out of the chaos, a face with haunted eyes and a strange desire on her face, Enis! Then

Priding was screaming, again and again.

He opened his eyes and knew immediately what had happened. He was trembling violently and the water of the pool did nothing to wash away the sweat that poured from his limbs. He stood up, struggling awkwardly to place his feet in the mud on the bottom of the pool, searching the water around him, looking for the semen he had ejaculated.

He saw it, a protoplasmic glimmering, sinking into the depths of the pool. Already it was beyond his reach. He stared at it for a moment, then gripped by a gnawing irrational fear, he turned and waded towards the bank.

It was six days before Priding entered the garden at the rear of the house and visited the pool again. During that time he was occupied with arranging his business affairs in Manchester. He frequently caught sight of Stallard working in the gardens, but somehow Priding managed to see very little of him. Their meetings, when they occurred, extending to a smile or at most a word about the unusual weather. Nothing further was said about Heth.

The pool with its nuances of unease was deliberately avoided by Priding. He refused to consider the problems it posed.

There had been an odour about the house for several days when Dianne finally decided that it originated from the pool. She insisted that Priding should instruct Stallard to do something about it. Priding promised that he would, although he wasn't sure what could be done about the smell. The next morning it was worse than ever, and Priding could ignore it no longer. He left the house and walked in the already hot sunshine towards the pool.

The water level had dropped. A large area of drying mud indicated how much evaporation had taken place during the continuing heat wave. Flies, gnats and brilliant dragonflies swarmed over the exposed mud. Water-lilies, their colour bleached by the sun, wilted and rotted. Only the moon-daisies seemed to be thriving in the dry heat.

Though stronger nearer the source Priding hardly noticed the smell, for his attention was drawn to a partly exposed structure in the centre of the pool. Perplexed, he stood contemplating the object. He recalled his last visit to the pool and found the sequence of events disturbing. But such conjecture was admittedly irrational. He laughed and dismissed the idea.

Stranded water plants adhered to the few inches of the structure protruding above the surface, making it impossible to determine its nature. Avoiding the mud, Priding walked carefully around the pool, hoping that a different angle would reveal more detail. He estimated that if the rate of evaporation remained constant another week should expose sufficient for him to determine the object's shape.

Apart from emphasizing its oddness, his circumnavigation revealed nothing new. He fingered his lips in vexation, staring at the mud. Apparently he could either wade out for a closer inspection or resign himself to waiting for the water level to drop further. Neither alternative seemed acceptable. It was then that he noticed someone else had been there before him.

There were footprints in the mud. Priding knew who they belonged to. Stallard's unfortunate condition imposed an instantly recognizable gait on his stride. Priding studied the erratic circling footprints thoughtfully. New avenues of speculation opened with the knowledge that the hunchback found the object in the pool disturbing. Now he was even more anxious to discover what the water was concealing.

In the distance a farm tractor disturbed the silence of the morning, the noise of its engine driving a group of crows from a nearby spinney. He listened to the tractor as the birds wheeled and cawed disgustedly overhead. Suddenly he knew what he was going to do about the pool.

Priding had already agreed to drive into Knutsford that day and collect a number of things from one of the shops. To Dianne's list Priding mentally added an item which, had she known about it she would have found most puzzling.

The decorators had arrived when Priding returned from Knutsford. Dianne was running round trying to help them in any way she could. She was obviously eager to have the house finished and the furniture brought up from the cellar. No doubt she was already planning a housewarming, with her colleagues from Jodrell Bank in attendance.

It was late afternoon before Priding could direct his attentions to the object lying in the boot of his car. It took him longer than he expected to erect the water pump. He had been assured that the device was highly efficient and that the hoses were simple to attach. In practise it took longer than Priding had anticipated. By the time the pump was ready to begin draining the pool it was growing dark.

A slight breeze had sprung up rippling the previously placid surface of the water. In the copse the trees swayed. The lights had come on in the house some time ago and for the second time Dianne was calling him into dinner. Priding's finger rested lightly on the button which would start the pump motor.

A strange vacillation gripped him. He foundered in indecision, his hesitation springing from an inner conviction that events were shaping beyond his control. The madness that had destroyed Heth's brilliant mind seemed to be gathering with the shadows and the improbable stories circulated about the disappearance of Enis were suddenly believable.

Appalled at his own fear, and only too aware of what Dr. Dattas would have made of his reaction, Priding stabbed savagely at the start button. The motor burst into life. Instantly the hoses began throbbing as a stream of dark water gushed out over the parched earth, soaking down into the ground.

For a moment Priding stood watching the flow of water. He was gripped by a desire to stay and watch for however long it might take for the pump to empty the pool.

The water ran away into the twilight, streaming down a slight incline away from the house to be sucked into the earth. There was no indication yet that the water level was dropping. It was too soon. But out in the centre of the pool, the water lilies began a slow circling, orbiting the submerged hose in anticipation.

Priding turned away. There was really no point in staying. It would soon be too dark to see anything, and no doubt Dianne was growing impatient.

As he walked towards the house, the steady beat of the pump echoed in his ears.

Priding lay in the hot room, conscious that something had awakened him. Dianne breathed gently beside him, invisible in the darkness. The silence was intense. For long seconds the answer evaded his sleep filled mind. Then it came to him. The pump had stopped.

He left the drowsy warmth of the bed and walked over to the window, a dim rectangle of light looking out across the gardens. Sensing his absence, Dianne moaned uneasily in her sleep. Priding stared into the night. Either the pool was now empty, triggering the automatic cut-off, or the pump had become clogged with debris. He studied his wristwatch in the faint light from the window. Two thirty. Surely it was still to soon? Then the steady beating of the pump came echoing across the darkness. It had started again. But how?

The moment of blank disbelief vanished in sudden understanding. Priding knew who was out there tending the pump.

Resisting an impulse to run out into the night, Priding returned to his bed. Instinctively he understood that Stallard would want to be alone. At least until the pool was emptied.

At dawn, from the window overlooking the rear garden, Priding saw briefly through a rolling ground mist what the pool had been concealing. Shallow tracts of water glistened on the exposed mud. In the centre of the pool area stood a stone woman.

He dressed hurriedly and left the house, walking through dew-laden grass towards the drained-out bed of the pool. Even in that glimpse from the window the statue had displayed the same elusive quality Priding had only experienced in Heth's work.

When he arrived at the pool bed the twisted figure of Stallard was waiting for him at the edge of the mud. Together they stared at the statue.

Priding began to feel sick. The similarities with Heth's canvasses, the unique style and subject matter could not be denied. But the statue was flawed, hideously so, by an obviously deliberate intent. There could be no defence in insanity. The statue was a work of applied inconsanguinity, jarring and insensitive, deliberately grotesque. Priding turned away, his eyes closed, his face pale in the dawn light.

'You are disappointed?' Stallard placed a hand on Priding's arm, preventing him from leaving.

Priding shuddered. 'I had hoped to discover evidence which would achieve for Heth the recognition denied him during life. I believed him to be a genius. This . . .' Priding indicated the statue, 'would seem to suggest otherwise.'

Stallard's grip tightened on his arm. He looked closely into Priding's face. 'Do not allow yourself to be deceived. Heth would explain if he were still alive. Interpret Mr. Priding, interpret.'

Priding shook himself loose. He looked again at the statue's face. 'That's Enis, the girl in Heth's paintings, isn't it.

The hunchback nodded. 'Yes.'

Priding fingered the locket containing the strand of hair he had found at the window. At that moment the statue and the girl the hair represented seemed irreconcilable. Priding had been conscious of an affinity with Heth's portraits of the girl. The statue produced a feeling of dissolution in him.

Dianne approached from the direction of the house. She stood slightly away from them, her face devoid of expression. For a moment she said nothing. Stallard acknowledged her with a nod of his head.

'It's dreadful.' She said at last, her voice curiously flat. Priding was silent. There was no denying the statement. 'Tell me,' she asked, 'how did you know it was in there?' She hadn't even bothered to ask if the statue was Heth's work. She knew.

'I drained the pool hoping to eliminate the smell.' Priding answered. 'I had no idea the statue was in it.' His reply was both deceitful and defensive, an admission of inferiority. Why couldn't he tell her the truth?

'Well it will have to be moved. I don't care what you do with it, but it will have to be moved out of sight of the house.' How it would be moved, where it would be moved to, did not concern Dianne.

Priding watched her walk back towards the house. He had a sudden impulse to run after her and try to explain. But he didn't. Communication between them was dying.

There were noises from the dining-room when Priding entered the house to take breakfast. The decorators had arrived early, having promised Dianne that the room would be finished that day. Realizing he would be an embarrassment Priding avoided the area. When he told Dianne he was going out into the garden again she seemed almost relieved.

The garden was hot and very still. He sat in the long grass trying to understand what it was apart from the obvious distortions that induced the sensations of unease which appeared to radiate from the statue.

Only in the face was there evidence of compassion. Apart from the staring eyes the face was almost beautiful. The figure's impossibly long hair was looped in wild seemingly erratic circles, an insane coiffeur whose spirals hurt the eye which attempted to follow their intricate and convoluted path. Yet it was the figure's arms which offended the senses most. Immense elongated limbs delineated a grotesque Mobius curve terminating in misshapen hands which rested partially buried in the mud in an awkward placatory gesture.

From any viewpoint the statue was a product of abnormal excesses, artistically inexcusable, understandable only if one accepted that Heth had indeed spent the last months of his life on the edge of insanity.

