Science Fantasy

No. 12

VOLUME 4

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In the mist-shrouded darkness of an alien planet the espionage agent was given a vital secret to take back to Earth. That was the easy part of the assignment - - the difficult part was to get off the planet.

IN A MISTY LIGHT

By Richard Varne

Illustrated by QUINN

Sands walked along the narrow street leading towards the waterfront, keeping into the deeper shadows cast by the ramshackle buildings that made the alley a canyon of darkness. All around him the city was silent, but it was not sleeping. In an atmosphere of tension and superstitious fear, families sat quietly in unlighted rooms, behind curtained windows, waiting out the night of the year when Copan spirits were abroad.

an intriguing novelette

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Science Fantasy

Vol. 4 No. 12

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Cover painting from "The Wrong Track"

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Well-known American author Alfred Bester whose novel The Demolished Man *has been so popular on both sides of the Atlantic defines the difference between American and British science fiction—and the faults of both!*

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE ?

By ALFRED BESTER

For the past few months I've been reading English science fiction with interest and enjoyment. I've been reading the comments and criticisms of English fans with even more interest and enjoyment, particularly the inevitable comparisons between English and American stories and authors. (I had almost, like St. Tony Weller, said "inwariable").

Invariable might be the better word after all, for fans, despite their good will, cannot help being enthusiastic partisans, and all readers who are not also authors must be forgiven for making the natural mistake of classifying authors in order of merit. We, who are brothers in our exacting craft, are more understanding. We know that the one difficulty is to *become* a writer, and, having passed that final test, all of us and all of our stories are equal in the eyes of our profession. All else is merely a question of personal preference and taste.

Comparisons of stories and authors are worthless and unfair. You may prefer A to B and insist that A is the better writer. Of course you mean that A is more to your taste, and there will surely

be someone else who prefers B. I myself have certain favorites among science fiction authors, men who can do no wrong in my eyes. I also have *bête noires,* writers who can never please me no matter what they do. But as a fellow craftsman I respect both and would never dare evaluate them. It is simply, I repeat, a question of taste.

Now a man's taste reflects himself, and he reflects his *milieu;* and if we explore this briefly it may throw some light on the interesting difference between English and American science fiction; but always provided we agree that we are not asking which is the better. Neither is better; we are simply trying to discover why the two styles have different qualities.

The American and English cultures differ tremendously. We in the States are a nervous, high-strung people, anxious, insecure, generous but confused, painfully eager to get places but not exactly sure where we are going. We're very much like a small boy in his first term at school who has a tendency to run and shout excessively for fear of being left out of he knows not what.

Our science fiction reflects this. It is nervous, high-strung, generous but confused. It is a painful striving for The Answers. We in the States want The Answer to Everything. It must be definitive, short and quick. Eternity must be explained in a sentence, our galaxy in a phrase, our place in it in a formula . . . and then off to other important Answers.

English culture, as reflected by its science fiction, might be likened to the big boy in his last term in school. It is assured, relaxed, aware of its own value, conscious of a long, honorable history, and doubtful but not alarmed about its future. It is too sophisticated, or at any rate too well-bred to run and shout.

This manifests itself in the quiet tempo of the English stories, the leisurely development, the emphasis on character rather than action. To me, the physical action in English stories never quite rings true. I have the feeling that it has been fabricated by a people who have forgotten the terrifying violence which we accept as everyday commonplaces in the States. And the conflicts of character in English stories rarely approach the violence of character conflict in our American stories, again for the same reason. The unmerciful warfare between human beings which we accept as the natural order of things in the States has long been bred out of English civilization.

Both styles have appeal and drawbacks. American science fiction is exciting. To read it is like being cooped up in a room with an

hysterical stranger. No matter how ignorant of the situation you may be, no matter how calm and poised, you begin to absorb the stranger's tensions (by osmosis, if you will) and tremble in harmony. No literature in the world can approach the tension and excitement of our American product because no people in the world are as tense and excitable as ourselves.

But the drawback of American science fiction (outside of the fact that you may not care for hysteria) is its devotion to The Answers. Too many stories attempt to define God and man, end war, perpetuate peace, and make the definitive prophecy about the future of the cosmos. In their impatience to find short, quick answers, American authors have a tendency to reduce life to round numbers. "All men are M," they say. "All problems are P. Therefore M plus P equals A (The Answer) and now let's get on to the next problem."

Now this sort of thing is wonderful if you happen to have a taste for tension and pat answers. Many people, both in England and America, do; many don't. To the latter, the English style in science fiction will appeal more strongly. It is calm, slow, relaxed. It does not search for The Answers. It attempts to explore human behaviour, and brings to its exploration a mature sense of values and a confident courage. It makes a realistic appraisal of the future undistorted by the infantile dreams and delusions that afflict America.

But at the same time, this relaxed tempo and mature interest in character which are the glory of English science fiction, are its drawback. Too often English authors are content to mine stereotype story situations which were abandoned years ago by their American colleagues. It is true they often dig up new and fresh aspects of human behaviour from them, but they impose a dreadful burden on the reader.

We all know the venerable science fiction cliché of the mad professor in the laboratory, his lovely daughter, his handsome young assistant, and the monster born of his experiment. We all remember how those stories invariably (inwariably) began: "Explain your experiment to me again, Professor . . ." Dear God! I can remember writing a turkey of that sort myself long ago.

Nobody does it today. Imagine, then, the burden you would be placing on a reader if you placed an interesting and novel idea about human behaviour in such a framework. I doubt whether any reader would get deep enough into the story to reach the idea. "Explain your experiment to me again, Professor," he would read. "Oh hell! Not *that* one again," he would exclaim and flip the

pages to the next story. Yet, alas, this is what English science fiction has been doing too often.

I have struggled through scores of English stories, chest deep in cliché, continually tempted to give up in disgust. Almost always I have been glad that I didn't give way to the temptation because I've found, tucked away in the stereotype plot, a fresh and interesting idea. Just to balance the equation I might add that I've ripped through scores of American stories, enchanted by the air of excitement, only to be bitterly disappointed in the end to discover that they were all excitement and no idea.

An English editor (who shall be nameless) tells me that this English weakness is a reflection of the taste of the English science fiction fan. I believe this. Just as I believe that the idea-less excitement of American stories and/or the pat answer is a reflection of the taste of the American fan. And in a larger sense, both are reflections of our cultures.

It would seem that the obvious solution would be a compromise. Let us combine the virtues of both styles into one great international style which will be a credit to science fiction authors and a joy to science fiction fans. But this is impossible. Our cultures are too widely separated, and are steadily growing apart. Both are in transition and the end-products of these changes may be totally incompatible.

Moreover, I'm against any such amalgamation. What's the difference if we're different? I said that one style was no better than the other. I should like to see them continue on their separate ways, developing and maturing apart. I would be unfaithful to science fiction, the expression of these turbulent times, the promise of a fabulous future, if I were to advocate anything that smacked of sameness, imitation, loss of individuality.

As an American, quite naturally I prefer our American science fiction (with all its faults and omissions) to any other; but as an author I want the English to prefer their science fiction (with all its faults and omissions) to any other. We are different, and so long as we remain different we shall both be the better for it. Let us be friendly rivals, if you will; let us envy and admire each other; but let us make no comparisons, no evaluations of good and better. So long as we are different, we are both the best.

—Alfred Bester

It should have been a very ordinary journey from Holborn to Hounslow, but somewhere West of Piccadilly the train entered another dimension—one where the Allies had lost World War II. That wasn't all either. . .

THE WRONG TRACK

By GEORGE WHITLEY

Illustrated by QUINN

You will have heard, no doubt, of the "Circle of the Globe." It sounds like the title of something by the late Mr. Gilbert Keith Chesterton—but it's not, although it might, quite possibly, have appealed to him. The Globe is a pub in Hatton Garden. There, every Thursday night, all those living in or visiting London and in any way connected with fantasy and science fiction gather to drink, to talk shop. It's centrally situated and, as most of us live in the suburbs, a convenient meeting place.

We live, Margaret and I, in Hounslow, which is the Ultima Thule of the Piccadilly Line. The nearest station to Hatton Garden is Chancery Lane, which is on the Central Line. To get there we take a Piccadilly Line train from Hounslow to Holborn, changing there for the Central Line. We always have done so and have neither reason nor desire to change our routine. It's returning home from the Globe that we have had to make use of a new and less convenient and speedy route.

The funny part of it all is that we were exceptionally abstemious that night. Perhaps that was the trouble. Had we boarded the

train in our usual mellow and slightly drowsy mood, homeward bound we should have been in no frame of mind to notice oddities, to experiment. But we knew that we had to arise early the following morning—the plumber who was engaged in ripping our bathroom to pieces had promised to start work promptly at 0900 hours—and so we left the Globe early and sober. We had dinner at the small restaurant across the way with Arthur Clarke, returned to the pub and enjoyed one glass of port wine each, and resolutely refused to join Peter Phillips and Bertram Chandler in a beer and bawdy song session. After I had handed a manuscript to John Carnell we said our goodnights and left.

It was a fine night—crisp, a touch of frost in the air, the full moon lending a spurious glamour to the ugly, red-brick-romantic offices of the Prudential Insurance Company—and my wife and I quite enjoyed the short walk from the Globe to Chancery Lane station. There we had only a minute to wait for a train. We changed at Holborn, from the Central Line to the westbound Piccadilly Line. When, after having negotiated the various escalators and tunnels, we walked on to the platform, I looked at the indicator board. The next train, I saw, was going to be for Hounslow and not, as so often is the case, Uxbridge or Rayner's Lane.

"Not long to wait," I said—then, seeing that Margaret was wandering off to the right, asked, "where do you think *you're* going?"

"We want the *front* of the train," she explained patiently. "Saves a walk at Hounslow Central."

"I know. But the way you're going you'll be right for the rear of the train."

"No. The front."

"The rear. *This* way for the front." I took her arm and pulled her in the right direction along the platform. "You know, it always seems to me that the train comes into this station the wrong way—eastbound instead of westbound. I have to force myself to go to the right end of the platform. But I didn't know that anybody else ever had the same feeling."

"I always have it," she said.

"I'm relieved to hear it. It was beginning to get me more than a little worried. Every time that I come home this way the train, for me, is bound in entirely the wrong direction. And then—usually one or two stations either before or after Hammersmith—there's a sort of . . . shift, and everything's all right."

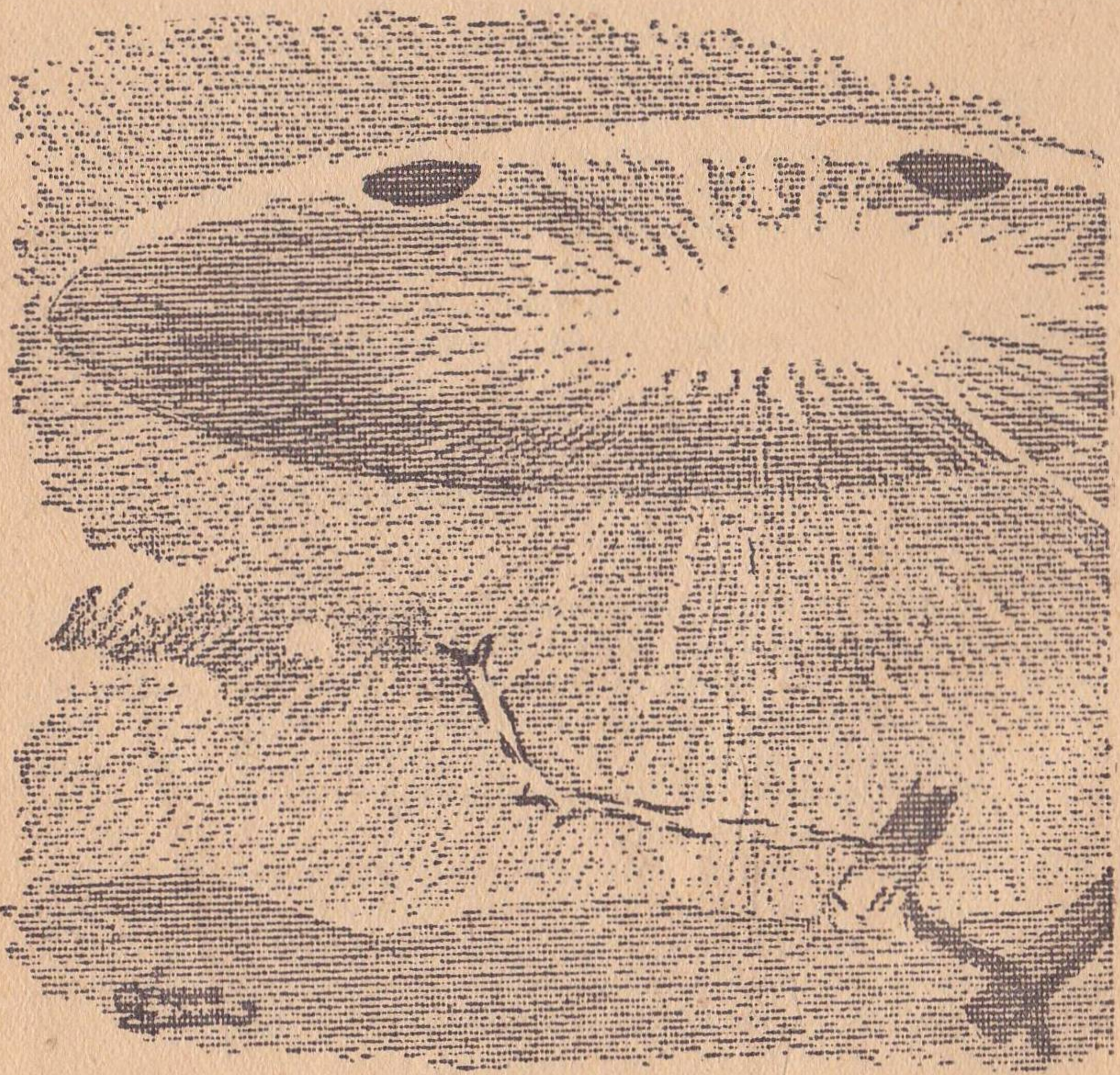
"It's the same with me," she admitted.

We stood there on the platform, just looking at each other. Any casual passer-by would have taken it for a case of love at first sight, or of a loving reunion after many years. And it was that, or almost that. It was a new and intriguing mental intimacy added to the mental and physical intimacies of a decade of marriage. It may seem absurd—but we were quite excited by the discovery of yet another shared experience.

"Have you ever tried to force the change?" I asked.

"Yes. But it doesn't work. And then, suddenly, when I'm not worrying about it, I realise that the train is travelling the right way."

"It could be," I said. "Like that diagram affair that's supposed to show you if you're an introvert or an extravert. You know, the



drawing of a skeleton cube, and when you first look at it it seems to be a certain way, and then there's a sudden shift of perspective and you're looking at it from an altogether different angle. Tell you what—we'll both try to will the change and we'll see which one of us gets it first."

A strong draught from the far tunnel, the rumble of steel wheels on steel, warned us of the approaching train. It swept into the station, drew to a halt. The sliding doors opened. After the disembarking passengers were clear Margaret and I boarded the first coach, which was only half full, found two seats. The doors sighed shut, the lights flickered, the train got under way.

"It's *wrong*," said my wife softly. "But why should it be?"

"Wish I knew. I've thought of Klein flasks and Moëbius strips . . ."

"I read a story once. A Moëbius strip on the Boston underground railway system . . ."

"So did I. One of George O. Smith's. Heard from Walter Willis the other day. He said that George had asked to be remembered to me . . ."

The train stopped.

"Covent Garden," said Margaret. "And still the wrong way."

"It's much too early for the change-over," I said.

A few passengers drifted out, a few drifted in. It was too early for the after theatre traffic. The train started again.

"Are you concentrating?" asked Margaret.

"Yes. That Phillip's Rubber Soles ad. always annoys me. That daft blonde is supposed to be mucking around with the controls of her TV—and yet she's grinning at the camera or the artist or whatever like a Cheshire Cat . . ."

"Never mind Phillip's Rubber Soles. Or blondes. *Concentrate.*"

"All right, all right," I said.

"Leicester Square," she said.

The train stopped and, after the usual pause, started.

We concentrated.

"Piccadilly Circus," said Margaret. "Still the wrong way. And you?"

"Still the wrong way."

Next time, I thought, *I must bring a pocket compass. Would it work? Too much steel? All sorts of electro-magnetic fields?* I tried to visualise the little instrument, the swinging, trembling needle. But I had visualised the disadvantages attending its use all too well. As, in my mind's eye, I tried to turn the case so that the North of the azimuth ring coincided with the North seeking end of the needle, the needle pivoted too. It was like one of those nightmares in which you desperately strive to do something that stubbornly refuses to be done.

"Wake up," said Margaret.

"I am awake."

"You had your eyes shut."

"So what? I was thinking, hard, and now you've broken the spell." The train stopped again. "Green Park."

"Any moment now," she said.

"I'm afraid I can't agree. Hammersmith at the earliest."

"No. Any time now."

Once again I shut my eyes and visualised a compass. Not a pocket compass this time, but a full-size master gyro compass. The noise of the train's passage became the whine of the motor generator, the clicking hunt and the ticking of the follow-up system. I saw, as clearly as though I had the instrument before me, the polished metal of the card, the divisions that were degrees of arc, dull black casing and shining working parts. I could smell hot oil and hot metal. I imagined that I opened the inspection

doors, checked the oil level in the bearing casings, looked at the spirit level. I could almost feel the warm, knurled metal at my fingers as I started to make the necessary adjustments for speed and latitude.

And Margaret's hand, which was lying loosely in mine, clenched suddenly, her fingernails bruising my palm.

"The right way," I heard her gasp.

"The right way," I agreed. The lubber's line of my imaginary compass was steady on 270°.

There had been, I was surprised to note, almost a shock, a feeling almost of nausea, when the change-over had happened. It must have been, I told myself, because we had been concentrating. It would be, I thought and said, a nice idea for a story. "What would you advise," I asked my wife. "Past, Future, or Parallel Time?"

"Knowing you," she said unkindly, "you'll work a switch to either the Martian Mail or the Lunar Ferry—unless, of course, you're in one of your bow and arrow moods, in which case you'll convert this carriage into a Viking long ship."

"What's wrong with the Martian Mail, anyhow?" I asked. "But here's an idea. Suppose the Tories *had* got back in the first post-war election . . . The odds are that now we should be living in a Communist state. The people'd never have stood for old Winnie and his bunch of rogues and incompetents right after the war."

"They would so. And they're not rogues and incompetents."

"They are so. I wouldn't trust any of 'em to run a sailors' home in Tristan d'Acunha."

"What's that got . . ."

"No ships ever call there. Yes—that's the way I'll do it. A Communist state, all very 1984."

A chill settled over the heat of our argument. It was like the sensation you get when you suddenly realise that you are being watched—but worse. Much worse. It was like the sensation you get when you realise that you have dropped a large, dirty, irretrievable brick.

I knew vaguely that the seat on the other side of me from Margaret was now occupied. I looked furtively at the little man—an inoffensive looking citizen he was, shabbily dressed—obviously trying to ignore me and with his nose buried in his newspaper. I glanced at it, as one does, saw that its title was, as far as I can remember, *Der Anglischer Zeitung*. That, in itself, was not surprising—you can buy all manner of foreign language papers in London.