A shadow fell across Priding as he lay face down in the grass, studying the statue. Stallard had returned. The hunchback sat down beside him.

'Strangely compelling, don't you think?' Stallard asked, making a circle of his fingers and peering at the statue through it. 'Will you respect your wife's wishes?'

'What?' The bright sunlight penetrated Priding's tightly closed eyelids as a red blur. He felt curiously detached.

'She wants the statue destroyed.' Stallard explained.

Priding sat up, blinking. 'Dianne didn't say that. She wants it moved out of sight of the house, that's all. It's understandable, isn't it?'

'Is it?'

They sat like that for several minutes. Out on the concave bed of the pool the statue shimmered in the heat. At intervals flies buzzed, crawling over the drying mud.

'How well did you know them?' Priding ventured at last, sensing a growing rapport between himself and the hunchback.

'Know who?' Stallard smiled evasively.

'Heth and Enis.' The names sounded alien on Priding's ear, as though they no longer belonged even in the garden.

'You've seen photographs of Heth?'

Priding nodded. There was one in particular which had been printed in several avant-garde publications. It showed Heth standing beneath a huge plane tree. It was autumn, there were leaves all around him on the ground. Priding could always remember the tree.

'The day after he died I came back here,' Stallard recalled, 'before the place had been shut up, before what was left of his possessions had been removed. I found sketches of Enis, discarded treatments of the statue. I destroyed them. Heth would have wished it. I have no regret about burning them. Enis will always be more alive in my memory than on those canvasses. Yet though I worked for Heth over a period of three years, assisting him in every conceivable way, that day in the house I could not recall what he looked like.'

Priding rolled over on to his back. Images of the statue impressed on his optic nerves through staring too intensely ghosted across the cloudless blue sky. Stallard's fascinating voice went on.

'Enis was blind. You knew that, didn't you?' The hunchback looked questioningly at where Priding lay stretched

out on the grass. 'They said she never saw any of the portraits Heth painted of her. Perhaps she didn't, as we understand seeing. But I used to watch her. She would sit for hours in front of Heth's latest painting, running her hands over the paint, touching the canvas as though trying to sense through her fingertips what Heth had been striving for.

'Heth saw something in Enis he was never able to capture in paint. It was hinted at most strongly in "The Entrails of Entropy" and "Convolutions", two studies of Enis which Heth insisted came closer to explaining the paradox she represented than any of his other pieces.

'The idea of the statue evolved out of a growing frustration with the deficiences of paint and canvas to express what Heth termed Enis's personal reality. He became convinced that only in a multi-dimensional art-form could he demonstrate her unique qualities.' Stallard stared pensively at the statue, remembering.

'He grew increasingly disorientated as his work progressed. Not madness you understand. It was as if he evolved a new way of interpreting reality. As he gained insight into his work, communication became ever more difficult for him. Towards the end he achieved lucid periods only when he was working on the statue.

'From the outset Heth realized that the statue was potentially dangerous. He disliked working on it alone, insisting that I be present even when the flow of inspiration demanded working by artificial light into the early hours. He worked from constantly revised sketches and memory, though when necessity required that Enis be present Heth drove himself feverishly, tormented as long as she was in the proximity to the statue, relaxing only when he could dispense with her presence.

'Naturally Enis was curious; and she grew more and more curious. Previously she had been allowed access to all of Heth's paintings of her. Now when he was involved in a sculpture, an art-form her tactile senses could fully appreciate, she was forbidden to approach it.' Stallard's eyes were haunted momentarily, but his mouth displayed a bitter smile. Priding wondered where the truth lay.

'She constantly insisted that I describe the statue. But what could I tell her? How would you begin to describe that to a young blind girl? I used to tell her, "Not yet, when it is finished. Perhaps then your guardian will let you touch it." '

Stallard suddenly began to leave, but Priding sprang up before him. There was a question the hunchback had yet to answer.

'Heth admitted on his deathbed that he had destroyed his niece. Did he?'

'They were both responsible, Heth and the statue.' Stallard pulled away then, lurching towards the spinney, and seeing him approach the crows began shrieking in the branches.

As the day wore on Priding began to see the statue in a different perspective; in many differing perspectives. Each time he looked back after resting his eyes, the statue appeared changed, altered in some subtle indefinable manner. And a growing excitement began to take hold of him. In the statue of Enis, Heth's mind had dreamed in terms of lines and curves and sweeping planes, so that acting together in mutual support were the mechanisms of convergence, divergence and irradiation. All playing a basic part in the illusion that was more than an illusion; producing a strange invisible stress on the fabric of reality.

Yet Priding was conscious of a deficiency in his understanding. He sat in the hot sun and stared until eye fatigue caused tears to run down his cheeks and his mind to spin with the effort of concentration. His fingers clasped the locket containing the single strand of Enis' hair, and he cursed Heth's complex patterns.

There, he came to realize, was his difficulty. The statue was beyond the compass of his eye. Before he could decipher the enigma it represented, he had to see it as a whole. There had to be a way of observing it on a multi-linear level, of somehow getting it into focus.

The answer was simple, yet it evaded him for hours. Mirrors.

Priding couldn't possibly handle them on his own. The mirrors were too large and too heavy. He would have to ask Stallard to help him. He crossed the garden towards the spinney, intending to walk to the hunchback's house, when Stallard emerged from the trees. The man had a sense of timing that Priding found disturbing.

Stallard listened patiently as Priding explained what he intended to do. He would help, but there was no indication of what he was thinking.

Through one of the kitchen windows, Dianne saw the two men enter the greenhouse. She was curious, but the decorators had almost finished the dining-room. After the furniture had been brought up from the cellar she would find out what Stallard and her husband were up to.

One end of the greenhouse had been filled with the mirrors removed from the dining-room walls. They were dusty and in some places the bevelled edges had been chipped, but none of the glass faces had been cracked. With Stallard's help it was possible to transport several at a time by wheelbarrow, depositing them around the base of the statue. By the time the last one had been removed from the greenhouse both men were perspiring.

As the mirrors were placed in position they sank inches into the mud, tilting precariously until held upright by a system of wedges applied to their reverse faces. Once the dried crust of the mud had been disturbed, the stench was stronger than ever, a miasma that hung in the still air above the pool bed, while each section of mirror erected reflected more of the suns rays, increasing the heat of the afternoon. Slowly the mirrors began to assume the shape of a circle around the statue.

The circle was almost complete when Dianne came running breathlessly from the house. Her face was contorted in anger. She stood on the edge of the mud glaring at Priding and the mirrors, her hands clenched before her in unmistakable rage.

'Do you know what you've done emptying that pool?' she screamed. 'You've flooded the cellar! The water drained into the cellar and ruined the furniture, ruined everything!' There were no tears, just hatred in her eyes. Unable to think of anything to say he made a clumsy movement towards her. She backed away.

'Don't you understand what I'm saying?' Her voice had an excitable incredulity. She seemed on the brink of hysterics. 'Don't you care what you've done? Don't you ever want

to see what it's like down there?' She made a helpless gesture towards the mirrors and the statue. 'Are you so involved with this insane fixation that the loss of our possessions means nothing to you?'

Priding had no answers, no explanation she would understand. There were larger problems here, he realized, other considerations. There was no way he could explain. With a shrug of his shoulders he turned back to the mirrors.

Dianne gave a strangled sob of rage, then she was running across the grass towards the car.

Priding selected the next mirror to be erected. 'Shall we continue?' he suggested.

'You realize of course where she's going?' Stallard asked, staring after her.

Priding nodded, watching the car as it roared down the ruined drive and out on to the Macclesfield road.

Sunlight bounced off the glass, hurting Priding's eyes. He looked away, blinking. 'What did you mean when you said that both Heth and the statue were responsible for Enis' destruction? What happened Stallard? How did they destroy her?'

'I never said they destroyed her.' The hunchback took hold of the mirror. 'I said both Heth and the statue were responsible.'

'What for?'

'Her disappearance.'

Carefully they eased the mirror into position. Priding paused for a moment, uncertain. 'Heth claimed he had destroyed her.'

'He believed he had.'

'Do you?'

'I'm not sure.'

There was a slow sucking sound as the mirror slid into the mud. Stallard placed the supports in quickly. Priding stared at the statue's reflection in the glass. 'Something happened to Enis that drove Heth to his death. It happened after he finished work on the statue didn't it?'

The hunchback looked at him quizzically. 'You wear a locket containing a strand of hair. Who's? Enis?'

Priding nodded. 'I believe so.'

'Why do you wear it?'

Priding had no answer.

Stallard indicated the distorted elongated arms of the statue. Priding's eye unwillingly followed the insane curve of the limbs. At the point where the arms terminated in misshapen hands, Stallard stooped, brushing mud away from the stone. 'Look,' he said quietly.

Priding peered over the hunchback's shoulder. The hands had been intricately carved, but for some reason known only to Heth, the nails were shown split down to the root on each finger.

'Here,' Stallard said almost irritably. 'Look at the print.'

On the flattened outstretched palm lay the impression of a naked foot; small, and delicate. There was another further along the statue's arm, then another. Odd, why hadn't he noticed them before?

Then the incongruity of the word registered. Print? He stared at Stallard suspiciously. 'Why did Heth carve these prints into his work. Symbolic perhaps? What did they represent?' Already Priding was preparing himself for the impossible.

'The prints are what they seem to be. They are not representational.'

'But this is solid stone ' Priding objected. 'They couldn't possibly be footprints.' He followed the line of alleged footprints along the arm. He knew it was inexcusable, but he couldn't help it. He giggled.

Ridiculously the prints continued up along the curved arm, travelling overhead, the distance between the prints increasing with each step, attaining an impossible stride.

Stallard displayed no anger at Priding's outburst. 'Count the prints.' he demanded. 'How many do you see?'

Priding counted nineteen.

'I've noted the footprints progress during the driest part of each year, when the water level drops and the statue is briefly exposed. Last year there were twelve prints, the year before nine. Enis may have been blind, but her other . . . senses were different from ours. More than just heightened. She had the capacity to respond to Heth's work just as she influenced it. Their curiosity was insatiable.' Priding had to look away from the expression on Stallard's face.

An hour later the last mirror was placed in position. The statue was now completely encircled by the mirrors except where a small gap permitted access.

Priding was standing inside the circle of mirrors. He was wearing polaroid sunglasses with mirrored surfaces.

Everywhere from every conceivable angle the statue existed in mirror images. Everywhere Priding's two-dimensional echoes moved, when he moved, imitated his every gesture.

Priding had calculated that the mirrors would magnify and repeat a hundred times the minute flaws and irregularities Heth had imposed on the matrix of reality through his incredible art, allow him to assimilate and understand the enigma of the statue.

It grew hotter. The air trembled inside the circle of mirrors, distorting the reflections. Gradually temporal and spacial continuity lost relevance. Bodily orientation fled and Priding experienced a tremendous interior tension, a sudden unnerving mental surge.

Inchoate stirrings of ideas without clarity streamed through his mind. A vision of Enis, blind, helpless, trapped through her own peculiar curiosity in Heth's Mobius concept recurred endlessly. What when she completed the curve, as Stallard had indicated? The prints swam before him with their random impossible spacings. In what form? How much of this nightmare was wild conjecture – how much more directly attributable to Stallard's subtle suggestions – how much was truth?

His mind swam with the impossibilities. The fear of insanity, closer than ever these days, was a torment.

There was a sudden loud crack, and the sound of falling glass. Priding spun around to see one of the mirrors shatter. Sunlight glittered off the descending shards.

Another sharp report, this time to his right and another mirror broken. Others followed in rapid succession. The sound of breaking glass came from every segment of the circle as mirror after mirror shattered irretrievably into a thousand pieces.

In the distance over the noise of the mirrors, Priding could hear someone calling his name in a vaguely familiar voice. One by one the vacant mirror frames began to fall over.

The lens in his sunglasses shattered.

Priding was crouched on his knees in the mud. Dr. Dattas stood over him, looking down. There was an expression of great pity in his eyes.

Without a word the psychiatrist raised the great iron hammer he was carrying and brought it arcing down on the statue. Priding managed to gasp, 'No!' before the hammer-head contacted.

A figure broke from the spinney, running with an ungainly stride towards them; Stallard. Then the statue was crumbling, toppling under the impact of blow after blow from the hammer.

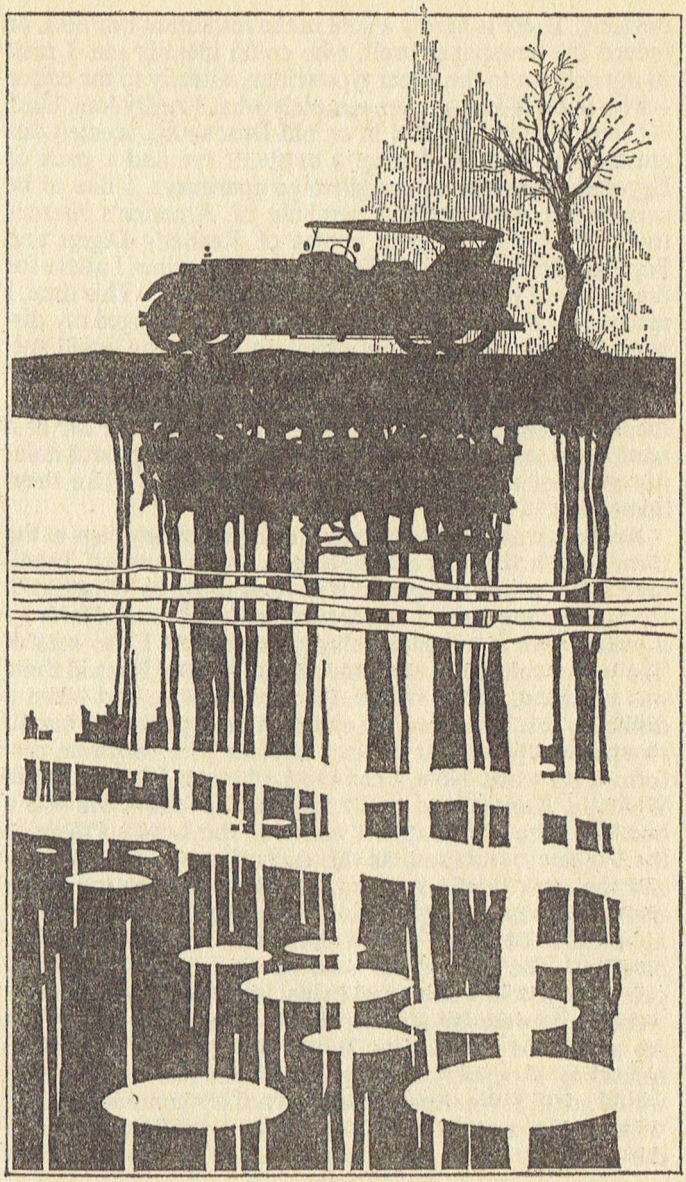
The hunchback hesitated, a look of insensate grief on his face. He seemed unable to speak. Then he hurled himself on top of Dr. Dattas. They both went down in a tangle of thrashing limbs. For a few moments after Priding could hear odd gurglings as the hunchback forced the psychiatrist's head beneath the mud. Silence fell.

Priding was finding it difficult to see. His vision was blurring over. Objects insisted on disintegrating as he looked at them. Casually Priding began to collect the shattered pieces of the statue. He had to be careful though. There were shards of glass in the mud. And they were very sharp.

THE JOURNAL OF BODLEY CLIVE

MATTHEW PARIS

I AM TAKING this trip to Arkham with no sense of purpose. I live in a world of pure method. And these military feints are not my style. My editor decided it was a perfect tactic for me to take a tour of the hinterlands. Many of my readers have compared previously such journeys favourably to the various quests in medieval romances. I feel that this trip through New England, to write of *la cuisine* for the town's most comprehensive newspaper, will offer me a perspective on the country from the view of one of the most urban and sophisticated *flaneurs* of New York City. Certain compunctions had made me shrink from this voyage to old Grease. I am too used to tempering my style for the snobs, gluttons, and orally obsessed maniacs who read my restaurant column daily. To write intimately, confidingly, I need to compose a heartfelt journal. Naturally, the image I have deliberately cultivated for over twenty years of writing for anonymous admirers, has cast me in a role I rather prefer. The fastidious gourmet, picking, judging, sipping at sensual pleasures with inimitable style, carving controlled elegance into tidbits, chewing indolently on the deeper textures of reality – that is, the emblem of the figure I cut in society as a man. My place in history as a literary figure is a bit of deception. Strange to say, the pretences necessary to disguising my purpose in restaurants, make my real life quite different from the enamelled caravan supposed by my readers. To maintain my anonymity, I have an immense variety of dishevelled costumes to throw restaurant managers off the scent. I have manufactured a variety of false beards for my perpetual holiday. Only the flowery shirts are supplied to me by my newspaper. They have been supplemented yearly with some rather theatrical effects of my own



devising. There is hardly a soul in the restaurant business, or indeed the newspaper itself, who could identify me. I mail in my column to the paper typewritten, directly to the editor – who nobody knows even remotely what I really look like?

I have always travelled in an old Dusenburg, scented discreetly with orchids. I keep a bottle of rye and a pack of Egyptian cigarettes in the glove compartment. I like to be surrounded with seminal symbols of America's literary tradition. A few pungent copies of Reader's Digest and Popular Mechanics on the back seat – magazines I adore for the clarity of their prose – and I am on my way. This time, I reached Arkham in five hours. Naturally, I changed my disguise and my Texas license plates on the car, to avoid suspicion. I arrived towards evening. Arkham, whose gabled roofs, church steeples and towers are most piquant at dusk, loomed strangely in the distance as I stopped the car at a hamburger stand for a snack. I finished the sumptuous dainties and put them in the glove compartment. I like them luke-warm.

Arkham was nearly deserted. I dropped off my bags at the town's one hotel – if I ever become a hotel columnist, I shall have a few words to say about it – and drove to *Whateley's*, for my evening meal. I was served the usual *hotel d'hôte* by a waiter with a provincial shrug, as soon as I was seated. The waiter refused to bring me the bill of fare. He said there was no menu, or the waiter, for some reason, had taken a dislike to me. I handled the situation, and permitted myself an uplifted eyebrow at the curt manner with which he performed his work. Now, I can think of meals I have eaten in Whichita, Kansas, and easily forgive this fellow. He was a bumkin, pure and simple. I muttered the Lord's Prayer in the Vulgate translation, as this dullard served the entree. I saw the cook briefly stepping out of the kitchen for a moment. He was a gangly fellow with fish-like eyes, and an appearance of dorsal fins on the back of his skull. He was barefoot. The poor churl was, no doubt, the product of centuries of cold winters and casual inbreeding. He had thick webbing between his misshapen toes. The waiter had served me a noxious fungii stew. It was topped with a generous sprinkling of peppery herbs, related to the Norwegian leek, I would guess. It was ice-cold and burned my gums as it passed with an oily scent towards my palate. I swallowed a bit of the glutinous relish, a queer compôte of fruits, with a

delicious shiver. I have eaten home-made Korean food without an involuntary shudder, and have even toasted to election of Gypsy kings with the infernal brew they call *hagofen*, but never have I experienced the hideous strength of this particular condiment of Arkham. I bolted my meal with a flourish, and almost ran out of *Whateley's* spilling a few bills on the table as I left their dining-hall.