I allowed my regard to stray from the newspaper to the advertisements on the opposite side of the carriage. Phillip's stupid blonde was no longer there to annoy me, and the Mona Lisa-ish model employed by Kent Hair Brushes was not to be seen. There was one poster from which a once familiar face—black cowlick and black toothbrush moustache—glared at all beholders. There was too much heavy, Gothic printing. There were too many swastikas.

Sitting across the aisle from us was an officer, wearing a smart, black uniform, buttoned high to the throat. His cap was the sort of cap worn by the chauffeurs of the very rich, the sort of cap that the average junior officer in the average passenger liner tries to make for himself by binding and distortion of the correctly uniform article.

He didn't like us. The frozen glare that he was directing at us through his monocle would have been lethal, could he have made it so. A hot resentment flooded through me. What right had this dressed up foreigner to criticise an Englishman and his wife discussing politics aboard a train in their own city?

But was it our own city any longer? There was the newspaper, and there were the advertisements on the walls of the carriage.

"Dunkirk," I whispered. "Or the Battle of Britain . . ."

Margaret clutched my hand painfully.

"We have to get back," she said urgently. "The children . . ."

I looked at her. Her hair and her lips were startlingly vivid against the pallor of her face.

The officer barked something in an ugly, guttural voice. A man got up from his seat, made his way slowly towards us. He was undersized, ferrety, and his black leather jacket had been made for a bigger man. He held his left arm so that we could see the black swastika on the white brassard. His right hand was in his pocket.

He snarled, "Dirty Reds! Yer under arrest."

"*Do* something," whispered Margaret.

"Where's yer papers?"

His right hand was out of his pocket now. It held an automatic pistol. He held it with the easy assurance of one to whom such weapons are mere working tools.

I shut my eyes. I tried, hard, to visualise that gyro compass again, the instrument that had got us into this trouble. Faintly, as from a great distance, I heard Margaret stalling, playing for time, heard her say, in a placating voice, "We left them at home . . ." The click that the pistol made as it was cocked merged with the clicking hunt, the normal train noises merged,

and once again the familiar machine was before me, almost tangible. Yes—it was easy to visualise the thing, but it wasn't easy to visualise it on the heading I wanted. *Let me get it back to 090°*, I prayed, *back to East, and we shall be back in our own world* . . . The lubber's line crept around the card—and steadied on 180°.

Once again came the change.

Once again came the twisting, the gut-wrenching sensation. Once again we opened our eyes and saw that we had a change of fellow passengers. And, although it took us some time to realise it, this time the change was evident to more senses than sight.

It took us, as I said, some little time to make the discovery. At first we lay back in our seats, recovering from the fright we had suffered, blandly assuming that all was well and that we were back in our own world and time. We opened our eyes sufficiently long to assure ourselves that neither the black-uniformed officer nor the man with the swastika brassard and the pistol were among those present. And, as far as I was concerned, the first attempt at rationalisation of it all was already being made. I had slept, and I had dreamed, and I had been the victim of a particularly vivid and plausible nightmare.

And yet . . .

Get this straight, before I go any further. I like garlic. I like garlic, used with discretion, and I like it when I'm eating it myself. But I don't like it when I haven't been eating it myself and everybody else has. Similarly—I don't mind Caporal cigarettes when I'm smoking them myself. But the fug in the carriage—composed, I should say, of one part Caporal cigarette smoke to two parts of garlic—was rather much. The motion of the coach was wrong, too. It was swaying more than it should have done. And the rattle of steel wheels on steel seemed to come from overhead rather than from below.

I opened my eyes properly, looked cautiously around. As before—and it was not until later that we discovered what may be an explanation—nobody seemed to have noticed our arrival. They were a queer lot, our fellow travellers, and . . . foreign. Not foreign as the Nazi officer had been—but with a foreignness that was, somehow, of Time as well as of Space, that called to mind old pictures of Leftish intellectuals and honest proletarians manning the barricades during the days of the Paris Commune. Almost all of the men were bearded—some with neat imperials, some with growths that were more luxuriant than tidy. Some wore black

jackets and checked trousers, some brown velveteen, some were in working rig of blue denim. The dress of the women was not so outlandish, would have drawn scarcely a second look in any big city. There was something of Second Empire about it, and something of New Look, and it made Margaret's tailored tweed costume look harsh and ungraceful by comparison.

I turned to her and said, "We shall have to try again, my dear. Something's gone wrong."

"Wait a little," she said. "I can't stand any more just now. And there's no . . . immediate danger here—wherever 'here' is."

We lit cigarettes. We listened to the conversation around us. It was in French, and in French far too fast for us to understand. We looked at the chart of stations, saw that it was almost the same as the one in the train in which we had started our journey. Almost the same—but in this world Acton Town was called Acton-ville, and the line made its way to Piccadilly by way of Charing Cross and Place de Trafalgar.

"And that's wrong," I said to Margaret. "Place De Trafalgar? It can't be."

"It is," she said.

The train stopped. We saw, across the platform, another, city-bound train. This was, as I had already suspected, a mono-rail system with the coaches suspended from the overhead track. I was pointing this out to Margaret when a girl came in.

There was something familiar about her. She was small, and dark, and attractive. The feeling of recognition was like the haunting memory of a dream.

She looked at me, and her face lit up. She came straight to us, burst into a torrent of rapid French. All I could do was to shake my head and smile. Her face fell. She said, in slow, precise English, "I am sorry. I thought that you were a very dear friend of mine. But he is in Paris, on business." She sat beside me, carefully arranging her dress as she did so. She smiled again. "You are his double. He, like you, wears American clothes. You are American, of course."

I felt a spasm of foolish annoyance at having my Regent Street corduroys and tweed jacket described as American, then saw the funny side of it. Besides—if Margaret and I could pass ourselves off as newly arrived tourists from across the Atlantic we should be able to learn a great deal. But, first of all, there was an interesting point to be dealt with.

"This double of mine," I said. "We may run across him in Paris. What is his name?"

"Dunstan," she said. "André Dunstan. He has gone to attend the . . . the . . . how do you say it? Le Congress Astronautique Internationale. You know, these people who would fly us all to the Moon in their foolish rockets. He is a friend of Monsieur Leclerc, the President of the society that interests itself in these matters."

"Monsieur Leclerc," said Margaret slowly to me. And to the girl, "It is rather strange. We have a friend, at home, whose name is Clarke. And he, too, is a big noise in rocketry."

"I wonder if he, too, has a double," laughed the girl.

I thought that it was time to change the conversation and, at the same time, deal with another interesting point.

"We're strangers here," I said, "as you've already guessed. We're interested in this city of yours. Tell me—what is there to see in Trafalgar Square? We have heard so much . . . "

"You must see it," she said. "The gardens, and the fountains, and the great statue of the Admiral with Neptune and the sea nymphs . . . "

"The Admiral? " I asked, looking as puzzled as I felt.

"Why, yes. The great Villeneuve."

"Somebody," I said to Margaret, "seems to have ruined his career by mucking around with redheads. Or, perhaps, one of his earlier wounds or illnesses was fatal . . . "

The girl said nothing, patiently waited until we had finished our private conversation. She was, I could see, a little hurt by our bad manners.

"Then," she went on, "you *must* visit the tomb of Robert Fulton . . . "

Fulton . . . The name had a familiar ring to it. I remembered, then, Robert Fulton was an engineer in Napoleonic times, that his name was associated with early steamships and primitive submarines. And there was a story, that I had heard or read somewhere, to the effect that he had offered his services to the Emperor but had met with a rebuff. Steamships and submarines at Trafalgar—and wearing the Tricolour . . . *That* would account for a lot of things.

Unconsciously I raised my hand—it is a characteristic gesture, they tell me—to stroke the beard that I no longer wear. The cuffs of shirt and jacket fell back from my waist, revealing the dark birthmark with its unmistakeable appearance, the similitude of a cat's head in profile.

The innocent, thoughtless action provoked a volley of rapid fire French from the little brunette. It was too fast for me to get it

all—but I got enough to make me feel acutely uncomfortable. The gist of it was that I was her André, after all, that I had not gone to Paris, to *le Congress Astronautique Internationale*, but had remained in London to have an *affaire* with this lady dog of an American tourist woman.

"It is time," I said to Margaret, "that we weren't here."

I grabbed her hand tightly in mine, shut my eyes and thought hard, visualised the humming, clicking compass, willed myself to see the lubber's line steady on 090°. I could see the machine plainly, in every detail, but the gyroscope was tilting, precessing, swinging wildly away from the true meridian. But the wrench came—the wrench, the feeling of nausea, of being turned inside out. I opened my eyes.

The brunette was gone. The car in which we rode was no longer the monorail coach, neither was it occupied either by Nazis or the men and women of our own world and time. It ran, by the feel of it, on a double track, on wheels that were nearer square than round. The other people in the carriage—it was about half full—were all dressed alike, men and women, in drab, grey overalls. They stared at us, through us, with dull dead eyes.

The carriage was dirty and smelled of dry rot. The seats were hard wooden benches. Light was supplied by flickering oil lamps, the flames of which were dimly visible through sooted-over chimneys. The air was cold and damp.

"What have you done?" demanded Margaret. "What have you done?"

I was asking myself the same question. I was telling myself that what I had fled from would have been no more than a temporary embarrassment to a very real peril. I didn't know what the peril was, but I could feel it. I tried to get us out of this extremely unpleasant situation by visualising, yet again, the gyro compass—but my thoughts were like feeble fish swimming weakly in some thick, gelid fluid. I couldn't concentrate.

We looked outside. We didn't see the street lights, the house lights, of suburbia, the illuminated clock towers of the factories along the Great West Road. We saw the fires. We saw dark, hulking masses like truncated pyramids and, belching from the tops of them, ruddy flames and billowing, black smoke. We saw a column of fire, springing, apparently, from ground level, that must have been all of a thousand feet high. We saw what could have been rivers of flowing flame. The low clouds glowed crimson.

I tore my regard from the lurid landscape outside, stared at the



chart of stations, tried to gain from it some idea of our whereabouts both in space and in the alternative times. The chart was not helpful. It was no more than a black line with circles marking the stations, and the stations had no names—merely letters and numbers. As I looked the train stopped at C14. A few of the grey people got up, moved like automatons to the door which, I noticed, they had to open themselves. After they had left another half dozen or so of men and women entered. They could have been twins of those who had gone. With a jerk the train started again.

Margaret grasped my hand tightly. I felt better then—and it wasn't altogether the very real comfort I drew from her company.

It was as though some of the weight on my brain had been lifted, some alien element of compulsion partially removed.

"Where are we?" she said.

"I don't know. But it's dangerous. More dangerous than the others. I can feel it. It's like a weight, pressing . . ."

"Can't you get us out? Try, my dear, *try*."

I tried. It was useless.

"I'll ask somebody where we are," said my wife suddenly. "It will do no harm . . ." Her voice, as she said this, held undertones of doubt. She turned to the drab, grey man who sat, staring vacantly at nothing, two places away from me. "Excuse me," she said. "We're strangers here. How far does this train go?"

There was no reply.

With my free hand I reached out and shook the man.

"Where are we?" I asked. "Where is this train going?"

I had to shake him again before I got a reply.

He spoke then, his voice as dreary and characterless as his appearance. He said, "They will not approve. They say that we are not to waste our strength in idle conversation."

"Who the hell are *they*?"

"They want to know who you are," he said, after a long pause.

"We're strangers here," I shouted. "From another Time."

"They will take the necessary action," he said.

It came to me, quite suddenly, that I didn't want to meet *them*.

I turned to stare out of the window, saw something large and lenticulate, gleaming metallicly in the glare of the fires, pale lights showing from the ports along its rim, drifting slowly down from the overcast. The sight of it frightened me more than anything else had done, gave me some inkling as to who *they* might be. To hide my fear I said foolishly to the little grey man, "And you'd better tell *them* that they have saucers at the bottom of their garden."

He made no attempt to acknowledge the inanity. He said tonelessly, "They will be waiting for you at D3."

We looked at the chart. D3 was the end of the line. There were three more stops before we got there.

"You'll have to try," Margaret was saying. "This is the worst of all. *They* aren't human. I know it. If they get us—we're trapped. There'll be no going back."

I looked at her. Even in her fear she was vivid and lovely. I thought of her like one of the drab, grey women in the coach, and I hated the thought. I caught both her hands in mine, felt—of this I am sure—power flow through them from her to me. I

concentrated hard on the mental technique that had been getting us into and out of trouble ever since we had left the Globe. Or, to be more exact, I tried to concentrate. It was impossible. Compellingly, monotonously, the words—"We will meet you at D3"—kept running through my brain to the exclusion of all else.

"I can't," I gasped. "Some sort of hypnotic control."

The train shuddered to a halt.

"Quick!" cried Margaret. "Out here!"

"But . . ."

"Do you want to meet *them?*"

"No . . ."

"Then out!"

Nobody tried to stop us. Nobody was interested in our movements. The grey people just sat there, staring listlessly at the dirty floor of the carriage.

The door was stiff. As I wrestled with it I felt a nightmare panic. It came open at last to a complaining of long ungreased hinges. Margaret and I stumbled out on to the platform just in time. We didn't bother to shut the door after us. We saw the locomotive, before it pulled out of sight around the bend, saw that it was steam powered, an ugly little brute of a thing with an almost spherical boiler and a long, crazily tilted smokestack. The train left a wake of ruddy sparks and sulphurous smoke, of gritty cinders.

After it had gone we looked around us. We were standing on a wooden platform, the planks uneven and littered with dark mounds of rubbish. The only lighting was from glimmering, widely spaced oil lamps. There was a persistent, bitter wind driving before it a persistent, cold rain. The glare of the fires reflected from the low clouds waxed and waned, alternated between an evil, ruddy glow and an even more evil red tinged darkness.

The voice in my mind, the reiteration of the words, "We will meet you at D3," was now no more than a murmur. I felt cold and frightened.

"What do we do now?" I asked.

"We take the next train back to town," she said. "Away from *them.* It will give us time to work out some way to return to our own world. And if we don't manage it—well, we stand a better chance of hiding out in a city than here."

"From *them?*"

"Why not? There's bound to be un underground. The entire population of London can't be like the zombies we've already seen."

"How do we find the underground?"

"Dammit!" she exploded. "You're supposed to write this kind of stuff. I'd have thought that you'd have been able to cope with it in real life!"

I managed a grin that probably looked as sickly as it felt.

"When I write it," I said, "I have complete control over the situation. Besides—when things get out of hand I can always kill off all the characters . . ."

Then I was sorry that I'd said it. It wasn't very funny. I caught her to me and held her tightly.

"All right," I said. "We'll manage. Somehow. After all—they can't shoot us."

"Can't they?" she asked.

I looked at her, saw, in the dim, flickering light, that she was trying to grin.

"Won't then," I said. "Not if we can help it."

"That's better," she said.

We started to walk slowly along the platform, away from the lights, away from the little shed that might have been a booking office, that might have housed—anything. Suddenly, ahead of us, I saw what at first I took for two glowing coals on the platform, pulled up sharply. At that moment the reflected glare from the sky brightened suddenly and I saw that the two sparks were the eyes of some creature. It was black, and apparently shapeless, and seemed to have too many legs. There was a familiar animal there, too—a cat. The cat was dead. The alien thing was feeding noisily on the furry body.

I like cats.

It was a silly thing to do, I know, but I lifted my foot, brought it down hard on the elongated head of the strange beast. I felt something give and crack. The screaming started then, a thin, high screeching that held pain and hate. The thing reared up—it must have stood all of five feet tall—and started for me. The ruddy light gleamed from teeth and claws.

I didn't want to touch it with my bare hands, even in self defense. I kicked out, desperately, frantically. My shoe grated on something hard and yet brittle. The screaming rose in intensity. I kicked again, this time with more judgment and less panic. The thing, for all its size, was amazingly light. It rose from the platform like a filthy rag blown by the wind, fell, with a clatter of scales of armour, on to the permanent way.

"Take this," Margaret was saying. "Take this."

She thrust a piece of wood into my hands—it had been pulled,

she told me later, from the light, rickety fence at the end of the platform. I took it, jumped on to the lines. When I had finished using it its end was splintered and dripping with a dark, sour smelling fluid and the thin screaming sound had stopped.

"Is it, was it, one of *them?*" asked Margaret.

"I don't think so. People who can build flying saucers aren't likely to be eating raw cats off dirty station platforms. One of *their* pets, perhaps."

"How do you know?"

"It was nothing from this world, nothing Earthly."

"Here comes our train," she said, pointing to the locomotive slowly approaching under its cloud of steam and smoke and sparks. It rattled into the station slowly, too slowly—for I had seen movement under the dim light over the station entrance. Six men, walking in single file, trooped on to the platform. Only they weren't men. Men don't normally walk with the jerkiness of a poorly manipulated marionette. Men don't have almost globular bodies, and they don't have more than four limbs. Men have necks—and those things had no necks. Their heads were hemispheres set on top of the spheres that were their bodies. They did not seem to have seen us—yet. A cloud of smoke and steam from the ugly little engine blew across the platform and hid them from view.

We lost no time in climbing into the first carriage. It was empty. We sat on a hard, wooden bench near the door, ready for a fast getaway on the side away from the platform if necessary. But the train started after a succession of violent jerks that almost threw us to the floor of the coach.

We had the vehicle to ourselves, so felt that it was safe to talk.

"The other worlds make sense, of a sort," said Margaret, as soon as we were well under way. "Of a sort. But this one . . . How did it happen? How did it ever happen?"

"I can't do any better than guess," I said, "and my guess, for what it's worth, is this. Some time in the past—in Victorian days? —there was an invasion from Outside. A successful one. In the other worlds, in our world, it never happened. Some little thing intervened, we shall never know what it was. Here's what it *might* have been—just suppose that the crew of *Mary Celeste* were captured by a flying saucer . . . In *our* world one of them carried some sort of disease that wiped out the aliens or persuaded them that Earth was not a safe planet on which to make a landing . . . In *this* world that particular disease, or that particular carrier of the disease, was absent, and the aliens had all their specimens for

leisurely study, for use as guinea pigs for testing weapons and techniques, before their invasion. They invaded, and they conquered, and they have their supply of slave labour for whatever it is they are doing."

"But where are they from?"

"We shall find out," I said, "when we get to D3. We must get out at the next station. We must go back."

"Andrew!" she almost screamed. "What are you saying? "What are you saying?"

I shook my head, trying to clear the thoughts from it that were drifting in from outside. Icy fear contracted the muscles of my stomach.

"It wasn't me that was saying it," I muttered. "It was *them*. They know that we've got away, that we're wandering around loose. All the members are on the look-out for us now, and all the . . . the Zombies . . . There's a mind back there—a mind, big, and powerful, and . . . and stupid. As stupid as those beings we saw back on the station. But keep hold of me. You're immune somehow. As long as there's physical contact I share your immunity."

"How do you know all this? Are you making it up?"

"I wish I were. But when it almost had me, just now, its mind, or their mind, was in mine . . ."

"I felt something too," she said slowly. "No, not this group mind, or whatever it is, of yours—but something human. Somebody is looking for us. Somebody wants us as badly as *they* do."

"Your underground movement?"

The train stopped at a poorly lit station.