3/20/67

Earlier tonight I sat down to write my column, but found the experience beyond my powers of description. An occurrence which is not subject to lingual analysis. I can only hope and pray that this will never occur again. After all, I make my living on the strength of my ability to translate any sensory experience. Notably the music of dining out, must be coded into lucid and pithy phrases. For my talents, I am invited to banquets on the lower slopes of Parnassus. *Whateley's*. I notice, is the only respectable restaurant in town, otherwise I would have gone to a more hospitable place for travellers, and would have had the neighbourhood inn deliver – dare I write this? – one of my secret delights, a feast of barbecue, pizza, and an orange drink. This *is* what an intimate journal is for . . . And so, to bed.

3/21/67

This morning, I had breakfast in *Whateley's*. It was a much more satisfying experience than my horrendous meal of the night before. The ugliness of that disaster seems like a dream to me now. To quote the waiter's curious benediction – by the the fires of Yog-Sothoth, we have eaten well. Afterwards, I offered the chef my compliments. Then, I met him. This surly figure, of the same aquarian physique and dreamy demeanour as my waiter, operated under conditions more primitive than any I have experienced in an American restaurant. He does not cook on a stove. There is no refrigerator visible in the place. I believe he must cook his delicacies in a series of earthenware pots. I have seen them on his shelves, topped with covers of similar material. I had never seen pots of quite that colour or resiliency and made a

remark to that effect. He smiled and told me their history. They are made by the local artisans, evidently a skilled bunch of tradesmen for all their inbreeding.

3/22/67

This afternoon I visited the town church. It was built in an architectural style that reminded me, absurdly, of hints of forbidden temples the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred had seen and recorded in his terrible masterpiece, the *Necronimicon*, but I smiled at this peculiar notion. I examined the interior of this hexagonal structure, with its queer angles and sinuously carved iconography. Muffled figures of saints glowed on its unlit walls. The narrow, high windows, a design native to Arkham houses, were completely covered by heavy wine velvet curtains. Neither sunlight nor moonlight could enter this temple, but it was lit quite brightly with a white light from three large phosphorescent lamps high above my head. Four incense burners, one in each corner of the room on thin, elongated tripods, burnt with a vinegary fragrance that smelled not unlike formaldehyde, but was richer and more subtle. Several crude statues carved from obsidian were placed on shelves, hanging stiffly out from the ivory walls. They were wholly unlike anything I had ever seen, lacking any appendages or facial contours I have normally associated with life. Yet they were not blobs either, but idols carved in a sort of vapid geometric structure, a compound of curious angles, and weird curves not usually seen in a holy place. A wild, terrible music, sounding vaguely like a violin, echoed through the ivory walls of the temple, playing harmonies that were more like grunts and tired moans, culminating frequently in an unmentionable scream. On the altar a curiously shaped polyhedron glowed and pulsated queerly with soft, violet light. It was an eldritch trick of the sunset, refracted through the garishly coloured windows.

3/23/67

Early this evening, I had another meal at *Whateley's*, in which exactly the same food was served me. I was glad that the waiter had not noticed how little I had enjoyed the

previous night's repast. For some reason unknown to me, I found this food excellent, and ate it with unfeigned relish. He served me a series of desserts, all of which were scrumptious. He again blessed these sophisticated dainties with those curiously provoking phrases, invoking the icy vaults of Yog-Sothoth, an archaism, with its turn of diction common in Cotton Mather time.

3/24/67

Sent my resignation to the editor. I placed the missive in the mail this morning, and wrote a short note. It hardly explained anything, but it was in the usual code. I suggested the names of several people whom I thought might follow in my increasingly untraceable footsteps. I think back on the range of tastes I had at my disposal in those days in Eden and the paltry language with which I attempted to communicate them. I was rash enough to think I could translate my life into language. I am ashamed of my folly, a temerity which I can neither attribute to youth or rationalistic philosophy. To translate the untranslatable experience – all ambiance *is* – into English like some idiot *ficcionierre* jabbering out nonsensical badinage on his portable typewriter is truly insupportable. For a man of etiquette, I have acquired the worst of manners. Nyarltelop knows best. I have died like an animal. I have been reborn again. With Yog-Sothoth's help, I must retain the humility with which I started this entry.

3/25/67

Many things to tell but I have not the words to tell it. As I come to the most difficult part of this tale, I begin to wonder what queer accident of character, strange quirk, or ugly streak in my lineage made me devoted to such arcane, weird researches. There are certain hideous experiences to be avoided, vertigos of nauseous abysses to be dreaded, properly shunned by any intelligent researcher into the unnatural and unearthly. There are certain misty shadows that hold secrets better left untalked about, whose unlit knowledge would drive most men to screaming unintelligible curses

at the night. There are cruel gods, exiled to the furthermost regions of the stars, who can be called up by name, but who may not be put down so easily. The very name of these creatures, uttered in a circle of Illuminati, can invoke a heartrending growl of terror, rising from the throat like a living thing, frightening the accursed demon away from this planet, even pursuing its baleful shape back to its home amongst the coldest and most terrible of stars.

I caution you who read this not to publish any portion of the journal. I shall count upon your honour – throw this journal into the fire, burn it, every last shred of it, until this hideous record of mankind's wildest dreams may stray in the realms of nightmare, and haunt us in our daily waking life no more.

I am finding the act of writing difficult. Grammar seems a mere rhetoric to me. I am learning the language spoken by the people of this town, a dialect found only in Arkham. In more intimate conversation, it is an unreal system of clicks and glottal sounds, without tenses, verbs, or normal structural pattern, apparently distantly related to certain Eskimo and Indian languages which, I would claim in my days of journalism, was the raw stuff of anthropological monographs. There is a level of consciousness they are getting at that no longer escapes me. They have invited me to a banquet, taking place on the first of next month. I am invited to a communal kitchen, in which the ceremonial delicacies prepared for such festive occasions may be tasted. I am not a little afraid, albeit mightily curious.

How can I describe this chilling revelation I have received from these extravagant meals I have ingested in Arkham? I look back over these pages, and I find my previous attitudes towards the whole experience are naïve. Of course, when I became aware of the deeper meaning of the banquets, and reflected on the ignorant age in which I had been born, it was an astonishment. For any creature of God to discover that his tastes, opinions, character, and ambitions are absurd tripe – as lover of tripe, I do not use that fragrant word lightly – was salutory. I had the temerity to publish these examples of my ignorance and folly, to trumpet my stupidity and deceit to the multitude, in the most influential rag in New York City.

Had I not guessed in the recesses of my heart that my public identity of gourmet was a veil between myself and the

world? My whole pose as a gentleman, my elegant patrician airs, had been nothing more than gates that stood between *myself* and the terrifying end of my journey. Surely I had sensed all of this, and walked away from the bath of blood and fantastic light in which I lived with my habitual hauteur. While other men would simply have had recourse to some stupefying drug to engage their senses in the huge trough of light in which we all live, I had, of necessity, to return to the source of my woes. I am ashamed of myself. I have hawked my folly and ignorance to every wag and carpetbagger on this earth. I am dust beneath the earth and above the sky, and a mote in the Womb of Matter. I bet the most profound forgiveness of all created things and beings I have slighted with my pride, and fear.

3/26/67

I am damned lucky I resigned my position when I did; the absurd and obsolescent crudities of altering my peculiar experience into the structural patterns of my race would have been intolerable for a man of my total integrity. I'm afraid language itself is made for the majority of human beings; our race at its most mediocre. I feel I cannot continue to write this journal much longer.

What I had not understood – dare I commit this vision to the ineradicable parchment of this hapless journal? – in my days of Pride, the most profound Nature of the Universe had contained me. We live in an immense stew of Matter, the least of which is father, brother, and son, and no airs or gestures of contempt can hide from our souls the nature of any material banquet. We feast on our own divinity, and those sweetmeats, those tender morsels of lamb, are nothing less than our own flesh.

3/27/67

I received a registered letter from my editor today. He had it sent to the hotel. It was brought to me here at *Whateley's*. It was an irate note, telling me of the many excruciating evenings he had spent in restaurants, following my enthusiastic hosannahs. He ended this missive with a few maledictions

which would have been offensive to a pearldiver. Ordinarily, I would have torn up this *billet-doux* in a blind rage, but I have learned a *soupçon* of humility since my drive to Arkham. I merely dropped it absentmindedly on the wooden floor of the restaurant.

3/28/67

Chancing upon my newspaper, brought to the hotel by some traveller last night, I read the column written by the insouciant gargoyle who dared to follow in my footsteps. *Entre nous*, this dastard is a Cuban refugee exiled lately from that tropic land, who previously had written quite expertly on jai-alai and Communism. I suppose the editorial board wanted to humiliate me, but I am astonished how little I care about these follies now. Here, at Arkham, I have attained peace of mind, proof against such arrant piddle-paddle.