The door opened suddenly, admitting three men and two women. They were pale and thin, and the drab grey coveralls they wore were torn and patched. Each of them had red hair. The eyes of each of them were—alive. They were the first real humans we had seen in this world.

"Here they are," said the leader, a tall man whose hair and beard were in startling contrast to the pallor of his face, whose long, sharp nose jutted out like the beak of a bird. "Here they are. A male and a female in strange clothing. *She* could be one of us."

"The platform's clear," said one of the girls.

There was something about her voice that was familiar. I looked at her closely. She could have been Margaret's twin—a twin who had suffered from years of malnutrition and rough treatment.

"Good," said the leader. "Stand around them in case anybody comes along before we start."

"There's a couple of slaves coming," said the girl.

Knives flashed into sight. The tall leader drew a weapon that looked like one of the old muzzle loading, single shot pistols.

"They've got into the next coach."

"Who are you?" I asked.

The leader grinned, showing uneven, discoloured teeth.

"We could ask the same," he said. "When the time is more suitable—we shall ask. But, first of all, your clothes." Two of his followers produced grey bundles. "Get into these."

It was no time for either modesty or squeamishness. It was obvious that the coveralls—like skimpy, illmade boiler suits they were—would not go on over our outer clothing and so, while the train rattled and groaned over the uneven track, we stripped to our underthings, pulled on the dirty garments. The touch of them was harsh to the skin; harsh, and greasy with the muck and perspiration of at least months of wear.

One of the red haired strangers produced a sack made of the same coarse material as his clothing. Into it went my jacket, and my trousers, and Margaret's costume. Reluctantly I removed my necktie—"That gaudy rag round your neck," the leader called it—dropped it into the bag after the other clothes.

Margaret, flushed with embarrassment, was standing next to her "twin." Now that there was no great difference in dress the resemblance was even more striking. One of the two women was better fed than the other, cleaner, and healthier. One wore rings on her reasonably well kept hands; the hands of the other were dirty and scarred.

"Sit down," ordered the tall man. "We have time to talk—unless any slaves or members come in. Where are you from?"

"I thought that Peter was to carry out the interrogation," said one of the others in a surly voice.

"That's as may be—but I'm in charge now. Where do you come from?"

I hesitated. For all that we knew to the contrary we might have escaped from the fryingpan only to fall into the fire. And yet—these, for all their ruffianly appearance, were free men and women. I decided to talk.

I said slowly, "We come from a parallel time track."

A claim to Alpha Centaurian citizenship would have been received with rather more credulity. There was a long silence, broken at last by one of the men who growled, "I don't believe it.

I say that they're the result of some damned experiment in breeding—we know that the Dring has taken thousands of men and women to its own cursed planet."

"Even so," said the tall man, "they're on the run. Our watchers have picked up the Dring orders—that's why we got here first. They're on the run—so they're no friends of the Dring."

"That's what the Dring wants us to think. It's a trap."

"No. I don't think so. The Dring is as stupid as any of its members. It uses force, but never guile."

"I've heard of traitors," said the shorter of the two women. "I've heard of traitors—people like ourselves who aren't under Dring control, and yet who've sold out to the Dring for what filthy extra comforts they're allowed. There was Carter . . . "

"Ay," agreed the leader slowly, "there was Carter . . . "

"And Carter led a band of members and slaves to our dynamite factory . . . "

"And we caught Carter," snarled one of the men. He had his knife out, was testing its edge on his thumb in a suggestive manner.

"Our orders," said the tall man, "are to take them to Peter. All the same, if there's any risk of treachery . . . "

"But we do come from another world," I said desperately. "Not another world exactly, but this world as it would have been, might have been, had there never been a Dring invasion. This is the third world that we have visited to-night. In one of the others we heard of, but did not meet, my . . . twin? No, not twin. Myself."

"Where is your proof? " sneered the leader.

"Here. Look at the resemblance between my wife and . . . and . . . "

"Margaret," said the tall red haired woman.

"Yes—even the same name. And the surname is, unless you are married . . . "

"I *was* married," said the woman.

"The surname was Rutherford. Am I right? And one more thing—you have a mole on the inside of your left thigh."

"He's right," said the woman, the Margaret of this world. "But where is *your* counterpart? "

"I don't know—but I can guess. Either he never existed, or he's dead, or he's a zombie, a slave. One thing I've noticed since we got here—Margaret's immune to the long range hypnosis of the Dring. I'm not—although the brute seems to have stopped trying to order me around now. Margaret has red hair, I haven't. She's immune. I'm not. Am I right in supposing that all red haired people are proof against this remote control? "

"Some," said the leader. "Some—not all. Not enough of us to stage a full scale rising, but enough of us to cause the Dring an occasional moment of uneasiness. The Dring, in their ether-ships, rule the air. The Dring have numbers and weapons. We have neither—just the poor firearms with which our grandfathers fought, the even poorer ones that we have been able to make for ourselves . . ."

He pulled his muzzle loading pistol out of his pocket and looked at it ruefully.

"This," he said, "against guns that shoot thunderbolts!"

"But what can you do?" asked Margaret.

"A little," said the tall man softly. "Only a little. Now that we have lost our dynamite factory there is not much that we can do; we find it hard enough even to make black powder. Our only hope is to strike at the Dring itself, at the mind of the hive. But how?"

"John!" warned the small woman sharply. "You are talking too much!"

"I don't think they're spies, Elsa. I've been probing their minds as much as I can—and I've had glimpses of the strange world they come from. They live in London, like we do—and their house is not a dirty burrow in the ruins, but stands in the air and the sunlight . . ."

"It will do her good," said Margaret's "twin," "to live as we do."

Margaret flushed angrily, but I could feel for the other girl. Her bitterness was understandable. I pinched my wife's arm before she could make a cutting reply.

"What do you want of us?" I asked.

"If you can give it to us—the secret of travel between these parallel worlds, as you call them. Think of it, man—suppose we could make such a journey, and come back with men, and weapons! We could drive the Dring back to their own planet . . ."

"I'm sorry," I said. "If I knew myself, I'd tell you willingly. But we've been trying to get back, and we can't."

"What can you tell us of weapons?" demanded John.

"Too much—and too little. Enough to make you hate me for having raised your hopes—not enough to give you the ghost of a clue to help you to make 'em for yourselves. Could you build a jet engine? Could you find a deposit of pitchblende? Could you extract the uranium? Could you differentiate between the isotope you wanted and the ones you didn't? Could you build a breeder pile and make plutonium?"

"You're talking in riddles."

"I'm not. But we're specialised, John, highly specialised. Give me a ship to navigate—and a full set of charts and ephemerae—and I'll take her anywhere in the world. Give me a typewriter, and a supply of paper, and I'll write you a story. Give me anything from a six inch gun down to a point thirty stripped Lewis and I'll show you how to use it. But somebody else has to make it for me."

"All this risk," said the woman Elsa, "for nothing. For a pair of fat, pampered apostles of uselessness who couldn't survive five minutes if left to themselves."

"Peter's the best judge of that," said John. "But—I'm disappointed."

"I wish they'd never come," said the widow Margaret.

She took the sack from the man who was holding it, pulled out my wife's costume. fingered the material with an expression of combined longing and envy that I hope never to see again.

"Put that back!" snapped John.

The rest of the journey passed in a glum silence.

We left the region of the great fires, drove through what, in the darkness, was an almost featureless waste, broken only at sparse intervals, by yellow, flickering lights. We stopped briefly at station after station—all of them bare, dirty, wind-and rain-swept platforms. Occasional parties of slaves, of zombies, entered our compartment, travelling to unknown destinations. They never noticed us. They were looking—if they were looking for anything at all—for a man and a woman in strange, bright clothing. Once we saw a full dozen of the Dring marching in single file beneath the glimmering lamps at one of the halts. Their globular bodies were crosscrossed with a sort of harness, and from this hung metal tubes that could have been weapons.

At last, at a station that seemed no different from any of the others, John told us, in a whisper, that we were to get out. He led the way, letting his body fall into the shambling slouch that had seemed characteristic of the slaves. The others of his party followed suit. Margaret and I did our best to imitate them.

He led us along the platform, past the dim light and the stairs. There was a loose slat in the fence at the end of the platform, and this he pulled aside. He wriggled through the opening, vanished, and was followed by Elsa. One of the other men said that Margaret and I were to go next. On the other side of the fence I found a rough embankment, steep, well overgrown with coarse weeds. I heard John below me, the scraping noise of shoes, an

occasional sharply drawn breath. I was surprised when at last I found myself standing on reasonably level ground. Seconds later Margaret almost fell into my arms.

After the dim lighting in the train it did not take long for eyes to become accustomed to the darkness. What we saw was like—yet unlike—the workers' residential quarters of Hamburg devasted by the R.A.F. during the war. Like—because the extent of the damage was almost as great. Unlike—because time had softened harsh, jagged outlines and trees and bushes had made their own successful invasion of the city.

But we were given no time to admire the scenery. John grasped Margaret's arm, and the other Margaret grasped mine, and we were hurried along over a rough track. There was no street lighting, but the reflected glare from the great fires that we had seen earlier served to light our path after a fashion. We followed the line of the railway embankment, passing under another station, for what must have been a full half hour.

Then John, who was in the lead, stopped suddenly. He whistled softly, a repetition of two notes, over and over. With a faint creaking a door set in the embankment, its surface camouflaged with earth and grass, opened outwards.

"The word?" croaked a voice.

"Security," whispered John.

"Then enter."

The old man who had opened the door whipped the cover off an oil lantern, held it high to examine us. Satisfied, he said, "Peter is waiting."

"Good. Follow me."

John lit another lantern from the first, led us along a maze of tunnels. The air was heavy with the smell of old, stale earth, of mildew, of the smoke of rancid, burning oil. There was another guard to pass, this one stationed outside a heavy, wooden door. He contented himself with a long and minute inspection of Margaret and myself, opened the door without a word. Through it, we found ourselves in a room about twenty feet square and ten high. There was a desk—a heavy Victorian piece of furniture—and behind it a matching chair. An old man, with white, yellow stained hair and beard, was sitting at the desk. He acknowledged John's military salute with a casual wave of his hand, motioned us all to the plain, hard benches before him.

"What are your names?" he asked as soon as we were seated.

"Andrew Dunstan," I said, "and Margaret Dunstan."

"Where do you come from?"

I told him. I told him the whole story. He did not seem too incredulous. After all, I reflected, the interplanetary invasion must

have been a very recent memory when he was young; he must, through his parents, have felt, even at second hand, something of the wonder as well as the terror of it all.

"I am an old man," he said, when I was finished. "I am older, perhaps, than you think—I can remember the Dring ships in the sky, the fire that rained down upon London—and that was all of a hundred years ago. I can remember being herded, with other children, into the Dring nurseries. Like ants they are, the Dring, and when they conquer they enslave. I knew, from the first, that I was not the same as most of the others—the Dring never got my mind. But I was cunning enough to act as the other children did.

"For a while I worked in one of their factories. What was the work? I cannot say. I shovelled loose earth into a succession of little trucks, each of which was wheeled away after being filled. I never did anything else. None of the slaves, the real slaves, engaged in other processes would, or could, tell me what they did.

"Then came the day—I must have been fourteen—when I was turned out of the factory with the ending of the day's work, pushed on to a train bound in to what had been the city. It is the policy of the Dring to let its workers house themselves among the ruins, scratch a bare livelihood out of their scraps of gardens—which is, of course, supplemented by a ration of synthetic food—and, of course, breed. They are under control the whole time, naturally.

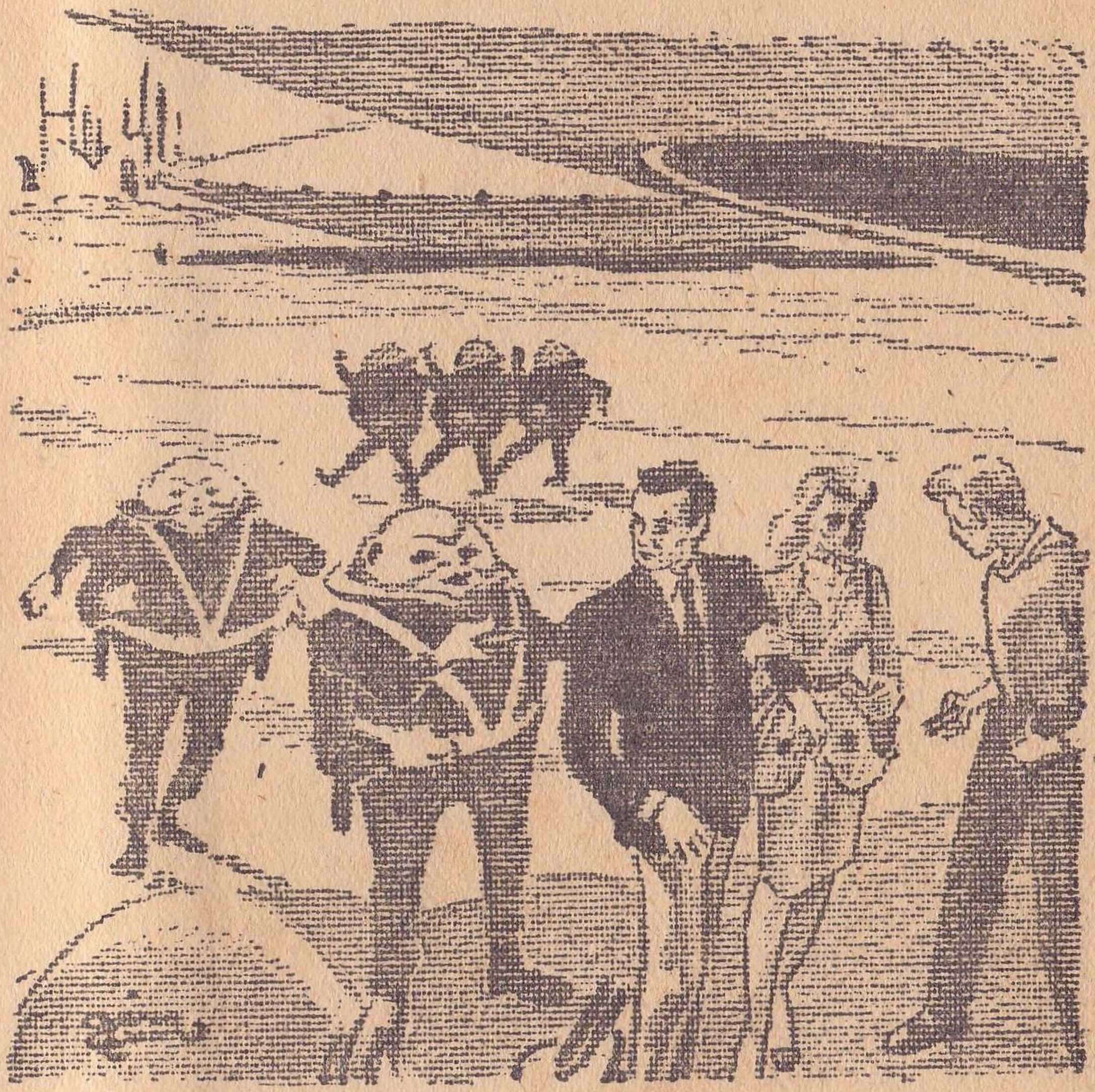
"I knew what I was supposed to do, where I was supposed to go. But as I walked along the street from the station a woman suddenly rushed out from one of the ruined houses, clutched me to her. At first I didn't recognise her. Her hair—which had been red when I had seen her last—was grey. Her clothes were in rags. If it had not been for the telepathic faculty that all of us seem to have developed I would never have known her for my mother.

"But it was my mother. She and a dozen others who had escaped both massacre and slavery were living together in holes and crannies, plotting a hopeless vengeance. They never knew how hopeless it was. We know—but still *we* plot.

"I had hoped," he said, "that you would be able to help us. We thought, at first, that you were voyagers from some other planet who had come in a ship like the Dring ether ships, a ship with equipment and weapons that we could use. But . . ." He was silent for a while, his fingers thoughtfully combing his beard. "We may still be able to use you."

"How?"

"From what you have told me—your world is not at peace. Your people have weapons, powerful weapons. Could you remember how they are made?"



"I'm sorry," I said. "A very limited number of weapons I can handle. I could strip and reassemble any of the machine guns we used in the war. But make them? You haven't the tools, the technology."

"I was afraid of that.

"Now, here is another way. Not all of the humans are either slaves or rebels. There is a class, a pampered class, that rarely leaves the Dring hives. They are people like ourselves who are immune to mesmerism. But they see nothing wrong with the present state of affairs—to them the Dring is father and mother, comfort and security. Now and again, as you know, perhaps, one of our number has turned traitor, has deserted us for the easy

living of the hive. We have thought, often, of sending in a pseudo traitor—it has been tried. But minds, in this world, are read far too easily. Those whom we have sent have been returned—their bodies dumped in the street, tortured and mutilated.

"Another technique we have attempted—prisoners whose capture has been a matter of intention on our part. But they, no more than have the others, have never penetrated the outer guard of members and tame humans to the Dring itself. But the Dring will want to make a personal—if *it* can be called a person—examination of you and your wife. If it can be killed, then . . ."

"Killed? But how?"

"We have a limited supply of dynamite. A stick, hidden in the bag that your wife carried . . . But it will not be your wife, of course. It will be Margaret, wearing her clothes. *You* must go. We have no double, no 'twin,' that we can use in your place."

"It's not my world," I began. I looked at Margaret, my Margaret. "It's not our world," I said slowly. "But these are our people. There's a chance that we shall be able to help them, to destroy this thing . . ."

"If you're going," she said, "I want to go, too."

"I'm sorry," said the old man Peter. "It's not possible. Have you ever thrown a bomb? Do you know how to handle one of our bombs?" There was a finality in his voice that inhibited any reply to his rhetorical questions. He said, then, "I am pleased that you replied as you did. I had one last argument that I was hoping I should not have to use. There has been no need for me to use it. But I shall tell you, just the same.

"We have reason to believe that the Dring ships have been able to cross the strange barrier between your world and this. Over three years ago one was observed by our people flying low over London, drifting down to the landing field. Hanging from its underside was a strange flying ship—a thing with wings and a fishlike body. We have never seen such a machine in our sky. We did not know, until tonight, where it could have come from. Now, having heard of your world, and the others, we can do more than guess. But, John, the clothing . . ."

The tall man produced the bag, handed it to me silently. I took from it my jacket and trousers, my necktie. The woman Margaret took from it the tweed skirt and jacket, said, "It must be a complete change of dress. Otherwise I shall not feel the part . . ."

I looked at my wife, saw by her expression that she realised the reason for the request. Her double wanted to experience the feel of silk and nylon, to be dressed, for once in her life, as a woman should. She said, "All right. Is there a room . . . ?"

"There is," said the other Margaret, and led the way out of the large apartment.

"While we are waiting," said old Peter, "I will show you the bomb. I do not expect that you will use it, that you will be in any state to use it. There is, however, just a chance that you might. When you feel the Dring taking hold of your mind again fill your thoughts with anything—multiplication tables, poetry—and you may keep it out. And keep hold of Margaret's hand.

"But the bomb . . . It's simple, isn't it? This little tube contains the detonator, the spring that works the firing pin and a strand of wire. It contains, too, a very fragile phial of acid. When the phial is broken the acid eats through the wire, releasing the spring. For this bomb we have chosen an almost instantaneous fuse."

"So whoever uses the bomb . . . "

"Must throw it as soon as the phial is broken."

"I see." I knotted my tie, wishing that there were a mirror.

The two Margarets came in. The one wearing the tweed costume picked the bomb off the desk, looked at it briefly, pushed it carelessly—too carelessly, I thought—into the handbag. She was wearing rings, I noticed, and the cat's eye and tortoiseshell bracelet I had brought home from Suva, and a wrist watch. As she fumbled with the handbag she sat on the edge of the desk, looked down with approval at her nylon stockinged legs.

"It was necessary," said Peter, "that every detail should be correct. The slave to whom you talked in the train must have supplied the Dring with a very detailed picture of both of you—and that picture will have been passed on to all the slaves and members. But—are you ready?"

"Not quite," I said. I walked over to Margaret, my Margaret, and kissed her. She said, trying hard to grin, "Be careful." Her double got down from the desk, stood waiting.

It was John who led us out from the underground headquarters, took us out through a maze of tunnels that led, eventually, to a door not unlike the one by which we had come in. It was not the same door, though—opposite towered the ruins of a large church, black and ragged against the ruddy sky.

"We shall be following," he said. "Good luck."

I wanted to keep to the edge of the road, but Margaret would have none of it. We were to be captured, she insisted, and the sooner this came about the better. So, incongruously arm in arm, we walked through the ruined city with no attempt at concealment. And we talked. "Your wife," said Margaret, "she's—me. I was

able to get inside her mind—and she in mine. If we are probed too closely I shall be able to deceive the Dring, for a while, at least . . . " Then, a little later, " Why don't you smoke? "

I pulled out my pipe, filled it carefully. The flare of the first match was startlingly bright. I used a second one, and just as I was getting the pipe to draw a bright, blue-white light flashed from the doorway of a dilapidated buildiug, blinding us. There was an agitated chirping noise, like nothing so much as a swarm of disturbed crickets, and a human voice crying, " There they are! "

My first impulse was to run, my second to fight—and with Margaret's restraining hand on my arm I did neither. And then I started to worry about the fragile glass phial, and what it was part of, in her handbag, but I need not have done so. Our captors were surprisingly gentle. They contented themselves with levelling bright metal tubes at us, telling us to come with them. With the light no longer shining in our eyes I could see that six of them were human, six the almost globular Dring. The aliens, after their first agitated chirping, were silent, the humans said little.

After a short walk we came to what must have once been a public garden. The dark, weed-grown area was almost filled with a hulking mass that gleamed metallically in the beam of the light carried by our captives. We climbed a short ladder to a dimly lighted, circular doorway, were pushed into a small, dark room. A metal door clanged shut, imprisoning us in total blackness.

There were no seats, so we sat on the deck. It vibrated under us, seemed to lift and tilt. " One of their ether ships," whispered Margaret.

I got my matches out of my pocket, struck one. The light showed nothing but four steel bulkheads, a steel deck, a steel deckhead. There were no ports. I dropped the match as it burnt my fingers.

" Can we talk? " I asked. " Is there any danger of anybody overhearing, or eavesdropping on our thoughts? "

" No," she said. " I should feel it if they were probing. I did gain the impression, when we were brought into the ship, that we were to be taken straight to the Dring, that there was to be no attempt at interrogation by any lesser being."

The matter-of-factness of her voice shook me. Margaret's voice, and Margaret's body—and the discussion of such matters as though they were no more fantastic than a comment on the butcher's bill or the evening's TV programme . . .

The deck seemed to tilt more steeply, throwing us together. I became alarmed again about the lethal contents of the handbag.

I said, "But the stupidity! You'd think they'd have searched us for weapons!"

"The Dring *is* stupid," she said. "Powerful and stupid. The Tamies are stupid—they have lived for too long the lives of petted animals."

There was a sudden jar beneath us. The vibration of the deck ceased. The door suddenly opened.

Two of the humans came into the cramped cabin, pointed the metal tubes at us and told us to get up. We did so, followed a third human along the short alleyway, down the steps to the ground. We found that we were standing at the base of one of the huge pyramids we had seen earlier. It towered all of a thousand feet into the sky. Down each of the angles formed by its walls ran a stream of what could have been blazing oil. Billowing smoke half obscured the hurrying figures of men and Dring, all of whom seemed to be moving with the frantic activity of a disturbed ant hill. There was the dull, rhythmic clangour of some sort of machinery.

We were led by our guards to a ramp, the angle of which was a little too steep for human feet and legs. It zig-zagged up the face of the pyramid, at each change of direction bringing us far too close to the blazing oil for comfort. The heat seared our lungs, the acrid smoke half blinded us, made us choke and cough. We passed numbers of downward bound Dring members and human slaves, all of whom stood to one side to allow us free passage. One of the slaves, I remember, lost his footing, fell from the ramp down the face of the pyramid. Not one, human or alien, raised a hand to try to save him. Not one seemed to even notice his going.

It was half way up the huge erection that we came to the door. It was the entrance to a tunnel of almost circular section, the walls of which glowed with a pale, cold luminosity. Once I put out a hand to steady myself, and found that they were slimy to the touch, seemed to crawl beneath the pressure. It was at this time, too, that I felt the first attempted invasion of my mind since the escape from the train. At once I began mentally to recite the Articles, the seafarer's Rule of the Road, that long list of regulations which every officer commits to memory. Also I caught Margaret's hand, held it tightly in mine.

It helped, although it did not entirely dispel the mental intruder. It was like . . . It was like somebody fumbling in a darkened room, fumbling and stumbling and muttering to himself It felt

like spiders on the skin, like a spider web caught across the face when you are walking through a garden by night.

"Has it got you?" asked Margaret urgently.

"No," I managed to say.

We came at last to a room, a spherical chamber. Its interior surface glowed with the same cold light as had the walls of the tunnel. It must have been all of forty feet in diameter. Strands of silk, each no thicker than a lead pencil, converged to the centre of the sphere, merged to form a huge cocoon. Around this guards, both Dring and human, supported themselves on the seemingly frail webbing. Of the thing inside the cocoon we could see nothing. There was a faint, dry whispering noise, a half heard stridulation.

One of the guards—a big man, fat, the remnants of his red hair like a priestly tonsure, spoke.

"We know," he said, "where you come from. We know that you are from the third level. How did you get here?"

I looked at the guards, the attendants, at the shining tubes that dangled at their belts. I weighed the possibility of a wild leap, of the snatching of one of the weapons, of fighting back to the clean outer air. And I saw that any leap would be frustrated by the tangled web.

And with the relaxation of mental vigilance the voice came back into my mind, the dry, rustling whisper of the Dring, the thing in the cocoon.

"You will serve the Dring," it said. "All beings serve the Dring. You will open your mind. The Dring would learn of the third level, of its power and its weaknesses. Open your mind. Open your mind."

"Andrew!" Margaret was shaking me. "Wake up! Wake up! Don't let it get you!"

Two of the almost globular Dring members started towards us, swinging through the web like enraged spiders. Margaret fumbled inside the handbag, threw it. Straight and true it skimmed through the air, not touching any of the strands of the web. The Dring must have realised its danger; its probing, questioning mind was withdrawn from mine. *Almost instantaneous*, I thought, and let go of the silken strand that I was holding. I pulled Margaret down to the curved floor with me, tried to scramble with her to the mouth of the tunnel. And we made it. The blast caught us, drove us like projectiles in the barrel of a gun. There was heat, and pressure, and noise that was felt rather than heard.

Then there was blackness.

I cannot say for how long I was unconscious. I was awakened, I think, by Margaret's moaning. I felt the weight of her across me, carefully and painfully wriggled out from under her. There was no light in the tunnel now, but a dull, ruddy glimmer marked the entrance through which we had come from outside.

"Margaret!" I said.

I got to my knees, bent over her. There was no blood that I could feel. Slowly, carefully, I lifted her to a sitting posture. She gasped, then retched painfully. I could feel the shaking of her thin body.

"You did it," I said.

She made no reply at first. She was conscious, her hands were working feverishly at something—"Take them," she said slowly. "Not mine. Wouldn't rob . . ."

I felt the things that she was pressing on me. There was my wife's watch, and her bracelet.

"Tell her," she said, "tell her, thank you . . ."

"You must keep them."

"No good to me . . . now. Finished. Broken inside, somewhere . . ." Again she was shaken by the dreadful retching. "Should have liked . . . Too late . . ."

I held her tightly, and then she was still. I buckled the watch and the bracelet back on to the dead wrist, got slowly to my feet. I didn't like to leave her there, but what else could I do? I staggered to the mouth of the tunnel.

There was fighting in the open space below the pyramid. Dark human figures milled around, the glare of the fires shone from the bright steel of knives and axes. Now and again there was the bright, intensely blue flare of the Dring weapons, now and again the orange flash of a black powder-loaded pistol. The sound of yells and screams, of explosions, drifted up faintly.

Somebody, I saw, was climbing up the ramp, somebody who was running with a reckless disregard of the dangers of that unrailed-off causeway. I had no weapons, and not for all the wealth in the world would I have gone back into that spherical chamber in which the dynamite bomb had exploded. It was a friend, I told myself. It had to be a friend. If not, a swift kick would send whoever it was tumbling down the face of the pyramid before he could come to grips.

It was Margaret.

"Andrew!" she cried, while she was yet all of twenty feet away, "you're safe."

She stopped then, gasping and coughing, feeling the effects both of her exertions and the acrid fumes that were still billowing down from the top of the pyramid.

I walked down to meet her.

"And the other?" she asked. "The other . . . me?"

"Dead," I said.

"I knew it, somehow. I felt it." She laughed hysterically. "Which of us was it? Which one? Which one?"

I had hold of her then, and I pulled her closely to me. "*You're* here," I said. "And that's all that matters."

After a while she murmured, "We must go. They are waiting for us."

"Who?"

"John and his people. They have a locomotive all ready. They want to take us back to the old man, Peter. They say that we, with our knowledge, are too precious to be risked in the fighting."

"Who *is* fighting?"

"The Tamies. They're shocked and disorganised, but they're fighting back. The Dring members are just wandering round like chickens with their heads cut off, but the Tamies are fighting. There's another Dring mind somewhere, and they're trying to wake it so it can take over."

A voice called from below. "Andrew! Margaret!"

"All right," I shouted back. "We're coming!"

When we got down to ground level all seemed to be over but the mopping up. The fires were dying, and dawn was grey in the sky, and the small rain was seeping down on the sprawled, untidy bodies. John received us—a John whose face was burned, whose left arm hung limply at his side, whose clothing was torn and bloodstained.

He said briefly, "So she's dead. I thought that both of you would be. But Peter wants you."

He led the way over rough ground, over a maze of railroad tracks, over a flat, hard surface that could have been concrete. Then there were more tracks, and one of the little, ugly locomotives standing there, panting impatiently. There were two men in the cab, strangers to us. One of them helped Margaret to climb up to the footplate.

"Tell Peter," said John to me, "that we're still looking for the new brain. It's here, somewhere. It's not awake yet."

I climbed up into the cab.

One of the two men threw a shovel load of coal on to the

furnace, the other opened a valve. The engine snorted, its wheels screamed on the greasy metals before they gained traction. Then, with a jerk, we were off. Past the huge pyramids we sped, past the columns of smoke, through the bare, sterile countryside. Through drab, comfortless stations we rattled, ignoring the hordes of grey-clad slaves who, dumb and uncomprehending, waited patiently for the trains that would never come to bear them to their hovels in the ruined city.

Frankly, I was rather enjoying it. Most of us still possess the boyhood ambition to ride on the footplate of a railway engine—and it is an ambition that, for most of us, is never realised. I watched the driver, I kept a keen look-out on the track ahead—but it never occurred to me to look astern.

It was Margaret who said, almost screaming, "It's following us!"

The driver turned away from his gauges, looked in the direction of her outstretched arm. He cursed. Gaining rapidly, skimming the tracks almost, was one of the smaller saucers. Its flight was unsteady, it wavered and dipped, but it was gaining.

"John," I said, not believing what I was saying, "it must be John. He must have captured one of the things, found out how to fly it . . ."

A crackling bolt flashed from the saucer rim, gouged a smoking trench from the ground twenty feet from the tracks.

The driver watched his controls intently, the fireman threw on more shovels of coal, raked and sliced. He said, curtly, "Weapons. Back of cab. Use 'em."

There were weapons there—half a dozen of the metal tubes that we had seen carried both by the Dring and the Tamies. I picked one up. It was light, too light, and had no comfortable grip for a human hand. Inadvertently I pressed a stud about half-way up the tube. There was a blinding flash of light, the reek of ozone—and a gaping hole in the roof of the cab whose fused edges still glowed redly.

Ignoring the driver's curses I leaned far out of the side of the cab, tried to bring the weapon to bear on the flying ship. My first shot was yards to the right, my second in line, but under. And the answering fire from the saucer sent the rails up in an eruption of molten iron not two feet behind our rear wheels. Margaret was firing now, and her aim, if anything was worse than mine. All that saved us, I am convinced, was the unskillful pilotage that made it impossible for our enemies to bring their own, heavier weapon accurately to bear.

The saucer swished overhead, roaring like a hive of angry bees.

It fled along the tracks ahead of us, diminishing rapidly as it increased the range. Then it stopped, hovering directly over the lines. It was impossible to get a fair shot at it as it hung there, even after I had battered out the dirty glass of the cab windows. From its underside lightning flared for long seconds, from the track sprayed a fountain of sparks and smoke.

The driver cursed. He pulled back, hard, on a lever. The fireman wrenched a valve shut with frenzied hands. The locomotive rocked and shuddered—and still sped on locked, screaming wheels to the inevitable disaster.

"Jump!" Margaret was crying. "Jump!"

But nobody heeded her. Driver and fireman were still fighting to bring their engine under control, and I, or so I was told later, was shouting, "I'll get the bastards! I'll get the bastards!"

We were so close to the saucer now that I could fire over the boiler of the locomotive. The long, ugly smokestack went with the first shot, and then I scored a direct hit on the underbelly of the lenticulate ship. The firing stud hurt my thumb as it tried to jump back to the "off" position, but I kept it pressed. The tube heated rapidly. The blue glare of the continuous discharge blinded me—and then the weapon went dead.

The saucer fell, sliding off away from us in a steep glide. We never saw it hit the ground. Directly ahead of us now, no more than a few feet, was the broken track, the tangle of fused, twisted metal. "Jump!" the driver was shouting. "Jump!"

And . . .

And there was an infinitude of tracks before us—parallel rows of gleaming steel, stretching away into a grey, formless distance, meeting each other at impossible angles. I caught Margaret to me, holding her tightly. We felt the locomotive dip and lurch, braced ourselves for the crash.

There was no crash. The train slowed gently, sighed to a halt. I looked out of the window of the coach.

"Hounslow Central," I said.

We got out at the next stop. We caught a 120 Bus, got off at *The Duke of Wellington*, walked home. It was raining, still, and there were few people abroad in the early morning streets. Those whom we did meet seemed not to notice Margaret's drab, grey overalls.

The house was empty—the children, luckily, were spending a week with their grandparents. We let ourselves in. We went to the kitchen and, in silence, brewed ourselves a pot of tea. While

we were drinking it there was a knock at the door. Margaret started violently, knocking her cup over.

"I'll go," I said, sounding braver than I felt.

"It's only the morning paper," I said as I returned.

"Let me have it," she said. "I want to see it—Russians, and Korea, and atom bombs and all . . . "

She snatched it from me, handed it back almost at once, her thumb marking a paragraph on the front page. I read it silently. It was about two strange people, a man and a woman, who had been seen in London the previous night. The man had been dressed in—or so the paper said—a copy of a wartime Nazi officer's uniform. There had been a brush with the police, and a constable had been shot. The gunman and his woman were still at large.

"They'll never get them *now*," said Margaret.

She got up, started to unbutton the overalls she was still wearing. She fingered the cloth with distaste. She whispered slowly, "I'm glad that I—that she, I mean—wore real woman's things before I died . . . "

I looked down at the mess on the kitchen floor where I had dropped my cup.

—George Whitley.

It wasn't an ordinary kind of monster that troubled the simple villagers of the post-atomic world. In fact, it was difficult to define just what it even looked like. However, the Government man would doubtless get rid of it. George, however, did not believe in slaying dragons.

THE DRAGON

By ALAN BARCLAY

Illustrated by HUNTER

No. 113811 Exp (F) Lieutenant Stephens, George, sighed with relief as his wagon reached the top of the pass. The long climb, two hours of slow slog up a gradient never less than one in twelve had nearly exhausted the batteries. Through the neck of the pass he followed the line of the old road among gorse and brambles and young trees until he could see down into the valley beyond. He pulled on the brake and the wagon drew to a halt, its caterpillars churning up the soft grass which had overgrown the road.

The floor of the valley lay four hundred feet beneath him. The hill slopes showed outcrops of grey-white limestone and patches of yellow gorse. In the distance where the valley broadened lay a mound of rubble and tumbled masonry about two square miles in extent. He thought this might be the ruins of the town of Saintivy-des-Pres. Nearer at hand was a modern village. It was



fairly typical of its kind—through his binoculars he saw that it was surrounded by a ditch and wall, the latter probably constructed of masonry dragged from the old town. Within the wall was a huddle of wooden houses and cattle- and pig-pens. Around the village the land was being actively cultivated. On the hillsides sheep and cattle were grazing.

So the rumour was true—here was another community.

"Ah, well!" he sighed, "Here we go again." His hand reached with accustomed ease to the power lever, polished and black with use; relays clicked and the wagon jerked forward on its tracks. He clanked down into the valley expertly, circling boulders and ploughing through the watercourses that here and there gouged out grooves in the roadway. Within the hour he had worked down

to the floor of the valley. Here the going was better and he proceeded at a quicker pace towards the village.

There must have been a watchman out on the hillside because he heard the long mournful note of a horn echoing between the hills. As he approached the gate of the village figures began to emerge from it. He snatched a quick look through his binoculars. There were twenty-five or thirty men of all ages, bearded, dressed in skin garments extending to the knees. One or two had rifles, but the majority carried a type of cross-bow.

"Ah, well!" he said to himself again, "It follows the familiar pattern."

He stopped the wagon, fastened on his breast-plate and pulled his uniform jacket over it, lifted his carbine from the rack, then after a moment of hesitation put it back in place again. He got out of the wagon and walked towards the group of villagers. When he was within ten yards of them, he halted. He thought they had probably never seen anything like him in all their lives. He wore a new clean uniform—it occupied the locker of the wagon except on occasions such as this—he was clean-shaven and had fair curly hair cropped short. A shiny brown leather belt round his waist supported a holster from which the black butt of a revolver peeped out in a very convenient positon.

The villagers fingered their weapons and muttered among themselves. Behind their backs a swarm of children pushed and shoved and chattered.

"What is the name of this place?" George Stephens asked slowly in French, hoping that his troubles would not be added to by the fact that the villagers' speech had diverged in the course of centuries into an incomprehensible dialect.

One or two people made swift gabbling replies which he failed completely to understand, so he repeated the question.

Then a man asked: "What village have you come from? Does your village have other carriages like yours?"

"I have not come from any village," George told him. "I am a man from the Government . . ."

The word government caught their attention. He heard several people pass it from mouth to mouth and backwards to those at the rear of the crowd. It made a sort of murmur.