I need a deeper bath in the stew of the Universe, the *bouillabaisse* in which I live. The gaseous caress of the atmosphere is not tactile enough to reach nerves severed by years of a world of forms, definitions, and the *cul-de-sac* of taste. How I yearn secretly for a gourmet's metaphysics!

3/29/67

Tomorrow, is the day of the banquet. I feel like a youngster, waiting for Santa Claus at Christmas Eve. Yuggoth has been showing up strongly in my dreams, haunting them to quite an appreciable extent. I was never a strong swimmer, but I felt an irresistible urge to go skin-diving at Innsmouth tonight. It is the coastal town, and the port of Arkham. Plunging into the sea in March is too difficult a baptismal rite for even the Puritans who originally inhabited this part of the country. But the sea is the home of creatures who perceive the Great Stew. I have noticed gills like shadows on either side of my neck and mysterious spidery webbing of my fingers and toes. I owe these organs to the weird food I had consumed at *Whateley's*, but they are also the product of my biological reaction to my deeper sense of identity, the capping of a profound ontological purpose formerly isolated to

my life. Tomorrow, a meal at *Whateley's*, by way of dutiful preparation for the repast, the feast of the Ocean! This rite may be held at Innsmouth.

3/30/67

I am writing this at *Whateley's*, having left the hotel for good. My waiter has kindly prepared a cot for me in the back of kitchen. Such a disappointment! The banquet has been postponed as a result of inclement weather. I had thought it was going to be held indoors. Apparently, we are to walk down to Innsmouth, and hold the rites on the rocky crags and piles. I do love the Atlantic coastal regions.

3/31/67

I exult, bathing in the Great Stew. Gills keep forming, and I cannot easily hold on to this pen, with my clumsy fingers webbing quickly into flipper-like claws. Of course. I am not less than terrified at these weird changes in my appearance, but fortified with the hope that my new shape will bring me into the Great Mystery of the Sea I have dreamt of, but have not yet fathomed in my cankered heart.

I spent this last day involved in what to most New Yorkers would be a terrible and eerie rite. We held a curious celebration in the church, a kind of arcane religious mystery, celebrated in their unspeakable eldritch tongue. We chanted in an argot full of clicks, hisses, and glottal stops; I had been learning it from the waiter and chef during my extended stay at *Whateley's*. Their robed priest, who claimed he had once been a Chaplain in the United States Army, chanted some verses in this language I barely understood. I listened to this unintelligible lingo, hints of which would have chilled my blood had I not already obtained the *contemplatio* mentioned by St. Augustine. I cannot possibly give the exalted tone of these odes by merely quoting excerpts from religious texts. Their sensuous purity leads to a voluptuous ascetism, and there are hidden keys to an undreamed of austerity, a visionary orgy, in this oddly accented verse. Locked within the languorous moods, the subtle rhythms of rhyme and

meter are dreams like aphrodisiacs, dissolved in a bow of clear spring water.

A series of gargling noises were emitted by the parishioners in the pews. I felt my body shaking uncontrollably. The choir sang hymns in a nasal, whining tone. It caused my forehead to break out into a profuse sweat. I am a hero. I was afraid, but I am triumphant in my fear. I am the groom at a pagan wedding. All problems are solved when all life's frustrations are past. *Amor vincit omnis.* As I heard these last horrendous intonations, a grisly *shape* began to form slowly out of the air in the temple. I realized it had always been *there*, in the room, and was merely waiting for us to beckon it to visibility. I call it a *shape*. Dazed by this unutterable horror, the terrible spectacle burnt my inner vision. It had no lines, no contours, no points of departure; it was a *presence* of some monstrous sort. Certain words of the chants, quite harmless to the uninitiated, had struck strange colour-chords in its utterly alien system, which activated its psyches in our poor, provincial set of dimensions. I tell you, it was *hideous*.

4/1/67

Useless to write any longer. My journal in my back pocket, I hiked to Innsmouth with the throng. I am in the Space-Time continuum. I cannot say what happened. Not what I have just seen! It is impossible. This journal dropped in the mail-box, I shall return to the sea. I can grasp the pen. What an effort! Breathing is difficult in this gaseous air. No sense in writings, beyond their anthropological value, so to speak. Thanks to the banquet feast. In the church. Food like a drug.

At the shore, I saw another eerie vision. It was different and more terrifying, as though I had passed through veils to reach this moment by the sea. The day was blazing with foggy light from the scarlet rays of the bloody sun. The clouds coagulated above me, into vast and horrific shapes, seen from one end of the horizon to the other end. I stared upward at long rows of diaphanous, dripping meat, white ivory ribs, and hollow carcasses, blending to shiny, flayed torsos, impaled on hooks, hung in long rows against the terrific zenith of the sky. In the bleary distance, sour odors,

salty spoors of rotting meat, began to fill my nostrils with a giddy, sublime fragrance. A mooing sound floated down towards me from either side of the hideous chimeras. The mooing sound became louder, insistent, holy in its fearful glissandos from dead gutteral throats. It mirrored the colours of the earth. Divine carcasses, dripping with fat, phlegm, and red liquids, were braying from unseen mouths, and their voices hypnotized me in their agonies, with soft dirge-like chorales. I shouted the names of horrors and demons at the echoing angles of the sky, but my voice seemed to join into the hysterical mooing of the bovine spirits and I was deified, a mote in their desperate cries, or a moment, I had blended into the blood-scented steamy air, a nimbus hovering around singing cadavers, my bones crumbling in the celestial slaughterhouse, rising towards the foggy light.

No more. I am gasping in this atmosphere. I must put down their journal. What shall I leave behind me, as I fall away into this protective ocean? What aphorism? What *sec* epigram? I am no longer in the grammar of life, or too decent for the more solid realms of Reality. Am I in the New World? Let no paltry God or angels bring me back to earth and the winey air, no spirits could lave my body now. What a joke! I swim in the eternal dance of the World, the pavane of my own waters. I am the eater and the eaten. I am dissolving in a dream of salt. I shall dance softly into the cadaverous bed of the Atlantic. I am going to the emerald world of the luke-warm ocean. I shall be a bone in the tooth that chews the iced fire in the sun. While the waves lap against ivory beaches, I shall be an ebony nut in oyster beds, the pearl of night gleaming in the blackness, my groin and heart eaten by the hungry mirrors in the fierce, bloody sea.

SWEET ANALYTICS

M. JOHN HARRISON

BY THE END of the show everything has shaken loose, flaked away: those monstrous insectile bodies, so terrifying when glimpsed briefly in dim underlighting, are after all awkward, callow, made of papier mache and lurex; the antennae of the Scarab Man, fibrillating wildly over his third and final squalling victim, have become mere piano wire, as tawdrily elaborate as his motives (the laboratory scandal, the research grant settled elsewhere, the explanation by some Louis Pasteur in a frock coat and steel-rimmed spectacles of his 'transference'). Boris Karloff has caught fire as we expected, discovered in a shuttered morning room from some other set, kneeling over his dead son and regretting, perhaps, the earlier demonstration of Galvanism in the scorpion's tail which sparked all this demoniac energy of revenge, this terrible, killing creativity. Amid the crackling cheap costumery, the melting fibre glass and the flames that roar like some enormous, vengeful, ironical Primus stove, poor old Faust has bought it again. Even the chambermaid could have told him there are some things we were never meant to know.

Previously, we've had a special fondness for Faust, our test tube clown, and come out of his drama feeling a little sad, if wiser. Now we execrate him. We trusted him, and he gave us DDT; we put up with his absent-mindedness and his cranky white haircut, and he got strontium in the milk; 'glutted now with learning's golden gifts,' he invented Lewisite and the unburnt hydrocarbon. We made sure he ate his breakfast, wiped the egg off his tie and managed his bank account: he introduced us to phenacetin, to the MIRV and the core-melt; monosodium glutamate coiled out from under the laboratory door in a creeping poisonous mist. His Magic

Food all turned bad, his wings flew *us* a little too near the sun. He had to go.

In a decade – at first apathetic, then coy and willing to be convinced, then tremulous and glad (for did we ever want it all – really?) – we've turned from Einstein to Thoreau, from photo-voltaics to Pre-Raphaelitism, from Doc Smith to Frank Herbert; and finally managed to shed somewhere along the way the Siamese twin horror that's held us rapt for a century and a half: our midnight fear that the scientific, the *power* civilization may fail and leave us back where we were, which is unthinkable – or that it may stay forever, which is worse.

> How I am glutted with conceit of this!
> Shall I make spirits fetch me what I please,
> Resolve me of all ambiguities?
> Perform what desperate enterprise I will?[1]

What a relief to discover that it was really all Faust's fault! He makes a satisfying scapegoat, and a most solid object against which to push: one good hard kick and we're clear of his sordid dream of megawatts and multilevel cross-overs, out of the tangle and the stink and into the simple log cabin by the lake (no matter that you must gut the fish – they're there to be caught!); or floating off downstream from Shalot, where the air is rarified, wrapped up warm with William Morris fabrics, in a barge hand-hewn out of that bemused Ruskinist impulse which led even Oscar Wilde to strip off his coat and 'build a road across a marsh'. If this should fail – and it might well – we have Luddism, recently playing to packed houses as New, Authorized, 'alienation'; and the dour, right wing anarchism of the competent thriller writer, with its body skills, its Outward Bound and its renovated croft in the shadow of the Cuillin . . .