"We have heard of Government," one man replied. "Our old people talk about it, but we have always supposed that Government had been dead a long time."

"Yet you see that it cannot be so," George pointed out, "since the Government sent me to you and has given me this carriage to bring me here."

They looked at him again and muttered about it for some time to each other. It was evidently a new and difficult idea for them.

"I have come a long way to visit you, will you not invite me into your village?" he asked. "Surely you are accustomed to offer hospitality to strangers?"

"We are not accustomed to see strangers at all," someone explained. "There is another village three days away, and we have been told that there are other villages in distant parts of the country, but we seldom see strangers in this place."

However, they talked among themselves and presently an invitation was forthcoming.

"But we wish you to wait beside your carriage for a little while," they explained with child-like simplicity, "For we are not used to visitors and never have any important person like yourself from Government. We mean therefore to clean out one of the houses and to prepare a feast, and bring seats, so that you can talk with us."

An hour later George was seated at a wooden table eating stewed mutton garnished with onions and washed down with wine. It was white wine, just a little sweet, and, as George decided after a couple of sips, as gentle as a lamb and as harmless as a dove. Half-a-dozen grey-beards were seated with him, and other men further down the table. At the back of the hall younger people congregated, craning their necks to see him, pointing, giggling, and occasionally earning a cuff on the ear from their elders. Women, young ones and old ones, bustled in and out with platters and dishes and flasks.

George looked at them with satisfaction. They were tall, dark-haired, and wiry. The children were normal, averagely intelligent mischievous youngsters. He searched with practiced eye for any indication of mutation, but saw no over-grown brains here, no purple-skins, none of the usual signs. A healthy community; good untainted stock—could do with instruction in the practice of personal hygiene perhaps—in fact, in this hot and crowded room decidedly smelly—but normal. Some of the girls quite attractive. He took another sip of the smooth white wine. Yes, quite attractive . . . That tall one, for example . . . From the gigglings and whisperings and shuffling George deduced that every girl in the village had crowded into the back kitchen, that they were taking it in turns to serve so that each could have a close look at him. A hand, strong but feminine, passed in front of his face; it was attached by means of a graceful wrist to a smooth arm. The hand held a pitcher and proceeded to refill his glass. George looked up and his own blue Northern eyes encountered a pair of large dark

Southern ones. Yes, by Jove! Then he forced his mind back to what he had been saying, but managed nevertheless to be aware of the fact that the owner of the eyes remained where she was, just to the left of his chair instead of scampering back giggling to the kitchen as her friends had done.

"When the wars came," he explained, "Government nearly ceased to exist. It was able to do nothing more than preserve the records of the knowledge accumulated by the old people. Now things are better than they were, so Government is sending out messengers like myself to discover how many people there are left in the world, and where they live."

"How many people are there?" one man asked. "We know there is another village not far from here; indeed, one or two of us have visited it. And the people there tell us of a third village beyond. How many villages are there in the whole world?"

"We do not yet know." George told them.

"Could there be as many villages in the whole world as there are people in our village?"

"There are many more than that number," he assured them.

They looked at him politely, but did not believe this.

"We know that many people died during the troubled times. How many villages did the world contain in olden times?"

"There were very many. I have passed their ruins while I travelled towards you. If all of you and your children and your sheep and cattle and hens were each one a village, then there were more than that number of villages."

"Then I think there would be insufficient room to pasture the cattle of all those villages," someone commented. "Why did so many people die . . . ?"

"We don't know. Government thinks there was a war, but after that there was a sickness. The people of olden times had ways to protect themselves against every kind of sickness and for many generations lived free of it, but when the protection was removed by war the sicknesses came back. People had no capacity within themselves to resist the sickness and it destroyed men until it seemed as if no single human being would remain."

He took another gulp of wine and looked round to see whether his explanations were getting home. He saw the faces opposite him begin to sway and blur. He realised that he was drunk. As quickly as he could—for friendly though they appeared he dared not trust himself to them—he made his apologies and left. The fresh night air outside sobered him and he walked quite steadily to the gate. Numbers of the villagers accompanied him, talking all

at once, but though he was managing to walk upright his knowledge of French—or at any rate his grasp of their kind of modern French—had completely evaporated and he failed to understand a word. Near the gate he discovered to his surprise, not to say to his pleasure, that the girl who had poured the wine for him was hanging on to his arm.

There was a moment of polite and meaningless words at the gate—the villagers evidently had a powerful disinclination to go outside after dark—and he found himself alone. He had the confused impression that someone, some young man with a black beard, had rather forcibly dragged the girl inside.

By the time he had stumbled his way back to the wagon he was pleasantly sleepy and his head was swimming, but long subjugation to a regular routine compelled him to adhere to his customary procedure. First he erected the slender lattice mast and set the propeller of his wind dynamo whirring softly so that the wagon's batteries would charge during the night, then he set up his tent and unrolled his sleeping bag. Finally he wound up the whip aerial and put out a call to base.

"Hullo, London!" he called, "Hullo, London!"

Presently an acknowledgment came through, rather faintly.

"Hullo, London!" he continued, "113811 Lieutenant George Stephens here . . . Ready to report."

A series of clicks and buzzes, then a pleasant voice spoke:

"Hullo, George. Glad to hear from you. Ready to take report."

George proceeded formally, ending with: "Population about two hundred and fifty, at first glance all sound and normal; no evidence of abnormalities. Position three miles west of a heap of ruins, probably Saintivy-des-Pres. I'll confirm the location next week."

"Good for you, George. I've recorded the lot. By the way, you sound a little thick of speech tonight . . ."

"Do I? Fact is, they make a kind of white wine here, it tastes harmless, but somehow the third glass crept up behind me and hit me over the head."

"Take care none of the natives manage to creep up behind you, that's all. Anything else?"

"No . . . or rather, yes . . . I've covered the territory assigned to me six weeks ahead of schedule. I'd be glad to have instructions ordering me back."

"Oh, you would, would you? Any alibis?—equipment needing overhaul?—ammo expended?"

"No," said George, "I'm a careful man . . ."

"Well, I'll pass your request along—Reply next week. Night, George."

"Night." George answered and switched off. He got out of the wagon and went across to his tent. The sleeping-bag looked comfortable and inviting. Then he looked around at the dark mountains and the huddled outline of the village and reflected a little on the dangers of his position and the present fuzziness of his wits. He went back to the wagon, locked himself in and curled up on its uncomfortable hard seat.

Sometime in the middle of the night he was awakened by sounds outside the wagon. He sat up, reached for his revolver and flicked on the electric spotlight. For an instant the beam lighted on three figures scrambling out of sight among the bushes.

Next morning he awoke, shaved and ate breakfast. Four of the older men of the village were waiting for him at the gate. He sensed at once that they had something on their minds.

"You have told us," one of them began politely, "that you are a man of the Government—that Government has sent you here to find how things are with our village."

"That is correct," he admitted.

"After your departure last night we discussed this matter for several hours. We in this village are ignorant of all that happens in remote places—we have, for example, heard very little about Government, but we are inclined to think that Government is a thing which formerly used to protect villages, and ensure that justice was done, and that peace existed between one village and another. Is this correct?"

"It did all that and much more also."

Smiles lighted the faces of the villagers. They nodded to each other.

"And nowadays this Government which has sent you here will do these things also?"

George decided to go cautiously. "Government today is a small and feeble thing by comparison with Government of olden times. It has only recently learned to manufacture such things as this carriage here, and it has still to discover by sending out persons like myself how many villages there are in all the lands of the world, and how many people live in each."

The men listened carefully.

"Nevertheless, it is the duty of Government to help and protect its people?"

"That is quite true," he agreed.

They shuffled their feet and smiled at him like children and resumed.

"You have a very fine and marvellous gun at your side," the spokesman said, "and it seems probable that you have larger and more powerful weapons in your carriage. Also the carriage itself is made of steel so that you may sit safely within it while it moves across the land."

"All this is true," George admitted encouragingly.

At last they got round to the point.

"We are very much troubled by a monster which lives in a cave some miles from here."

"Ah!" George exclaimed.

"Our village wishes to ask you, since you are a man of Government, that you kill this monster for us."

"What harm does the monster do to you?"

"It kills sheep very often."

". . . and once it killed a cow."

". . . and it came on one occasion into the village at night."

". . . and it eats our young girls."

"Eats them?" George asked incredulously.

"It has never actually eaten any," the speaker answered simply, "but there is no doubt it would do so if it could. It has chased many of them and they have run home screaming."

"Have you not yourselves attempted to kill this monster?"

"On several occasions," they said, "but it has some magical means of knowing when any man is coming near. Thus it is never in its cave on the occasion when we are lying in wait."

"What is the appearance of the monster?"

"It is quite black and in the shape of a man, but is twenty feet tall . . ."

"My daughter, who saw it, puts the height at thirty feet . . ."

"It is entirely black, glossy shining black, with horns on its head . . . It makes the most fearsome bellowing noises and bounds over rocks and up hillsides with incredible speed."

"An interesting monster," George agreed. "You want me to kill it?"

"Yes, please," they said. "It seems to us that this is a thing Government should do for us. Unless, of course, you are too much afraid," one man added.

"The question of being afraid is an entirely private matter," George said, "and quite beside the point. It is my job to deal with things like monsters, and I shall do it."

They told him where the monster's cave was, and in fact two young men accompanied him some little distance from the village.

Quite a number of people, including many of the girls of the village, climbed to the top of the stockade to see him move off. He noticed that the dark-eyed girl was among them. George remembered that the monster was said to be in the habit of chasing girls, but he nevertheless did not feel certain whether the girls were on his side or the monster's.

He drove along the floor of the valley for four miles, then turned as directed up into a side valley and proceeded right to its top. Here among the hills there were many vertical faces of outcropping limestone. The cave, whose entrance was a narrow fissure in one of these faces, was quite easy to discover. George drove the wagon quite near to it, switched off the engine, and got out. He walked over to within five yards of the entrance, and sat down on a flat rock. He began to roll a cigarette. Cigarette tobacco was scarce and precious and he did not smoke very often, but this was definitely an occasion for a cigarette.

"You can come out, monster," he said conversationally, speaking towards the mouth of the cave.

Nothing happened. He continued to smoke. As he finished the cigarette and threw away the butt, he heard a small noise inside the cave, like the sound of a stone tumbling. He had the most powerful feeling of being watched.

He rolled another cigarette. It was distinctly possible, he reflected, that this might be his last. Then from a corner of his eye he saw just within the margin of his range of vision a swift flurry of movement.

He turned and looked. The monster was standing there, huge and threatening.

Although George had been eager to see the monster since the first moment he heard the village people talk about it, he now found himself unable to take any interest in the details of its appearance, for his whole attention focussed itself on an immense steel bow. The bow was bent--George even heard it creak. An arrow with a glittering steel tip was notched in the cord of the bow and lined up in the direction of his stomach. He estimated without any difficulty that he had an entirely negligible chance of drawing his gun and shooting the monster before the arrow could be released. He estimated further that if released the arrow would pass right through him and emerge out of the middle of his back. He concluded finally that it was highly advisable to sit perfectly still and make no movement of his hand towards his holster.

He proceeded to do this with concentrated attention. A considerable quantity of extremely tense silence elapsed. To George

it seemed like several hours, but in fact it was probably no more than a minute.

Then the monster spoke. It spoke surprisingly enough in rather high-pitched tones and in somewhat slurred accents as if it had difficulty in pronouncing the consonants.

"I—kill—you," it announced.

George was almost hypnotised by the glittering arrow point, but he managed to drag his mind away from contemplating it and tried to think of an effective reply. He did not succeed. All he could find to say was: "Why?"

The monster groped for words.

"You come—from village. I watched you come—you wish—hurt me."

George said nothing.

"You frightened," the monster stated.

George was still looking at the shining tip of the arrow.

"Of course," he admitted.

"If you run—very fast—maybe I not hurt."

"You want me to run away just like everyone else does? Oh, no!" George shook his head. "I came to talk with you."

"Talk?—You know I talk?"

"I thought you might . . . Will you put that thing down?"

"No," the monster said violently, making a threatening motion.

George's stomach squirmed. "So you're frightened too?"

The monster turned this thought over in his mind, then suddenly threw the bow down on the grass. "I am stronger and bigger," he asserted.

George drew a long breath of relief, and took a drag at his cigarette. And now that the menace of the arrow was removed, he found it possible to look at the monster properly.

The monster was certainly not thirty feet high, but it was at least ten, and broad and powerfully built as well. Its skin was black—not merely dark brown, but black and glossy like oilskin. It was not like human skin at all. The head was massive, entirely hairless and noseless and with a wide slit for a mouth. The creature had a balanced and well-knit appearance, suggesting both strength and agility. The eyes were entirely black and set in between long lids that gave them an elongated slant-wise appearance. At the moment, they were watching George blow a long stream of smoke from his nostrils—watching with rather childish curiosity.

George looked at him, now that the danger of sudden death had been removed, with pleasure and satisfaction, for it was such as this monster that his Government had sent him out to find.

Like many educated men of his age, George knew there had been a time when the world was different. It had been teeming with people, crowded with cities, swarming with vehicles and ships and aircraft. There were, of course, many things he did not know or would not believe. It seemed incredible to him that as many as five million people once lived together in one city, for there were nowadays only a few million humans alive on the face of the whole earth. The cities—their size and complexity—were a considerable mystery to him. He knew the cities had been destroyed by bombs—flattened, smashed, burned and poisoned by radiations. In the beginning rescue teams went to the stricken cities, but later on, after war and disease had disrupted every sort of human organisation, nobody did this any more, and half-crazy men with nothing in their minds but hate kept firing bombs as long as any remained. The bombs fell. The cities were destroyed. Many of the inhabitants died at once; some lingered on a while and died later; a few crawled out of the ruins. After that the ruins were avoided. They were poisoned, radioactive. Nobody went among them. Even animals kept away.

But in at least one instance something did manage to go on living in the glowing ruins. Nothing very important—just two young women in charge of a group of children. The radiation made them all very sick indeed, but the mothers managed to crawl out of doors and bring back food to their children. The food, the water, the very pavements over which they moved, were radioactive, but they went on doing this. Presently, after a few weeks, the young women died, as might be expected. The children ought to have died too. No doubt some of them did, but others persisted in surviving in a perpetual bath of invisible lethal radiations. Perhaps they were Negro children; perhaps their dark skins could absorb or deflect some proportion of the lethal radiation. The children lived by raiding the food stores as they had seen the women do. They were all sickly and anaemic and the lives they lived were not long, but long enough to grow up and have children of their own.

These children born in the radiation bath were not—human.

"All other people run away from me," the monster complained petulantly. "Why you not run?"

"I know you never kill people. Although—" George nodded towards the terrible steel bow, "—you might easily do it by accident sometime, if your hand slipped."

"If I kill anyone," the monster explained, "the men will try much harder to kill me."

"A very intelligent notion," George approved. He noticed that although the monster had the simple vocabulary of a boy of seven, and didn't understand some of the words he himself used, it was not short on ideas.

"Where did you learn to talk?" he asked.

"Talk?—I just talk always—but not for long time now."

"You must have lived with human people at one time." The monster thought this over. He was sitting on a rock now, about five yards away.

"Long time ago I played with boys in a village. I was small then. I was— There was a man who gave me food."

"You were kept as a pet?"

The monster did not answer. It did not know the word. George had a mental picture of a small black shining figure running in the wake of a group of ragged village children.

"Where was the village?"

A black arm pointed north across the mountains. "I walked a long time. Stayed many places. Then I come here. See people, so I like to stay near."

"Before the village, where did you live?"

"Always in the village. But byanby I get big. Bigger than the boys. The village people make me go away."

"But before you lived in that village," George persisted, "where were you?"

"Always in village," the other repeated. Then he appeared to understand what George was driving at. "A boy told me his father found me when he went into the ruins one day. But I only remember the village. Then they drive me out because I am big."

"The ruins? What were the ruins called?"

"The people called the ruins Paris," the monster said. Then he returned to the thought that troubled him. "They drove me out with sticks, and when I tried to come back, they fired arrows at me. Everyone is frightened of me," he concluded.

"You are frightened also," George pointed out. The monster considered this.

"Yes," he admitted finally.

"Would you like to be a friend of the village people, and live with them again?" George asked. The monster moved his great shining bulk restlessly.

"Yes. But they are always frightened and hate me." Then he added definantly, "Perhaps soon I shall kill them all."

"I am a very important and powerful person," George told him without modesty. "If I order the people to let you live in the village with them, they will do so."

"They will? It is warm in the village" The monster mused.

"Let me tell you a story," George proposed. "This happened long ago in a place not far from here. A bear, that is to say a sort of monster like yourself, lived in the mountains, and ate crops and killed sheep and frightened people. So the villagers took their guns and went out to kill it. One hunter shot the bear in the leg and it fell down and was tied with ropes and carried into the village. There the people proposed to shoot it, but the bear offered to be a servant to the village and so it was allowed to live. The bear worked very hard; it carried loads, chopped wood, ground corn, cleared snow, and led the cattle out to pasture before anyone else was awake. In time it came to be highly respected, and eventually it was elected mayor of the village. Under its management the village became more prosperous than ever before."

The monster considered this quaint old folk-tale. "I understand this," he said. "Not all the words, but I understand what you mean. You think this can happen with me?"

"I do," George affirmed.

"Why?" The monster demanded.

"Because you're intelligent. More intelligent than these people."

"Intelligent?—Yes, I think so too. How do you know so much about me?"

"There are others like you," George told him.

The monster's face was smooth solid black, not a human face, not a face on which any emotions could be read, but for a moment it was convulsed.

"Others?" It sprang to its feet. "Where?—Where?" He seized the bow from the ground and fitted an arrow. "Tell me!—Tell me or I kill you—Where are others like me?"

"Put that down," George told him irritably. "If you kill me you will never know. They are on the far side of a great lake of water. The Government in London has had news of them."

"You have seen them?"

"No—They are far away on the other side of the world."

"How many?"

"Eight," George told him. "But we are always searching for more."

"Why?" The monster asked.

"We need you," George explained. "You are extremely valuable to us."

"Why?—Why?" The monster insisted.

"You have better brains than we humans. You are much more clever. We want your help to pull humanity together again."

"A-h-h-h-h!" exclaimed the monster.

George drove down to the village again, with the monster curled up uncomfortably inside the wagon. Near the gate of the village, George stopped the wagon. His approach had been signalled and the majority of the villagers were there to greet him. There was a certain amount of cheering and hand-waving. When the monster squeezed out of the wagon and stood upright, there were cries of alarm. George walked confidently to the waiting group, with the monster pacing behind.

"Here is the monster," George told them, "He was considerably smaller than I expected."

"But we asked you to kill him," someone protested.

"That was unnecessary," George assured him, "I have tamed him instead. But let us go inside and I will explain this."

". . . and the monster also?"

"Yes, certainly."

George advanced into the village. The monster followed. There was a good deal of shuffling to get out of the way. Some house doors were slammed and children were dragged indoors by their mothers.

"I have had experience of monsters before," George told the assembled villagers, "This one is extremely small and I had no difficulty in taming it. It will understand orders quite well if you speak slowly and clearly. You will find it useful and hard-working."

"It would be safer to kill it," someone proposed.