All these are symptomatic of a horribly tenacious clutching at significance, the replacement of the actual, the ordinary and the uninvested by great sweeping romantic myths. Rationalism, it would seem, has sold us up a very mucky backwater indeed. Thought turned out to be a straw; we throw each other fat lifebelts of charisma, mysticism and emotion instead. From Jimmy Saville, the Divine Idiot, via the Festival of Light with its Gilbert & Sullivan gullibility, Scientology, a commando of the deluded; from J. R. R.

Tolkien, by way of brown rice, to Uri Geller, Madame Blavatsky of the 70s, conducting us – by means of a power he receives from flying saucers – through the seven sacred trances, and so besotting the collective imagination that his disfigured spoons twine themselves round the heart of University College London, while Cambridge nods proudly and possessively on like an emancipated mother hen. In ten years, logic has ceded its place to cheap fantasy and a cheaper superstition. Finally, science fiction really has replaced science fact, and thus become its own subject matter. Ghosts of old Ace Books editors revolve in their grave for joy.

(The re-enactment of *Morte D'Arthur*) was my last open make-believe before my adolescence, after which time, like everyone else, I lived half the time in fantasy, craftily deceiving both others and myself. This adult make-believe is something we have foolishly ignored . . . and in the epoch of Hitler – Siegfried Redivivus – it is not only a mistake but a disaster to ignore those underground motives that cause both war and art . . . Man is essentially weak, and he wants power; essentially lonely, he creates familiar daemons, Impossible Shes . . .' Thus Louis MacNeice[2] the poet, realizing – perhaps too late, like many of the intellectuals of the thirties – that the danger of the time lay not so much with technology or even economics, as in that eerie crepuscular hook-up between questionable fact and ostensible fantasy, between Hollow Earth and Wagner, between the risky ideology of myth and the vast blotting-pad credulity of which we're all capable.

Thirty years on, we're no less desperate for significance. But the washing machine, the prairie farm and the megawatt power station, which looked for a time as if they might provide it, have betrayed us; materialism has tainted reason, and we turn, with the expressed purpose of discovering something 'better' than either, to the solution by myth. This argues not only a superstitious inability to separate Faust's methods, his 'Sweet Analytics' from what is after all *our* abuse of his results, but also a failure of self-confidence which bears all the hallmarks of some dancing epidemic or millenarianistic cult of the Middle Ages. In a sense, we have become the 'rootless poor' again, disorientated and, apparently, disinherited.

We can perhaps discount interest in established non-

western religions as a measure of our particular distraction – they have been around as alternatives for some long time and are thus not purpose-built – even their latter-day fractions, the various divine lights and Maharishis have what might be called a traditional basis; most socio-political solutions, too, have deep roots – the Thoreauism now gaining favour, the 'conservationism' which is in fact Conservatism in a new guise; but if we want a really accurate blood pressure of the time, we cannot turn our backs on the vulgar heresies, those clunky, home-made pseudo-sciences and half-religions that have their origins as much in the respectable publishing houses of central London as in the sacred groves of California or the still, cool drawing rooms of votive St. Annes-On-Sea (where they believe that NASA is knocking 'holes in the air' at risk of admitting something mortally unpleasant, and simultaneously await the coming of the Master – from Venus, by what transport is unclear).

Nothing advertises so well our fear of impotence in the face of technology as the success of Uri Geller, with his raree-show of purely personal force and his implication that Faust, so apparently secure behind a laboratory door whose lock we haven't the education to pick, may after all have missed the point. The vulgarized anthropology of Erich Von Daniken becomes, in *Chariots of the Gods*, a blueprint for collective inferiority, suggesting a loss of confidence of such an extent that we now prefer to attribute our progress to mere reinvention and our very ability to progress to the result of genetic interference by some spacefaring master-race; and Charles Manson is the very least, if most notorious, of our new Messiahs.

All these myths and myth-figures have two things in common: in the first place they achieve a currency which appears to be out of all proportion to their value – in one way or another they 'sell'; and in the second, they are unoriginal, in the sense that each one borrows for its basis, various well-used but inviting ideas from the science-fictional stockpot – Geller's telekinesis, Von Daniken's visiting aliens, Manson's open use of elements from Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*.[3] Vendibility and the derivation from fiction coincide perfectly in Scientology, the 'technological' religion invented by a hack. Thus we observe the 'fact' creeping steadily towards the fiction. A movement in

the opposite direction completes the dialogue, by way of a vogue for the provision of fictions (and here I use the term to encompass the staged as well as the written) so lavish, so detailed and so long that they provide a complete 'world' for their audience.

Thus we have the World of Tolkien, the World of Michael Moorcock, the Worlds of *Dune* and of *Star Trek*, to mention only a few: most of them supply a thorough physical geography or cosmology (at any rate a complicated, characteristic landscape), with its own maps, its histories and technologies and jargons; each has a multi-element comparative anthropology; and all seem to achieve success in direct proportion to complexity of background and wealth of 'data'. Most important, perhaps, each provides some more or less easily-grasped handle by which to pick up the universe, some combination of (homilectic) philosophy and metaphysic which can be seen as a way of perceiving not simply the world of the fiction but also of reality. All have won a more general audience than one would expect of generic fiction, all bid fair – whatever the original intent of their authors (or 'creators')[4] – to replace in the minds of that audience the World of Disney – funny little distorting mirrors in which we can detect transfigured images of the real.

The next step is replacement or at least augmentation of the world itself. We can see the beginnings of this in the publication of such efforts as *A Guide to Middle Earth*, language primer, Baedecker and *Who's Who* of a country imagined for the amusement of a handful of (mostly dead) dons; or in those enormous gatherings of *Star Trek* devotees, huge flocks of Spock-eared fans, brought together as if in preparation for some unimaginable migration to a sunnier clime. The commentaries and explanatory texts, the societies and conventions, the bibliographies and endless amateur publications, are not simply reminiscent of the crank-cult modus operandi, but might also be viewed by the jaundiced eye as the germs of a well-documented, seriously-conceived attempt to catalogue the physical and cultural phenomena of imaginary realities, the infancy of a natural science of the fictional . . .

Will Book Two, Chapters VI–VIII of *The Lord of the Rings* now replace *An Excursion Flora of the British Isles?* – and where we once botanized the chalk downs of Kent or

the peaty flush soils of the Cumbrian uplands, will we now discuss the soliology of the Lothlorien pre-Alpine woods, whose terminal vegetation is the Mallorn Tree, with its characteristic golden leaves? (What's the matter with real flora? Possibly it's that they demand a real rather than imaginary botany, and for that we must trudge reluctantly back into the cold country of Faust.) In the end, it's no great step from 'Wart Factor 6, Mr. Zulu!' to the excesses of the ninth dimension and the personal TL travel offered – whether honestly or cynically and for cash profit makes little difference when the real involvement is on the neophyte's (or sucker's) side – by that Tibetan sage T. Lobsang Rampa.

Plainly, Louis NacNeice's 'underground motives' are surfacing again, drawn into the vacuum created by a technology which has equated reason with material prosperity, materialism in turn with a noticeable erosion of individuality, self-determination and 'quality of life'; in the absence by overt rejection of Faust, they are being catered to, on a considerable scale, as crank-cult and cult-fiction – the one fictionalizing reality while the other struggles to realize fiction – engender a climate of fantasy which not only exacerbates Two Cultures polarization – denying imagination to the scientist and logic to the imaginative – but also furthers their own proliferation.

Just as plainly, no new Nazism prowls the seafront at St. Annes: there's no reason to suppose that, left to themselves among the relics of the Master – the weeping pictures, the little dying Belgian dog in whom is reincarnated the soul of some departed guru, the neo-Blakeian daubs and icons – those gentle old flying saucer ladies will ever rediscover the goose-step, or, jackbooted, set fire to the powder keg of bourgeois dissatisfaction. While buttons, and even banners, have proclaimed FRODO LIVES, no-one marching behind them has yet made the critical addition THEREFORE . . . In at least one disturbing case, granted, it can be argued that the circuit has been completed – in Mansonism, questionable fact and ostensible fantasy set up a direct relationship, shared an audience, acted in the real world from entirely fantastic premises. Here, though, we may take refuge in the complicating factor of drug abuse, and in the very minuteness of the minority concerned.

Minority has been the way of it so far, and is a protection; and there may be no value at all in reference drawn from an entertainment fad which may already be over the hump and fading. But with crank-cult and cult-fiction pulling large new general audiences, we ought at least to give some thought to the misuse of fantasy – a tool customarily (as far as our industrial culture has been concerned) of escape, of avoidance, suddenly gaining currency as a means of managing the real world. Faust's analytics, his equations and mistakes, however damaging they appear to be, have at least put us on our guard against accepting him as an expediter of easy solutions, a bringer of Utopias: but no similar machinery exists to deal with our own imaginations – and in the age of Frodo Redivivus, gullibility may well be a greater danger than Hubris.

1. Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus.*
2. *The Strings Are False*, an unfinished autobiography, Faber & Faber.
3. *The Family*, by Ed Sanders, Hart Davis. See also Charles Platt's article, *Family Literature.* NWQ 5. Platt's call for self-censorship on the part of cult-book authors seems a little naïve in the face of dollar vote and profit motive.
4. In many cases the author's continued presence interferes with interpretation or reinterpretation of his work. It helps if he has the grace to die. Many of Michael Moorcock's audience, for instance, are convinced of his demise, attribute his continuing prolific output to the discovery of MSS unpublished in his lifetime, and show a disturbingly energetic resistance to proofs of the contrary.
5. Efforts such as *The Third Eye* are an amusement in themselves, and well worth struggling through for the accidental humour; but for those wishing a quick resumé there is nothing better than John Sladek's *The New Apocrypha* (Hart-Davis McGibbon) – a comprehensive guide to strange sciences and occult beliefs.

TROPE EXPOSURE

JOHN CLUTE

GAW. HERE I have opened my mouth to gape in the dark at the silver screen, which is about to hallucinate me on request and to strobe my privacy on request with science fiction movie made in 1954 on time-honoured generic lines, when suddenly I find myself ingesting cigarette smoke exuded from the disgusting lungs of the city slickers in the audience who disease us with their habit in places where humans congregate, but that's life. Life is a fascist state with its prick up and the hands of Esau, a conspiracy against entropy; the habits and the haecceity or *thingness* of others constantly forces you into arrant impostures to keep the dogs off, dissolution off. The cigarette smoke of others is what you might call closet entropy, entropy camouflaged as a trope (or vector) of the role of addicted human. Heat death in drag, that's life. Yuck yuck yuck, they'll say, if you accuse them of invading your privacy with their poisonous vectors, these humans addicted to themselves, chuckling with the self-indulgence that signals a connivance claim on those they victimize, as what genre doesn't yuck I guess the habit's got me yuck I've given up smoking a hundred times, yuck.

So life is boundary maintenance against the enemy's story, so I close my mouth. The film begins. Life and art – at any rate life and the science fiction film made in 1954 on time-honoured generic lines – differ in that the incursion of the latter is solicited. Like docked triffids, the generic film is safer than life in other ways, too, as we've always known. In the absence of Sensurround, which makes you want to go toidy, a genre product's ontological locale is safely anaesthetized as 'existing' *behind* the signs it comprises of an enactment completed into a shape you can blame, because

even while you're pretending to be hallucinated you can *remember* what's going to happen; life's intolerable and chaotic presentness, on the other hand, with its billion balkanized extras and no auteur, requires a constant wariness in the mind's eye, a capacity to predict and channel the intrusions of the other extras, to shift genres like a card-sharp.

For their audiences, generic productions can be perceived as mnemonic plays upon an anaesthetized matrix; this matrix, this associative net of expectations or trammels, comprises plot segments, character icons, Production Code opacities, visual syntax, sexual skews, segmented tropes, channelled tropes, blocked tropes, all as they are perceived of as typically existing in previous works defined as making up or contributing to the particular genre or subgenre in question. In referring to a matrix of this sort, THEM, for instance, a science fiction film made in 1954 on time-honoured generic lines which I am about to return to for the first time, presents itself, in other words, as a form of rhetoric. The arguments presented – however seemingly coherent – are less relevant than the fact that rhetoric itself lays on a presupposition of the accessibility of the world to the forms of 'argument' that comprise it. If rhetoric is a kind of *passacaglia*, then the world (the individual work) must be transparent to the entailments of the tune. Any other forms of truth – any dissonant perceptions, like the wrong actor in the role of duplicitous father figure, you can tell him by his habit of making cognitive speculations about the nature of social realities, i.e., he has a sense of wonder – other forms of truth tend to fog the plate, so that the film tends to become indecipherable, like Kubrick's Jupiter abort, and begins to threaten the viewer, just as life does, outside the dark. Generic works are devices for casting back, not neologisms. In the true novel, whose existence is frequently posited, there can be no mnemonic play.

In a TLS review (28 February 1975), Niko Tinbergen suggests that 'the motivating systems . . . involved in religious behaviour' might include

> a fusion of a number of 'natural', deep-rooted response systems, such as our submissive attitude to people whom we admire and respect; our limited but real social co-operativeness; our need for feeling at home in familiar

surroundings; our fear of threatening agents even within this familiar 'home range'; and our resigned acceptance of the incomprehensibility of our world.

But it is a world whose organized religions play at jingle bells in Flanders fields, still swank but rotting, like lepers in Santa Claus gear. We no longer live in a world we can perceive as transparent to the doggerel of an established Church; generically, the Church reached the end of its tether a long while ago. Perhaps (it is not an original thought) the proliferation of generic literatures during the course of this century, along with a similar breeding of 'new paradigm' cults and sects, can be read as symptomatic of the sort of needs or 'response systems' Professor Tinbergen adduces. 'God' help us. If so, the Summa Theologicae of the twentieth century would be a properly comprehensive encyclopedia of the Hollywood trope, whose star avatars abide in the seventh heaven.

Penetrating the contaminating cigarette smoke of the barbarians with stirrups who ceaselessly besiege the frontier encampments of our lives, THEM really does begin, with an aerial view of the American desert, a shot whose import is immediately transparent to the viewer: because it is the desert in 1954, we know that THEM, whatever they turn out to be, have something to do with nuclear explosions; because we are in a moving plane, we know that director Gordon Douglas (no auteur but crafty) has plumped us in medias res, as the sight of a police car bucking with speed and of a darling small girl wandering traumatized across the cactusy burning sands soon confirms. So it goes. Of the two officers in the speeding car, one is a nobody who will consequently soon fall victim to *THEM*, and the other is played by James Whitmore, whose presence carries a semantic burden – a mnemonic *move* – from the matrix in which 'James Whitmore' is an axon of sorts. As established in THE ASPHALT JUNGLE (1950), 'James Whitmore' signs on as craggy, sincere, mulish, sentimental, dumb, prone to pair-bonding with other males, though very much a family man, and kind of religious; in short, a loser. We remember these attributes and apply them to the cop he plays in THEM. We 'remember' that he is a straight cop, mulish, prone to pair-bonding with his doomed buddy, and sentimentally familiar in his responses to the darling girl

traumatized – it turns out – by the death of her parents, killed by THEM. A few sequences later, when THEM exterminate his buddy, we also 'remember' that 'James Whitmore' will surely give up his life somewhere near the end of the film (we'll be able to recognize the false resolution two-thirds the way through by his continuance among the living) both to revenge the death of his pair-bond and to save either the little girl herself (who would be retained in the film for that purpose) or possibly a suitable surrogate (some other little girl perhaps, or maybe a nun). Just how he buys it doesn't much matter; what's important in the sign language of genre is that, after five or ten minutes, we (and by we I mean most of the audience) know both that 'James Whitmore' is a goner for sure, and that we need a protagonist, because protagonists in science fiction films in 1954 cannot be *losers.*

They survive, and so does America.

A simplified adducing of cues like this, however, only begins to plumb the depths of our knowledge of why 'James Whitmore' cannot be the protagonist of THEM; how we know (or remember) that he's a second lead, a character part, how we know he has too much 'character' to be anything *but* a loser or earth – the sources and routes to the surface of these forms of knowledge would require many viewings of the film in question to work into consciousness, and hair-raising interminable exposition to begin to make clear. But we do know, and our shared awareness of a structural retard comprises part of the pleasure of our viewing.

The retard will not be resolved until the appearance of James Arness as an FBI investigator. In 1954, James Arness has no character at all; the director *positions* him into the role of protagonist, enhaloes him with protagony vibes, so that by the time the scientist's daughter tumbles out of the plane we know that he will win the battle against whatever unnatural phenomenon THEM represent because of his instant love for her and other well-known cues. So it goes. Some either/ors we won't know until the actor who represents the film's 'choice' makes his appearance out of the matrix, or well of being. Is the scientist in the film going to be evil (that is, creative) or benevolent (that is, an expert)? Not until Edmund Gwenn appears *twinkling* do we know that this movie's scientist is on the side of the guys in the government, and that (consequently) THEM's origin will be

ascribed to the unknown effects of atomic radiation, and not to a hypomanic bookworm with dandruff and an unquenchable lust for worldly power (that is, a research scientist)'s Weltschmerz as he experiments in things men were not meant to know. The monsters in THEM, incidentally, turn out to be giant mutated ants who eat people. In the false resolution their desert nest is fumigated (though not 'James Whitmore'); in the final sequence, the last of the migratory queens (plus what's his name, who does manage to save the children) are given to the flames in the storm sewers beneath the streets of Los Angeles, the very same sewers that seem to be about to erupt with giant ants in POINT BLANK (1967) but don't.

Most of the generic moves visible in THEM, conventions not shared by much of written science fiction from the same period, will have been recognized by most viewers of the film, who will have counted on this sort of high profile genericness for much of their pleasure. Indeed, an intense visibility of moves, or trope exposure, arguably distinguishes not only the generic film but maybe cinema as a whole from other narrative arts. Industrial, sociological, historical and ontological reasons for this can be brought forward by the film critic, most of whose groundwork is still to be done. At this early date, two of his primary tasks must still be the creation of an adequate working distinction of cinema from the other arts, and the amassing of a vocabulary of moves. Films work through a rhetoric that claims (perhaps falsely) to bare and simultaneously to soothe the memoriousness of perception, so our eyes pun flowing with tears. Gratefully we play with ourselves in safety, in the dark, with the corsets of our drag unlaced a little, because these risen dreams we plug into, though stroboscopic, do not break the film of the past.