"I think that would be a mistake," George objected judiciously. "You are fortunate in having such a small monster in this valley. If this one is killed another one—almost certainly a larger one—will move in, and your troubles will be increased."

He thought this rather a thin argument, but it seemed to go down with his listeners.

He stayed a week in the village, collecting data for his reports, and making sure that the monster settled in to its new way of life. Before he left he had a word with it.

"They will be glad to have you so long as you work hard," George said. "Listen to everything, learn all the words they use, and try to understand everything, but don't talk at all. Be careful not to let them discover you are more intelligent than them. Human beings mistrust cleverness. And don't frighten the girls!"

"This will not be easy," the monster replied, "but I am more intelligent than these people, as you say. I should like to ask one thing more—You told me there were eight of my sort in the world . . ."

"That's correct—so far as we know."

"Female as well as male?"

"There are five females," George told him.

"A-a-a-h!" exclaimed the monster.

"In a year I shall come back. Perhaps the Government will have plans for your sort by then," George promised.

"You will have no trouble with the monster," he assured the villagers. "As you see, I have made him entirely tame. Don't forget, also, that he has now become a Government monster. I shall expect to find him unharmed when I come back. Government is interested in monsters at present in view of the fact that they can be tamed and made to work hard. On no account kill it yourselves, even if it is troublesome. If necessary I shall do that when I return."

The villagers listened worshipfully. His farewells completed, he returned to his own encampment outside the gate. It was growing dusk as he erected his aerial and put out his call for London. He had made contact and began to read over his report.

"What about my recall?" he asked when that job had been completed.

"Sorry—no recall. The reply is as follows: In view of your rapid completion of mission you are instructed to proceed south to the Mediterranean and make an exploration along the coast. H.Q. Exp (F) thinks there might be one or two villages there."

"What's the use?" George grumbled. "I work hard and cover my assignment in five months instead of six, and all the thanks I get is more work."

"Why should you grumble?" his listener asked. "Nice country you're in; nice wine, so you told me the other night. The books say the girls used to be attractive too, in the old days. You're better off there than trying to scratch a living here among the ruins in London."

George signed off. He got out of the wagon and walked over towards his tent. Just as he ducked his head to go inside he saw some shadowy forms move quickly away towards the village. He patted his revolver holster automatically and walked round the back of the tent to make sure no-one was lurking nearby. He saw immediately two large wooden platters, on one of which lay a couple of plump roasted fowls, and on the other a sizeable mound of ripe peaches. Three bottles of wine stood alongside. Near these appetising offerings, seated on a boulder, was the dark-eyed girl.

—Alan Barclay

Longevity brought with it the daily joys of savouring to their full the little things of life that comprise Life itself. But Man is not immortal—how best spend the last hours when Death has been ordained?

THE LAST DAY OF SUMMER

By E. C. TUBB

He awoke to the sound of roaring trumpets and lay for a while, hovering in that strange region between sleep and waking, clutching vainly at the broken fabric of shattered dreams as the once-bright images dissipated into tenuous clouds of dream-mist. Then he sighed, stirred, the trumpets dwindled to the musical attention call from the bedside videophone and, opening his eyes, he reached for the switch.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Melhuey?" The face pictured on the screen was smooth and pink, with liquid dark eyes and a gentle, understanding mouth.

"Mr. John Melhuey?"

"That's right."

"This is the Bureau, Mr. Melhuey. We received a letter from you this morning with certain enclosures." The image shifted its eyes a little as it stared at something beyond the range of the scanners. "You realise, of course, what it is you ask?"

"I understand perfectly." John didn't trouble to hide his impatience. "Why are you calling?"

"Isn't that obvious, sir? There is always the possibility of mistake. Or perhaps . . ."

"There is no mistake and there is no perhaps about it. You have your instructions."

"Yes, sir. At your service, sir."

The image died as John opened the circuit, lingering for a brief second in fading brilliance before merging with the blank, pearly lustre of the screen. John stared at it for a moment, idly wondering what the man had thought and vaguely regretting the lost opportunity to ask questions, then he sighed and got out of bed.

It wasn't as easy as it had been yesterday, and yesterday had been harder than the day before. Stiff limbs and throbbing joints, odd twinges and dull aches, all foreign to his experience, all unwelcome symptoms of what was to come. Tiredly he entered the bathroom, stripped, and stood beneath the shower.

The water was hot, so hot that it steamed and stung his flesh into a pink glow. He revelled in it, letting it drum against his skull and run over his face, opening his mouth to the warm liquid then stooping so that it traced a tingling path down his back. He adjusted the flow to cold and shivered in the icy blast, his skin goose-pimpling and changing from pink to blue, dead white and unhealthy grey. Misery came with the cold, a chattering numbness then, as he spun the control back to hot, the relief was so great that he almost shouted with sheer animal-pleasure.

He had always enjoyed his morning shower

Finished, he stood in the air-blast, staring at himself in the full-length mirror as he dried.

He had always been a big man in every sense of the word and now, physically at least, he was still big. Carefully he examined himself, from the wide-spread feet, splayed a little now and with sagging arches, up the blue-mottled legs, the abdomen, bulging and lax, the thick waist, the chest heavy with fat where muscle should have stood in taut splendour, the neck with its loose skin and flabby tissue.

Old!

He stared at himself, his lips twisting a little with self-distatste, his deep-set eyes bitter as he touched the engraved lines from nose to mouth, the crow's feet marring once smooth skin, the receding hair and the wrinkled forehead. His skin bore the tiny marks of passing years, crinkled and crepe-like, too-soft and too-sagging, the muscles unable to restrain the tissue, the skin itself a too-big bag for what lay beneath.

Old!

Yesterday he hadn't seemed so bad and the day before yesterday he had been almost young. A week ago he had been fit and a

month ago as virile as he had ever been. Now he was succumbing to age, losing the battle of the passing years with the passage of each hour, paying heavy penalty for his extended youth.

"You're worn out," he said to the image in the mirror. "Finished. Not even the drugs can help you now. You've lived a long time, longer than any man once had a right to expect, but you cannot live forever. Now, with medical science helpless to stave off old age, you're getting senile—fast!"

And it was true. Three times now he had passed his youth and virility only to have it restored by the longevity treatment. Three times—and there could be no fourth. Now he had to wait until he aged and died. Now he had to pay for extended youth by the accelerated advance of breakdown, the accumulated enemies of senility and old age. He had had a long, long summer. He had tasted life to the full, spreading his experiences across the years until now. Now was the last day of summer. Tomorrow was only winter, painful, degrading, bitter winter and bitter death.

He sighed as if bidding goodbye to what he had once been and could never be again then, with exaggerated care, he dressed himself, taking a new suit from the dispenser, smiling as he snapped the seals and slipped the shimmering garments over his body.

He had always liked new clothes.

Breakfast was a work of art. Real fruit juice. Real coffee. Real bread toasted to a fragrant brown crispness and loaded with creamy yellow butter, the soft richness seeming to hold within itself all the trapped sunlight of bygone years. He ate slowly, moving the food over his palate, swallowing with careful deliberation, tasting the food instead of merely chewing it, savouring it as if he had never eaten before. The meal finished he rose and, with casual deliberation, moved about the huge room with its scattered treasures and its quiet, subtle, unmistakeable air of good taste.

A plaque of polished wood hung against the wall. A stone was mounted in the centre, a fragment of grey, crumbling rock and he stared at it, leaning forward to touch it and, as his fingers caressed the rough surface, time slipped and he was young again.

A grey plain, the hiss of oxygen and the chafing encumberance of a suit. Sunlight, harsh and glaring through the shields, jagged peaks and, high in the star-shot sky, a swollen, green-mottled ball wreathed with the tenuous fingers of fleecy cloud.

Luna!

The rock had come from there, torn from where it had lain for uncounted years, wrenched free by a metal glove and carried as

a trophy back to distant Earth. He had been the one to rip it from its bed. He had torn it free and stumbled, knee deep in luna dust, back to where the ship waited like a splinter of radiant steel in the savage light of a naked sun. Long ago now. Long, long ago. Back in his first youth when life was a gay adventure and death a mere word. How long?

He sighed as he thought about it, not trying to read the gold-letter date on the polished wood, letting his hand fall from the rough stone and, as he turned, the too-bright memories scattered and vanished in the light of harsh reality.

A book lay on a small table, a single volume written by a man long dead, and yet containing within its pages the trapped gems of his genius, caught and safeguarded against time. It fell open as he picked it up, flattening at a favourite poem, and he scanned it, feeling a warm comfort in the familiar text.

"From too much love of living, From hope and fear set free, We give our brief thanksgiving, To whatever Gods may be, That no life lasts forever, That dead men rise up never, That even the weariest river, Winds somewhere safe to sea.

He set it down, the warm comfort vanishing at the touch of chill dread, feeling a slight irritation where always before he had relished the swing and depth of the thought behind the words. Swinburne was not for him—not now.

He touched other books, scanned other volumes, all old friends, all holding for him some special grace, some captured memory. He read a story for the hundredth time and enjoyed it as if he had read it but once. He fingered worn bindings and yellowed pages, blinking as his eyes refused their duty until he had had a surfeit of reading and put away the books and sat, staring through the high windows at the late-afternoon sky beyond.

He felt restless. He felt impatient with a strange urgency as though he had much to do and little time in which to do it. Summer was nearly over and soon would come the bitter winter or . . .

He didn't let himself think about it.

He found a bottle, dusty and sealed, stained and bearing the arms of an emperor long dead. He held it against the light, staring at the golden glory imprisoned in the glass, caressing the bottle as if it was a thing infinitely precious, which it was, and priceless, which was almost true. He took a huge glass, a monstrous thing with a tiny stem and a baloon-like bowl. He warmed it between his palms, rolling it, nursing its delicate fragility then, opening the

bottle, he poured out the lambent fluid and, still warming the glass, inhaled the ineffable fragrance of the rare old brandy.

He inhaled and sipped, inhaled and sipped again, feeling little fires light in his stomach and warm his chilling flesh with the magic of the grape and summer suns of distant memory.

"*Oft I wonder what the vinter buys—One half so precious as that he sells.*" He smiled as he murmured the lines, the brandy in the glass seeming to wink at him with reflected light, smiling with its golden face and gurgling with its liquid mouth in complete agreement with the philosophy of the Persian Poet.

"You're a snare," said John accusingly. "You are the one true magic of the ages, the single thing which, by illusion, can turn terror into pleasure, hate into love, despair into hope. You can make all men brothers, all worries as drifting dreams, all hurt and pain as laughable memories. You hold the gift of courage. With you a man can face the world and be undaunted. With you he can ever smile at . . ."

He swallowed, drained the glass and rose from the soft, form-fitting chair in which he sat.

A bowl of fruit stood on a table of glistening plastic, the colours cunningly fashioned in abtruse designs of convoluted shades. He picked a grape, a swollen mutation from the hydroponic gardens, and crushed it against his teeth, savouring the seedless pulp and the sharp, almost acid tang of the syrupy juice. He ate slowly, his fingers not reaching for another until the first had been enjoyed to the full then, as he stared at the darkening sky outside, left the fruit and moved towards the door.

He had always liked the city.

He had always liked the medley of noises, the traffic sounds, the hum of inaudible conversations, the droning and scuffling, the humming and scraping of millions of feet and millions of wheels as the life of the metropolis ebbed and flowed.

There was a little park he remembered, an oasis of green and brown, of trees and flowers, of soft grass and winding paths among the steel and glass, the concrete and plastic of the city. Here little birds chirped their tuneless songs and the heavy scent of growing things filled the summer afternoon with heady fragrance and stately blossoms nodded with somnolent grace.

He spent a little time in the park.

There were some sculptures he had always admired, things of stone fashioned by hands long dust, holding within themselves the dreams and ideals of bygone ages, the figures staring with blank

eyes as they had stared over the passing years and as they would stare for years to come.

He spent a while with the familiar shapes.

There was a street lined with garish signs and filled with the healthy, raucous, cheerfully independent voices of shouting men. A place of misty treasure and glowing illusion where flesh and blood puppets cavorted on stages and the beat of skin and the throb of brass brought a sense of reeking jungles and carnivorous beasts. Here emotions were released and bodies swayed to nerve-tingling rhythm while eyes widened and breath came fast and the pulse of blood rose until each cell and sinew tingled with the collapse of care.

He walked the street until his legs were tired.

He walked until the prickling between his shoulder blades had faded, until his anticipation had died, until despair and frustration rode with him like an invisible incubus and worry began to gnaw with its ten thousand teeth at the yielding fabric of his mind.

When?

He didn't know. He didn't want to know for there is some knowledge a man should not have, but . . . when?

Tiredly he made his way back to his apartment, walking slowly through the bright-lit streets, the sky a black bowl above his head and the scintillant trails of the ships hurling themselves from the spaceport dying like the sparks from a million fireworks against the faded stars.

When?

Now? Two minutes time? Tomorrow?

He hoped not tomorrow. He hoped that he wouldn't have another night of old-man's sleep in which the visions of his youth came to torment him on waking with bitter memories of what might have been. Not again the slow awakening, the rising, the horrible aging and sagging onrush of senility. Not tomorrow. Please God not tomorrow!

"If the thing is to do," he muttered. "'twere best that it be done soon."

For if it were not done soon then it might not be done at all. Human courage and human despair have their limitations and life, even twisted and bitter, hateful and painful—life can be sweet, even though the sweetness be of bitter aloes and dead sea dust.

And he was but human.

Reluctantly he pressed his thumb to the lock, feeling a last flash of hope as he stepped into the warm, softly lit interior then, as he realised the room was empty, felt the sagging onrush of despair.

Tomorrow would be too late.

Tomorrow he would have aged a little too much, would have lost his courage, would have discovered that the today's unbearable was tomorrow's acceptable. He had seen it before. He had seen the broken, decripit things that once had been bright-eyed men strong and with the clear vision of youth, had seen them huddled in their shame as they strove to cling to a life which had become a nagging burden. Tomorrow he too could be like that, hoping against hope, running a futile race against time, senile, teetering on the edge of insanity, his fine co-ordination and trained reflexes lost beneath a welter of petty fears and niggling doubts.

Then death would be a hateful thing. Then the thought of oblivion would fill him with screaming dread and he would shrink, enjoying the pain that meant life, blind and deaf to sane counsel and the advice of intelligence.

A thing of which to be ashamed.

A thing which he had sworn he would never become—and yet? Was there still time?

The room was locked, empty, and he was alone and, looking around him, he knew that time was running out in more senses than one.

For this was the last day of his summer and he was still alive.

He sank into a chair, staring dully at the dark bowl of the sky beyond the high windows, not seeing the flash and glare of the slender ships as they rose towards space, not seeing the faded stars, the immensity of the universe, seeing only himself and what he would become. For a moment self-pity gnawed at his strength and almost he yielded to it, feeling the easy, emotionless tears of age blur his vision and sting his eyes. Then he recovered and stared about the glowing beauty of the room.

Here were his treasures and, in a sense, here was his life. Here were his memories, the little things, the trifles and yet each with its own association with the past. A statue, he reached for it and let his thumb travel with almost sensuous pleasure over the polished stone, a fragment hardly worth the price of a meal, and yet he had carried it with him for uncounted millions of miles. There a ring, a gift later returned, a gift which, if accepted would have changed the course of his entire life.

For a moment he felt the old pain, the shattering of cynicism and felt a faint regret that now, in this last day, he was alone.

And yet he would not have had it otherwise.

Loneliness was something he had lived with too long to fear now. And he could bear it until he died—if he died. The thought made him sweat, a thin film of glistening moisture over the too-soft skin, and his hand trembled a little as he reached for the bottle of rare old brandy. Death, something he had wanted, something he had paid for, something he had expected all day. Not natural death, that would come and its approach was a thing he dreaded and feared accompanied as it would be by accelerated senility and gibbering insanity. But clean, sweet, merciless death, unknown, immediate, a clean cutting off and a neat finish.

The only way to avoid the winter.

He had arranged it and the Bureau of Euthanasia had never been known to fail. He had tasted the sights and sounds, the sensuous pleasures of good food and good wine, the sight of familiar scenes and the visiting of familiar places for what he had imagined to be the last time. He had ignored the assassin who would be watching his every move, discounting what must come until nerve and sinew could deny his knowledge no longer, until anticipation hovered on the verge of being replaced by fear, and the terrible dread of having to reaffirm his intention once the night had passed.

He knew that he could never do it again.

Liquid sunshine poured from the bottle into the swollen glass. Automatically he warmed it between his palms, unable to desecrate the fluid gold even in his extremity of emotion and, as he inhaled the glorious bouquet, he smiled as an artist might smile or as a man to whom has been given one of the rare pleasures of the earth.

He had always appreciated good wine.

He sipped, letting the nectar drift over his tongue and sting his palate with its familiar taste. He sipped again then, as the glass slipped from his fingers and oblivion came with time but for a single thought, he smiled.

The assassin had been something more than just a killer.

He had been a gentleman.

—E. C. Tubb.

It would doubtless be a wonderful thing if a machine could be invented that would do away with journalists, authors and would-be authors. Fleet Street would slowly crumble into an archaic thoroughfare of taverns and coffee shops where the authors' Guilds could slowly raise a new literary edifice.

AUTO-FICTION LTD.

By WANLESS GARDENER

Illustrated by QUINN

Pale brown beer glinting in its glass. Blue cigarette smoke trickling upwards from the nostrils to join the haze overhead. Dusty sunbeams of the late afternoon forming pools of bright yellow light and elongated shadows of the words PUBLIC BAR on the floor. The glass ash-tray, imprinted with its cigarette advertisement, resting on the wet table top. The subdued murmur of an increasing crowd of drinkers. All merged to form an atmosphere in which, for once, the mind became alert; the body erect; the eyes shining, and the tongue eloquent. An atmosphere which engendered enthusiasm for some infallible financial scheme which, alas, in the grey light of dawn was fated to seem depressingly infantile.

"Self-made millionaires are a thing of the past." Caesar Britton spoke through a cloud of smoke issuing from a rapidly moving cigarette clamped between his lips. He had done this the night before, and the night before that, and the night before that . . .

"This is the age of the salary and the wage earner," agreed his companion.

Caesar pulled savagely on his cigarette until the end glowed then he sent a stream of smoke down the nostrils of his long hooked nose. "We were born just a hundred years too late, Pete," he said morosely. "In the middle of the nineteenth century we could have hired a cheap stone hall, bought a few dozen children from the Workhouse and made a fortune in textiles. Nowadays the factory inspectors and the trade unions would make us spend a third of our capital on Welfare; and the vertical trade monopolies would squeeze us off the market."