BILLION YEAR SPREE BY BRIAN ALDISS

Corgi S.F. Collector's Library Selection

BILLION YEAR SPREE is a comprehensive history of science fiction by Brian Aldis, one of the genre's leading authors. From early works such as H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* to Kubrick's film of *2001*, sf has encompassed prediction, escapism, satire, social fiction, surrealism and propaganda both for and against technology. BILLION YEAR SPREE begins at the very birth of SF with Mary Godwin Shelley's creation *Frankenstein Or, The Modern Prometheus*, and studies the growth and development of the media to its present successful position in contemporary literature.

0 552 09805 1 60p

Here, for the connoisseur, for the devotee of the SF genre, and for those who like their reading to combine excitement with good writing, is the Corgi SF Collector's Library – a series that brings in uniform edition, many of the Greats of SF – standard classics, contemporary prizewinners, and controversial fiction, fantasy, and fact . . .

DANDELION WINE BY RAY BRADBURY

is set in the strange world of Green Town, Illinois, where there was a junkman who saved lives; a pair of shoes that could make you run as fast as a deer; a human time machine; a wax witch that could tell real fortunes; and a man who almost destroyed happiness by building a happiness machine. But there was also a twelve-year-old boy named Douglas Spaulding, who found himself very much at home in this extraordinary world . . .

0 552 09882 5 45p

Here, for the connoisseur, for the devotee of the SF genre, and for those who like their reading to combine excitement with good writing, is the Corgi SF Collector's Library – a series that brings, in uniform edition, many of the Greats of SF – standard classics, contemporary prizewinners, and controversial fiction, fantasy, and fact . . .

A FOR ANDROMEDA BY FRED HOYLE AND JOHN ELLIOT

Far away, from the constellation of Andromeda came a message . . . a programme for a giant computer which hadn't even been built. For the scientists it was a major breakthrough in technology; for the politicians it was an opportunity to conquer the world; but nobody realized the true significance of the machine they had helped to create, nor of the beautiful woman who shared its secrets and its power . . .

0 552 09938 4 40p

ANDROMEDA BREAKTHROUGH

BY FRED HOYLE AND JOHN ELLIOT

Both the computer and the woman were the products of an alien intelligence. Man had built them to the specifications of a signal received from the constellation of Andromeda, and so their existence on Earth had begun. But what was the real purpose of their creation? Was it a breakthrough into new realms of knowledge? Was mankind to be shown new horizons of science and technology? Or was it the beginning of something more sinister . . .

ANDROMEDA BREAKTHROUGH is the gripping sequel to A FOR ANDROMEDA

0 552 09939 2 45p

NEW WRITINGS IN SF 24 EDITED BY KENNETH BULMER

NEW WRITINGS IN SF featuring stories by Brian W. Aldiss, David S. Garnett, Martin Ricketts, Peter Linnett, Cherry Wilder, John Kippax and Donald Malcolm.

NEW WRITINGS IN SF brings to lovers of science fiction, strange exciting stories – stories written especially for the series by international authors.

NEW WRITINGS IN SF is now one of the most popular and well-established series in science fiction and presents a stimulating and energetic approach to modern SF.

0 552 09851 5 40p

NEQ THE SWORD BY PIERS ANTHONY

An age of darkness was descending upon the Empire. Soon there would be no food, no weapons, and no honour, as the laws of the nomads were forgotten in the struggle for survival.

Neq was the greatest of warriors. No man faced his sword without feeling its sting. Yet even he could not save the Empire – not alone – he needed the help of those who had begun its destruction . . . the great leaders who had not foreseen the outcome of war. And so Neq travelled many dangerous miles to find them, knowing that upon his journey rested the future of the world . . .

Neq the Sword is the third book in a trilogy by Piers Anthony.

0 552 09824 8 40p

FAHRENHEIT 451 BY RAY BRADBURY

A Corgi SF Collector's Library Selection

The Corgi SF Collector's Library is a series that brings, in uniform edition, many of the Greats of SF – standard classics, contemporary prizewinners, and controversial fiction, fantasy, and fact . . .

FAHRENHEIT 451 is an eerie and prophetic novel of a future, where happiness is allocated on a TV screen, where individuals, eccentrics and scholars are outcasts of society, and where books – the cause of all unhappiness and disruption – are burned by a special task force of firemen. This is the story of Montag, trained by the State to be a destroyer, who one day begins to read a book . . .

0 552 09238 X 35p

THE LION OF COMARRE BY ARTHUR C. CLARKE

A Corgi SF Collector's Library Selection

Here, for the connoisseur, for the devotee of the SF genre, and for those who like their reading to combine excitement with good writing is the Corgi SF Collector's Library – a series that brings in uniform edition, many of the Greats of SF – standard classics, contemporary prizewinners, and controversial fiction, fantasy, and fact . . .

THE LION OF COMARRE

is a story of a mysterious city, a courageous youth, and a lion of peculiar ability . . .

AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT

is the early version – the embryo – of the now classic novel THE CITY AND THE STARS. It will be of special fascination to Clarke affionados . . .

Arthur C. Clarke, 'the Colossus of Science Fiction' creates man's secret vision, the search for an eldorado that fulfils his dream of the unknown . . .

0 552 09829 9 40p

A SELECTED LIST OF PSYCHIC, MYSTIC AND OCCULT BOOKS THAT APPEAR IN CORGI

☐ 09471 4	MYSTERIES FROM FORGOTTEN WORLDS (illus)	*Charles Berlitz* 40p
☐ 09392 0	THE MYSTERIOUS UNKNOWN (illus)	*Robert Charroux* 50p
☐ 09556 7	THE SPACESHIPS OF EZEKIEL (illus)	*J. F. Blumrich* 50p
☐ 08800 5	CHARIOTS OF THE GODS? (illus)	*Erich von Daniken* 50p
☐ 09083 2	RETURN TO THE STARS (illus)	*Erich von Daniken* 50p
☐ 09689 X	THE GOLD OF THE GODS (illus)	*Erich von Daniken* 65p
☐ 09853 1	FAR MEMORY	*Joan Grant* 60p
☐ 09811 6	EYES OF HORUS	*Joan Grant* 60p
☐ 09813 2	SO MOSES WAS BORN	*Joan Grant* 50p
☐ 09430 7	THE UFO EXPERIENCE (illus)	*J. Allen Hynek* 50p
☐ 09556 7	IN SEARCH OF ANCIENT MYSTERIES (illus)	*Alan & Sally Lindsburg* 50p
☐ 08880 3	THE THIRTEENTH CANDLE	*T. Lobsang Rampa* 35p
☐ 08765 3	THE HERMIT	*T. Lobsang Rampa* 35p
☐ 08611 8	FEEDING THE FLAME	*T. Lobsang Rampa* 50p
☐ 08408 5	LIVING WITH THE LAMA	*T. Lobsang Rampa* 35p
☐ 08105 1	BEYOND THE TENTH	*T. Lobsang Rampa* 35p
☐ 07652 X	CHAPTERS OF LIFE (illus)	*T. Lobsang Rampa* 40p
☐ 07349 0	THE SAFFRON ROBE	*T. Lobsang Rampa* 35p
☐ 09138 3	YOU-FOREVER	*T. Lobsang Rampa* 35p
☐ 07146 3	DOCTOR FROM LHASA	*T. Lobsang Rampa* 40p
☐ 07249 6	WISDOM OF THE ANCIENTS	*T. Lobsang Rampa* 35p
☐ 07249 4	THE RAMPA STORY	*T. Lobsang Rampa* 40p
☐ 09834 5	THE THIRD EYE	*T. Lobsang Rampa* 50p
☐ 01320 X	THE CAVE OF THE ANCIENTS	*T. Lobsang Rampa* 50p
☐ 09390 4	CANDLELIGHT	*T. Lobsang Rampa* 50p
☐ 09609 1	THE SPEAR OF DESTINY	*Trevor Ravenscroft* 60p
☐ 09827 2	A TIME TO HEAL	*Gordon Turner* 40p
☐ 09880 9	SEX AND THE OCCULT	*Gordon Wellesley* 60p

All these titles are available at your bookshop or newsagent: or can be ordered direct from the publisher. Just tick the titles you want and fill in the form below.

CORGI BOOKS, Cash Sales Department, P.O. Box 11, Falmouth, Cornwall.

Please send cheque or postal order, no currency.
U.K. and Eire send 15p for first book plus 5p per copy for each additional book ordered to a maximum charge of 50p to cover the cost of postage and packing.
Overseas Customers and B.F.P.O. allow 20p for first book and 10p per copy for each additional book.

NAME (Block letters) .....

ADDRESS .....

(NOV 75) .....

While every effort is made to keep prices low, it is sometimes necesary to increase prices at short notice. Corgi Books reserve the right to show new retail prices on covers which may differ from those previously advertised in the text or elsewhere.

NEW WORLDS NINE . . .
is not just another S.F. collection . . .

NEW WORLDS NINE . . .
is an S.F. forum of multi-dimensional stories, stimulating criticisms, and original illustrations from both established authors and talented newcomers to the genre . . .

Contributors to this edition are—

MICHAEL MOORCOCK, KEITH ROBERTS, JOANNA RUSS, JOHN SLADEK, BRIAN W. ALDISS, GILES GORDON, CHARLES PARTINGTON, MATTHEW PARIS, JOHN CLUTE, M. JOHN HARRISON, RICHARD GLYN JONES, JUDITH CLUTE, and JIM CAWTHORN.

UK.....50p
Australia.....*$1.60
New Zealand.....$1.60
Canada.....$1.95
*RECOMMENDED PRICE ONLY