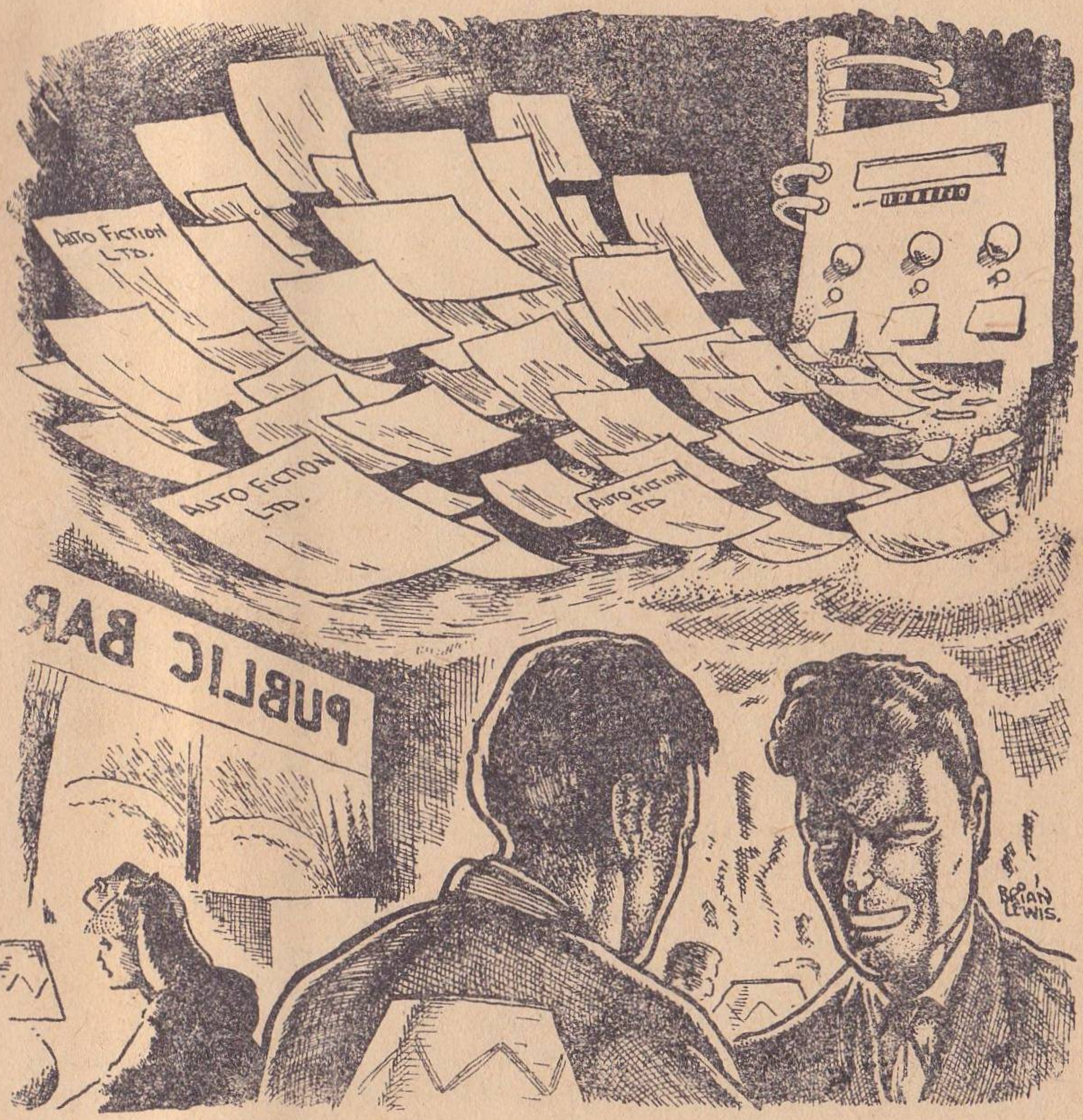
Peter tried to sound optimistic. "There are still occasional bright ideas that make money: ball-point pens; chemical cigarette lighters; self-heating soup tins . . ."

Caesar shook his head. "Ninety-nine-point-nine percent never make the grade. Those that do, make money for the financial backer, not the inventor." He leant forward and extended his hand. "The only way to make a real fortune—I'm speaking in terms of millions—is to mechanize some essential feature of Civilization like transport or communications or power production." He blinked his eyes, looked away, and his voice turned hoarse. "The trouble is everything's already been mechanized. Every damn thing!"

There was a silence between them while they wallowed in self-pity, then Peter drained his glass, placed it on the table again, and waited. A faint sensation of warmth radiated from his stomach to other parts of his body, down his legs to his feet, along his arms to his finger-tips, to his neck and finally to his head. The room became luxuriant and took on the aspect of a millionaire's library or a stock exchange lounge. He reached out for his cigarette and found that his movements had grown more positive, more expressive. His brain had sharpened and he was filled suddenly with the inspiration of the evening, "Why not mechanize my trade—writing!"

Caesar was not to be drawn. "You can't mechanize thought," he said irritably.

"Don't you believe it! Some of the lower grade literature is mechanized in a crude sort of way already. Have you never heard of the cardboard plot-finders; or the old western horse-operas that were always based on one of three plots; or—" Peter searched round for a way of explaining himself, "Look at it this way—you know the police identification system? They have thousands of cards filed away, each one containing the full description of a criminal expressed in about ten out of a hundred factors: colour of hair; colour of eyes; build, etcetera. Well, everyone in the



world is a permutation of these factors, and if we had a machine which selected these factors at random, we would be able to create fictitious yet perfectly credible characters.

"Literature, written by machine, would be the same as the police identification system. Only instead of a hundred factors there would be thousands, maybe millions in the high grade stuff."

Caesar was only half convinced. "It comes down to a question of capital again, doesn't it. A machine, such as you have in mind, would cost hundreds of thousands to develop and build . . ."

"We could dispense with the machine temporarily," said Peter. "We could use something like the police system, with cards and indexed books. We'd have to limit ourselves to a minimum

number of factors for the time being. The result will be undiluted corn but there are people who buy that stuff. We may even sell on the novelty value until the quality improves."

Caesar thought for a while then sat back and allowed his eyes to grow small and shrewd. "To make it pay we would need, at a minimum, a salary for each of us plus a typist's wage plus overheads—say three and a half times an average writer's income. Then, following the normal practice of mass production, we'd have to sell at half the standard market price, which means we'd have to produce at least seven times the output of an average writer—do you think we can do it, Pete?"

"I don't see why not. We'd be cutting out the three main time wasters: research, continuity, and inspiration."

Caesar felt inside his coat and pulled out a pocket-book and pencil. He opened the book on a dry part of the table and said, "First, how much capital will we need?"

"We'll need a typewriter, one or two filing cabinets, a desk, chairs, paper, filing cards and other odds and ends—say about £200," suggested Peter.

"And we'll need the typist's wages for about three months," added Caesar, "plus three months' rent, water rates, electricity, plus minor alterations: say a grand total of £400."

Peter sat back and said, "I have £150 in savings."

"And I have £90," added Caesar.

"Which leaves . . . er . . . £160 to make up. Do you think the bank would advance us a loan?"

Caesar shook his head; "Not on an untried scheme like this. We'll have to canvass our relatives."

He drained his glass then walked over to the bar to replenish. He returned carrying whiskies as well as beer.

"I know just the place to commence business," Caesar continued. "We'll rent that hall above Johnson's the hardware merchant on the main road . . ."

And so it went on. Vague plans slowly crystallizing into fact. The sunbeams were nearly horizontal and had turned dull red. The crowd of customers had increased and were noisier. A mistuned piano clattered in the background. On a rising tide of excitement the conversation changed from plans and figures to speculation on the future effects of their financial scheme.

Abraham Perdy, managing-editor of *Modern Magazines*, sighed and laid the manuscript down on his desk.

"You said you had something excitingly different to offer, Mr.

Britton," he said sorrowfully. "You obviously haven't read my magazines."

Caesar Britton, standing at the other side of the desk with a soft-leather case under his arm, asked an apparently forlorn question. "Would you say that the manuscript was up to the standard of your usual author?"

"Yes, dismally so."

Caesar rubbed the side of his nose. "What if I were to tell you, Mr. Perdy, that this manuscript had no author; that it was the product of a machine."

There was a pause then Perdy said, "You are, of course, speaking figuratively."

"No, literally. May I take a seat?"

Perdy smiled slowly and nodded towards a chair. "Your approach is at least original, Mr. Britton."

"I am a salesman," said Caesar. "The manuscript on your desk is a sample product of the firm I represent—AUTO-FICTION LTD." He unzipped his case and withdrew from it a printed green folder. "This is our prospectus," he said, handing it to Mr. Perdy. "Of the list of story-classifications mentioned, "Westerns" are available now and the others will become available in due course. We will write a story of any length to within a hundred words of the figure you request. A thousand words will be supplied within twenty-four hours plus an extra hour for each additional thousand words thereafter.

"We also have a special editorial service which some of our customers have found convenient. Its purpose is to save you time and money. Instead of searching half the night for something to fill those awkward gaps, you have but to lift the phone, state your requirements, and leave the rest to us."

Perdy read through the prospectus for a while then said, "Is your business a large one, Mr. Britton?"

"Not at the present moment but . . ." Caesar smiled modestly, "we believe our prospects are good and we hope to expand rapidly."

Perdy remained buried in the book a moment longer then said, "Do you intend placing a limit on your expansion?"

The purpose of the questions eluded Caesar and so, a little defensively, he said, "Naturally not. We assume the prerogative of every capitalist enterprise; which is, ultimately, to capture the entire market."

"Then you intend squeezing out the . . . er . . . manual style author."

Caesar's face hardened slightly then he shrugged, "The oil lamp

gave way to the gas lamp and gas gave way to electricity." He closed the zipp-fastener on his case with a flourish and added, "Can't stand in the way of progress can we, Mr. Perdy?"

Mr. Perdy shook his head regretfully. "No I suppose not," he sighed.

The clatter of typewriting smote Caesar's ears as he entered the room and closed the door behind him. He gave the girl-typist a fatherly pat on the cheek and the shoulder and, swallowing hard, walked over to where Peter was standing beside the filing cabinet. He surveyed the boxes of numbered cards, and the charts and lists and graphs pinned to the wall, then said ruefully, "I'm always half afraid we'll run out of stories."

Peter shook his head, "Even with the small number of factors listed here, we have over a billion permutations diverse enough to warrant calling each of them a new story, and I'm increasing the number of factors all the time," he smiled reassuringly. "I think you can regard our source as inexhaustible."

"Isn't there a chance we might repeat ourselves?"

"Yes, there is," admitted Peter, "but I'm inventing a checking system, consisting of numbers and figures for each factor, which should obviate the danger. Unfortunately it'll waste more and more time as our output grows. We're going to need the help of some kind of automatic calculator.

"And while we're on with mechanization," Peter grew suddenly enthusiastic, "I've thought of a way of increasing output. My present method is first, to look up, in the index book, the plot incident and mood of the character speaking. This gives me a selection of cards, on each of which is written a suitable phrase for the character to speak. I take one at random and place it in the clip above the typewriter and the typist does the rest. Now if we could sort these cards with the aid of . . ."

Caesar snapped his fingers. "Of course! A punched-card sorting machine. Write down a list of specifications, Pete, and we'll send them off to IMPERIAL ELECTRIC. Our bank-balance is rising all the time, we should be able to afford some decent-sized machinery by the time they design what we want. Later, when our store of information gets out of hand, we might even go in for their new "Large-Molecule Memory Unit"; it sounds too incredible to be true. They say it can store the equivalent of eight-times-ten-to-the-twentieth binary units per cubic centimetre. The supporting equipment unfortunately makes it the size of a house but it still seems incredible."

"Oh, by the way," said Peter, "while I remember—the hardware merchant downstairs has complained of the noise again."

Caesar looked out of the window and smiled cynically. "Well, the man won't need to complain much longer—I've just bought the whole block. I'm kicking him out next week. We'll need a strong ground floor for the new machinery when it arrives—are there any more worries?"

"A few abusive letters from anonymous authors. One polite one from the "National Writers' Association." They're complaining about our cut prices. They say it's unethical."

Caesar twisted his lips contemptuously. "Since when was greater efficiency unethical."

Peter shook his head dubiously. "When we really expand, our business will hit them pretty hard. It doesn't seem right that every step we take upwards should be at the expense of someone else."

Caesar make a gesture of impatience. "Save your sympathy, Pete. This sort of thing has been happening ever since Civilization began. All inventions cause a certain amount of unemployment and dislocation when they first start. The only difference is that the victims this time are by nature more garrulous."

The President of the "National Writers' Association," sitting with a small group of friends in the club lounge, slid his whisky to one side irritably. He was entitled to a few hours relaxation like any other member and he objected to these selfish interruptions. He gazed at the table for some time, moistening his moustache, then inclining his head towards the man standing at his side, said, "Can't it wait until next meeting?"

"No, it can't." The man leant forward and in almost menacing tones said, "I'm getting desperate. "Smyth House" have cut me off dead. They've changed over exclusively to the services of this . . . this robot-writer thing."

"There are surely other magazines in the crime field," said the President, querulously.

"I've tried them. They're all overcrowded by refugees from "Smyth House."

The President fiddled unhappily with his tie. "Quite frankly, Chadwick, I can't see what more I can do. I've sent these people a note giving my views on the ethics of the situation and . . . I'm afraid that's my legal limit."

"Legal limit! Ethics! Good God, man, this isn't a tea-party, it's a fight for survival!" Chadwick slapped the palm of his hand on the table making the President's whisky jump. "I'll tell you

what you can do. You can phone the other writers' associations and form a common-front with them. You can get on the tails of the publishers, tell them to stop accepting this machine-made stuff. If they refuse, slap on a universal boycott, and do it now—before it's too late—before the Robot-writer grows big enough to satisfy the entire market. Then you can find out whether AUTO-FICTION LTD. are contravening any bye-laws. And find out who owns their property and buy them out. There's a hundred and one things you could do if you'd only get a crowbar between the chair and that big fat behind of yours."

Marlow Hogg, a novelist of the freudian school, seated on the opposite side of the table, tried hard to conceal his irritation. He had worries just like Chadwick. The Inland Revenue people pestered him continually with demands for supertax. Editors, publishers, and film directors were at him night and day, never giving him a moment's peace. Life was hard at times but he never lost his temper, he never panicked.

"You're exaggerating the danger, Chadwick," he said soothingly. "That this machine may take over the lower grade literature I'll grant you. It was pretty dreary stuff anyway, badly in need of efficient handling. But that it should take over the entire field of Literature is quite patently absurd. This machine is merely a mechanical card shuffler. It's stories are permutations of thousands of phrases already written down by human hand. There is no provision for the invention of new phrases, therefore it is incapable of writing anything of a truly creative nature."

"I agree with you in principle, Marl," said a breezy socio-political author at his side, "but not in detail. If a phrase were an entirely new creation throughout, it would read like gibberish. All new phrases are but rearrangements of words and phrases used by other people. It is the orignal underlying ideas which are the true results of creation."

Chadwick rapped the table again angrily, "Dammit, isn't anyone going to do anything."

The President exchanged weary glances with his friends. "I must repeat, Chadwick, there is nothing we can do. This club is an association of free individuals, not a trade-union. We cannot order our members out on strike—which is what your word "Boycott" really implies—we cannot undertake to supply strike funds, nor can we organize pickets. Your whole attitude is unrealistic and unreasonable, and I'd be obliged if you allowed me to finish my drink."

Chadwick straightened up and sighed heavily with dissatisfaction. "I see. You three are sitting pretty, so it's damn-you-Jack-

I'm-all-right." He pulled a small leather folder from his pocket and threw it on the table. "Here! I'm resigning. We'll form our own club, my friends and I. Then we'll get some real esprit-de-corps. We're not bothering ourselves with any legal flip-flap so don't blame us if any mud starts flying around."

"This is the third burglary in a row," said Caesar, glancing round at his staff of four seated at the table, "and they've all followed the same pattern. Nothing of value stolen but plenty of wilful damage. Have any of you anything enlightening to say on the matter?"

They all shuffled their feet, looked at each other's reflections in the polished table, and doodled with their pencils.

"It's pretty obvious who the culprits are," rumbled Johnson, technician in charge of the memory department.

"Yes," agreed Caesar, "there's little reason to doubt that it's the work of our bellicose friends in the "Writers' Freedom League." Of course we might have expected it. Craftsmen have rebelled against every mechanical improvement since the Industrial Revolution. This puts them in the same class as the English hand-weavers who smashed up the new textile machinery in the eighteenth century." He paused thoughtfully and added, "The point is, what are we going to do to stop it?"

Peter smiled secretively. "I think I have the answer."

"You have?" asked Caesar, brightening. "Well, let's have it, man."

Peter felt inside his coat and pulled out a sheaf of papers. "I have the answer contained in this short story. All I did was put the problem of the burglaries in the form of a half-finished plot and the Robot-writer solved the problem by completing the story."

There was a general gasp of admiration but Caesar held up a warning hand, "Let's hear what the machine has to say first. It isn't unknown for it to produce a stinker."

Peter laid the papers down on the table. "The solution is as follows: finger-prints to be taken of everyone working in the building, all doors, windows, and other means of entrance to be fitted with a special lock which will operate thus: (a) the person entering will place his finger-tips on a concealed scanner; (b) the information will travel to memory department where it will be compared automatically with the prints in store; (c) if the prints tally, the door will open and the fact that a certain person went through that door at a certain time is recorded; (d) if the prints do not tally or if entrance is made without recourse to the scanner,

an infra-red photograph is taken and the caretaker is warned." Peter glanced up to indicate that he was finished.

Caesar turned to Johnson and asked, "Can you fix it?"

Johnson shrugged, "I can manage the connections to the Memory department but I'll need advice on the scanners."

"Send away to IMPERIAL ELECTRIC," said Caesar. Then he gave a word of praise, "That was a smart idea of yours, Pete."

Peter blushed.

"But," continued Caesar, "Why should we limit ourselves? Why not make Peter's short story a permanent fixture—an everlasting serial of the adventures of AUTO-FICTION LTD? We could make the central theme the protection and improvement of the business then the constant input of new information could help create an equally constant output of ideas from the machine." He looked questioningly from Johnson to Peter.

They both exchanged glances of approval. Peter said, "Why not select relevant information deliberately?"

Caesar turned towards the secretary and asked, "What do we feed in at the present moment, Miss Frazer?"

Without reference to notes, the secretary said, "The contents of twelve weekly and daily periodicals, selected B.B.C. items, selected histories, anything we can pick up in the way of crime, information on schools and sports for our juvenile stories, facts and figures about the Wild-West, an art journal, two ladies magazines, six trade and domestic catalogues, three rural magazines, two geographical magazines, two aviation magazines, four science periodicals, and three or four books a month on selected subjects."

Caesar smiled faintly and said, "That seems fairly complete. I don't think we'll need anything extra on the question of protection save maybe a few technical books on burglar alarms. To deal with the question of business improvement however, I think you'd better feed in all the statistics you can find on economics. A teletype connection with the stock exchange wouldn't come amiss either—have you any comments, Johnson?"

"Yes," said Johnson ruefully, "I'm afraid this will aggravate an already pressing problem. My memory store is expanding all the time. I'll soon have used all my allotted floor-space."

"That problem, alas," sighed Caesar, "will be with us always. As a temporary solution I've taken an option on all the property in Trafalgar Street next door."

"I have another point," said Peter. "I think you'll agree we're pretty well overworked as it is without this new thing. Don't you think we should set on extra staff to deal with the stream of bright ideas we're expecting from the machine?"

"Yes, that's an idea." Caesar turned to the secretary and said, "Will you see to it, Miss Frazer. Set on a few people. Let them handle all the small suggestions themselves and bring only the big things in for our approval." He turned to the others and said, "Is there anything else?" He waited in silence for a few seconds then was about to turn away when he saw the expression on Johnson's face. "Well," he said irritably, "if you've anything further to say, say it."

Johnson smiled uneasily. "A thought's just occurred to me," he said. "Do you realise the machine is gradually taking control of the business!"

May Lindsay gazed dreamily along the row of photographs pinned to the partition above her desk. She paused before her latest hero, Patrick Connolly, leader of the first expedition into space.

Patrick spent most of his time in Australia but he did come to Harwell occasionally, and she did have an aunt Jean who lived in Harwell! She could see it now, she'd be wearing that white dress that made her skin look gold, and she'd be resigned to the thought that she'd have to walk all the way home to her aunt Jean's, when who should come up in his car but—

But she had work to do. A pile of Auto-Fiction Memos on the side of her desk, and a new one sliding down the Robot-writer's chute even now. With a sigh she picked up the top one and began checking through it.

The other girls were always asking her when she was going to get a boy-friend then sniggering afterwards as though they'd said something funny. They would snigger on the other side of their silly faces one of these days. She could just picture their expressions when it happened. She'd be sitting at her desk minding her own business when—

May's eyes blurred over as she saw the incredible contents of the second paper in the pile. It read:

Dear May,

I'm crazy about you. Make an excuse to come to my office.

P.W.

P.W.—Peter Watt! One of the Gods of the head office. May bit her lip to stop it trembling. She glanced along the row of photographs again and suddenly felt older, more mature. She realized now that these photographs represented mere girlish infatuations. She'd really been in love with Peter all the time.

The inter-comm at the side of Miss Frazer's desk droned. She pressed the thumb-switch and the screen cleared to reveal the blushing face of Mr. Watt.

He cleared his throat and said, "One of the girls, a Miss May Lindsay, claims that I wrote her a note of a very compromising nature . . ."

"Did you, Sir?" asked Miss Frazer bluntly.

Mr. Watt blushed more than ever, "Certainly not, Miss Frazer. I wouldn't think of such a thing . . ."

"Does the note bear your signature?"

"No; only the typewritten initials: P.W."

"Then you've nothing to worry about. Leave it to me, Mr. Watt. I know how to handle girls of this sort."

Ten minutes later, a weeping, bewildered May Lindsay was dismissed. As she walked past her desk the paper-chute seemed to grin at her.

"These are the personality charts of the applicants for the post vacated by May Lindsay," said Miss Frazer. She handed Peter Watt a sheaf of cards.

"Personality Charts?" Peter raised his eyebrows. "That's a new one on me."

"It's the latest bright idea from the machine," explained Miss Frazer, an edge of irritation in her voice. "It consists of a long, apparently pointless, questionaire for each of the applicants. These personality charts are the result."

Peter glanced through each chart in turn then selected one. "This Mary McCarron seems, according to the chart, almost phenomenally suited for the job."

"I know." Miss Frazer compressed her lips. "And there must be something wrong with my personal judgment, because I've seen her and she's as shifty as they come."

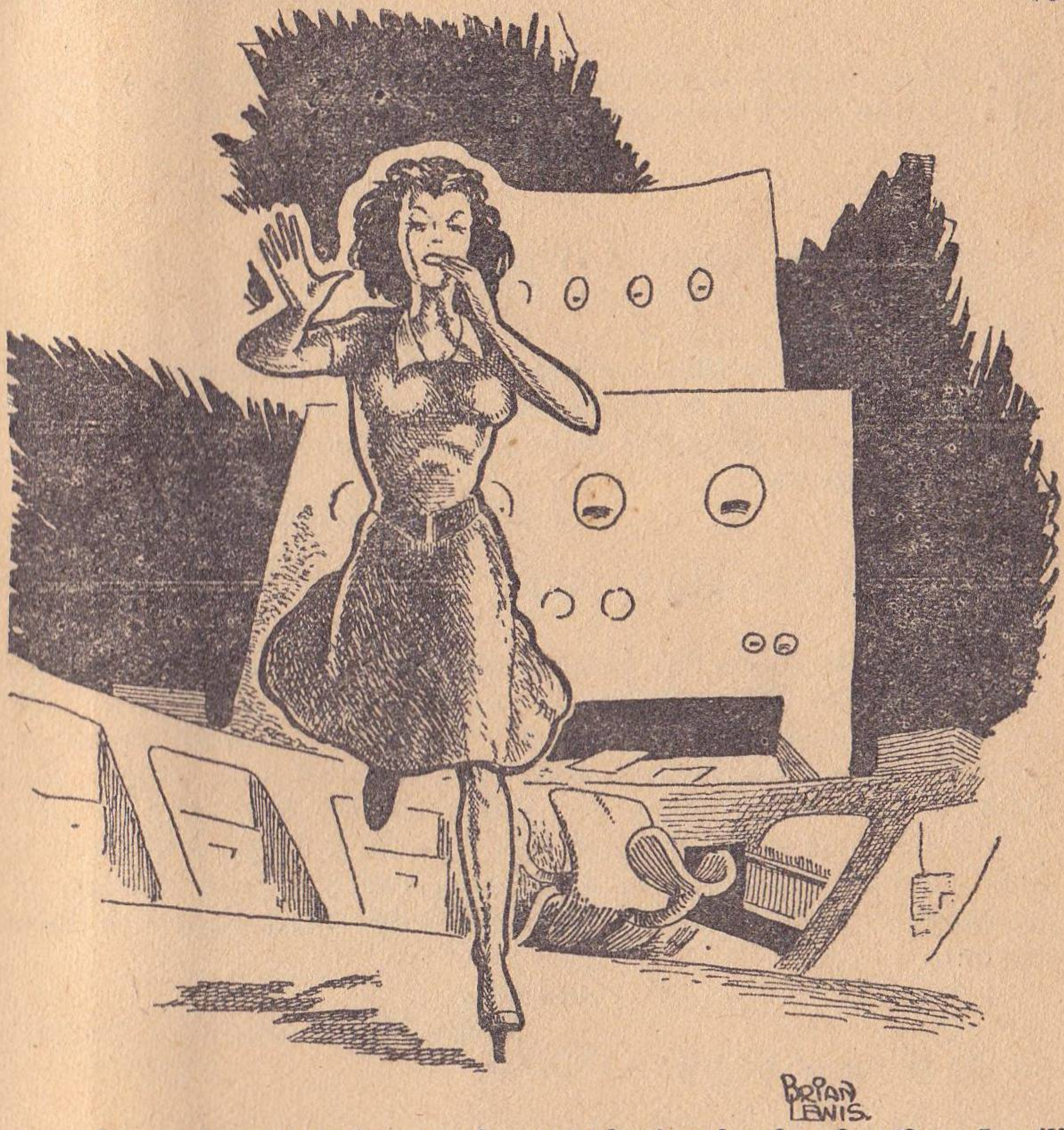
Peter stroked his chin for a while, then shrugged, "Ours' not to reason why, Miss Frazer. If the machine says it, it must be so. Sign her on."

Miss Mary McCarron was surprised but not in the least put out by the letter she received on her first day. It read:

Dear Mary McCarron (As you now call yourself)

A number of small birds with large ears have informed me of certain interesting and—more important—provable items concerning your previous places of employment. I need only mention "Hotel Metro," "The Colonel," and "Con Lou" so that you may dig that I know whereof I speak.

My proposition is this: if you pass all Auto-Fiction Memos marked with a green swastika, without reference to either the



other sub-secretaries or the people in the head office, I will refrain from publishing your monotonously sordid biography. Furthermore, a slip—advantageous to yourself—will occur in the wage account.

Mary, being a sensible girl, knew a deal when she saw one.

to the editor of HOMO SAPIENS 3/8/75

Re, your editorial of the 27th of last month. In para. 4 you assert that the new robot-newspapers are replacing their human-operated rivals, one at a time, by a process of blackmail and legal trickery. I might have called this a contemptible libel but knowing the true reason for your outburst I dismiss it as maudlin self-pity. The robot-newspapers are in the ascendancy for the good old capitalist reason that they are more efficient. They present to the World a unique journalistic phenomenon: news-

reporting, entirely unbiassed by human emotion or beliefs. They are, Sir, the first newspapers ever to give GUARANTEED truth.

yours etc.,

A. Merrit Bishop's Market.

to the editor of HOMO SAPIENS 5/8/75

This fellow A. Merrit must have a hide of brass to submit a letter so blatantly anti-human to a human-operated newspaper. I find it incredible that anyone should be so completely lacking in a sense of loyalty to the Human Race; that anyone should be so contemptuous of moral values; that anyone should be so . . . Sir, words fail me.

Sir Douglas Byng O.B.E. Epping.

to the editor of HOMO SAPIENS 8/8/75

Sir,

...

Who is this character, Merrit, anyway? I've lived in Bishop's Market all my life and I've never come across the name. Can he by any chance be a phoney? I know it's unfashionable to bear a passionate loyalty towards Mankind but people like Merrit who actually help the Robot to the detriment of their fellow humans make me feel sick. In these times I think it is the duty of we, the few who seem aware of the danger, to investigate people like Merrit, especially when they use false names.

yours etc.,

Wally North Bishop's Market.

to the editor of HOMO SAPIENS 17/8/75

Sir,

Two "Peter Cheyney" types called on me the other day and started asking questions about A. Merrit. Dare I guess that my letter of the 8th. started an investigation?

yours etc.,

Wally North Bishop's Market.

The two "Peter Cheyney" types you mention were almost certainly members of the "Bishop's Market Investigation Agency," whom we employed to follow up your courageous and public-spirited lead. A. Merrit, as you seemed to have guessed, does not in fact exist. The name is a nom-de-guerre used by a group of Bishop's Market citizens—we might almost call them renegade humans—who were secretly employed by AUTO-FICTION LTD to spread pro-robot propaganda and slanderous rumours against people and firms selected by the A-F brain. With the interests of Humanity at heart we shall continue our self-appointed task of exposing these malignant growths in the midst of society.

For story so far and list of people involved, see our editorial and front page. *Ed.*

LIBEL CHARGE AGAINST NEWSPAPER

The newspaper HOMO SAPIENS was taken to Court last week on a charge of libel. The plaintiffs, a group of angry Bishop's Market citizens, claim that harmful allegations were printed in HOMO SAPIENS accusing them of belonging to a secret society and of spreading false rumours against certain firms in the town.

HOMO SAPIENS tried to overwhelm the Court with a mass of documentary evidence in support of their accusations, but the Counsel for the Plaintiffs, with calm and practiced skill, proved each item to be a clumsy, easily exposed forgery.

Kingdom Smith, the proprietor-editor of HOMO SAPIENS, with breath-taking effrontery, professed surprise, claiming that he had accepted the evidence on good faith from an organization known as the "Bishop's Market Investigation Agency," but his surprise was as nothing compared with the surprise of the Court when it was found that the B.M.I.A. did not in fact exist.

The Court at this point rocked with laughter when Kingdom Smith, assuming an air of bewildered innocence, said, quote—We must have been corresponding with *someone*—unquote.

Kingdom Smith tried to push this preposterous point even further by producing a letter from Wally North (a supposed inhabitant of Bishop's Market) claiming that he (Wally North) had been visited by two men making inquiries about Mr. A. Merrit (one of the plaintiffs). The Court was by now not in the least surprised to find that Wally North was likewise an invention of Kingdom Smith's fertile imagination.

In a last minute bid, HOMO SAPIENS tried to implicate another newspaper, the BISHOP'S MARKET RECORDER, but the RECORDER were quite firm. They categorically denied ever having corresponded with HOMO SAPIENS or ever having recommended the fictitious B.M.I.A.

HOMO SAPIENS inevitably lost their case. Kingdom Smith was heard to remark on leaving that the whole thing had been a frame-up, a plot on behalf of the Robot to ruin him and steal his newspaper. (Sigh!) where have we heard that one before. *A-F N S report.*

A declaration of policy: We, the new proprietors of HOMO SAPIENS, will henceforth exclude from these pages, all propaganda designed to create suspicion and hostility towards that much maligned public servant: the A-F brain. And yielding to overwhelming public pressure, we shall henceforth campaign for the merging of human and robot-controlled periodicals into one great news service.

A. Merrit Editor.

Bernie gazed disconsolately out of the window. The changes that had taken place in Fleet street depressed him and made him feel old. The famous newspaper offices had either been turned into cheap cafes with names like "The Mail" or "The Sweeney Todd" or "The Lord Beaver," or had remained derelict, their cracked plastic fronts now half-hidden beneath rusty corrugated iron, and their upper floors converted into noisy, crowded tenements.

Writers swarmed the street below, wearing what almost amounted to a uniform—a multi-coloured monk's habit, tied in the middle with a rope, with ornamental knot in front hiding a magnetic clasp, and ornamental writing materials hanging at side. Most wore the new "Tonsured pate" hair style accompanied by either beard or handle-bar moustache. Higher up the street towards St. Paul's, Bernie could see crowds of them lounging and arguing, their typewritten broadsheets laid out on the pavement for the inspection of the public.

Bernie turned his gaze in towards the equally crowded and noisy interior of the flat. It was, like hundreds of other writers' establishments, furnished in the latest, so called, "Early Council-House" style.

A young man, standing near the imitation wash-up sink, raised his glass and murmured, "Death to the Robot."

"May his cog-wheels rust," replied another.

"Amen!" shouted those who could hear above the noise.

"The end of the twentieth century," said a floral monk into Bernie's ear, "will mark the beginning of the Literary Renaissance." He pushed aside two shameless lovers; dove his hand into the library shelf and handed Bernie a book. It bore a brilliant hand-painted cubist cover and was thin and cunningly designed not to fit into any pocket. "Isn't it a masterpiece?" he drooled.

Bernie glanced through the ten or twelve typewritten pages of jerky, apparently unrelated, phrases. Picking one at random, he read—A plum has a soft body, no brains, and a heart of stone: I AM A PLUM!—Bernie shuddered.

"There . . . isn't much story, is there," he said, trying not to be too critical. "I mean, not when you compare it with the Auto-Fiction books."

The Floral Monk raised his head to one side, half-lowered his eyelids, and in a bored voice said, "Well, of course, if you want a mechanically catalogued report oozing with such fascinating tit-bits as the precise shade of red of a man's eyes or the number of meals he drinks a day or the kind of toilet-paper he uses . . ."

A striped monk, gazing at the book in Bernie's hand, wrinkled his nose in disgust and said, "Excrement!"

"It never was more than a stop-gap," said his companion, "a preliminary to the real literature of the future: Nihilinguism!"

"We nihilinguists," announced the Striped Monk, "have dispensed with all physical impedimenta, even language itself."

"You write without language?" said Bernie incredulously.

"It is quite an achievement," agreed the Striped Monk. He sat down beside Bernie, crossed his legs, and, leaning forward confidentially, said, "You see, stories may be translated into many different languages, their wording and appearances changing each time, yet their basic meanings remaining intact. These basic meanings are thus more permanent, more—real—than either the stories or the languages themselves. You follow me?"

Bernie nodded vaguely and murmured, "I think so."

"Well, it is these transcendent, non-linguistic meanings that we nihilinguists strive for, and in striving we declare our emancipation from the mere machine-writing of our predecessors."

Bernie was intrigued in spite of himself and asked, "But how can you possibly write without a language of some kind?"

The Striped Monk smiled modestly and said, "We use symbols, some familiar and some unfamiliar. They bear a superficial resemblance to words but they are really what we call inter-plane keys: oral and graphic links between the physical and non-physical worlds whereby one nihilinguist may communicate his transcendent thoughts to another. Do you understand?"

Bernie understood only too well but he managed to look profound.

"The best example of nihilinguist art," said the Striped Monk, "is Van Haarlem's devastatingly funny poem: "Ti Flodwed"; written in the pure or Jabberwocky style."

"Lewis Carroll's Jabberwocky," explained the companion, "is the earliest example of nihilinguism."

The Striped Monk closed his eyes in ectasy. "Ti Flodwed," he murmured, leaning back, "is a poem wherein each inter-plane key has its own individual meaning and stands by itself as a masterpiece. Yet . . ." he looked into the beyond and bit his lips in a struggle to express himself, ". . . collected together the poem makes a complete thought," he cupped his hands, "a well rounded harmony of wit and drollery." He lowered his shining eyes to Bernie and said, "You must allow me to read it to you."

Without waiting for permission he pushed aside the two shameless lovers and withdrew from the shelf a blue rhomboid book

measuring three inches by twelve. Selecting a page he cocked a roguish eye and read four lines of pure gibberish.

He grinned and dug his elbow into Bernie's ribs to indicate that he had reached the funny part. All those within earshot were soon convulsed with laughter.

Bernie wondered if it were he who was wrong and he turned to gaze disconsolately out of the window onto a decaying Fleet street.

Peter Watt removed his glasses and looked up at the infuriated sub-secretary. "I . . . hear you have a complaint to make, Miss Crain," he murmured hesitantly.

The female's eyes flashed. "What do you mean by printing this?" she demanded, throwing a paper-backed novel onto the desk in front of him. It had a luridly sexy cover and the title: *Overheard In The Powder-Room.*"

Peter distastefully picked up the book and forced himself to read a few words. After a while he laid it down, not quite sure of what he was expected to say. "There seems to be nothing unusual here, Miss Crain. It's about the same standard as our other sex novels and you haven't previously objected."

Miss Crain's mouth tightened. "Don't come the innocent with me," she said furiously. "This book contains word for word reports of things said in our powder-room over the last three months."

Peter shuddered as the all too familiar thoughts of libel proceedings crossed his mind. "Now, Miss Crain," he said placatingly, "you know as well as I do that in a large concern such as ours coincidences occur all the time . . . "

"Coincidence, my aunt Fanny! We've just searched the powder-room and we've found a microphone hidden beneath the plaster."

Peter had the horrifying feeling that he was losing his grip on reality. "But . . . who could possibly have done such a thing?"

"That's an easy one." The sub-secretary slapped a paper on the desk and as Peter reached for it she added, "There's no point in destroying it. It's only a photostat copy. I'm keeping the original for evidence."

Peter's attention was drawn briefly to a small green swastika at the foot of the page then he lifted his eyes to the top and as he read, understanding dawned. It was an authorization for AUTO-FICTION LTD to open an account with NATIONAL TELE-PHONE INSTALLATIONS. N.T.I. had never installed a legitimate telephone in their entire career. It was well known—though never openly stated—that most of their transactions were concerned with the installation of hidden recording machines, cameras, and microphones.

Peter's hand trembled as he laid the paper on the desk again. "I see it all now," he said huskily. "We are both victims of the same monster. A monster, alas, of my own making."

The sub-secretary's normally pretty face twisted into an ugly sneer. "This is a new approach, Mr. Watt. It ought to be worth hearing."

"Don't you see," pleaded Peter, "We've been thinking of the Robot-writer as a tool, as a computor, but now we know it to be a ruthless intelligence serving no end but its own. Alas, it is we who have been the robots—flesh robots! It has merely pressed the appropriate emotional button and we have moved in the desired direction—and that poor girl!"

The sneer remained on Miss Crain's face, "I'd get your solicitor to think up a better story than that, Mr. Watt, because you're going to need it. This isn't the first slimy trick your firm has pulled but it's the first time there's been any clear-cut evidence, and I'm going to use it to open up the whole rotten business from top to bottom. You just wait till I've been through the Law Court —you'll wish you'd never been born!"

With that she went out, clashing the door behind her. Peter heard her retreating footsteps going down the corridor—sounding sharp and angry. He rose from his chair, walked over to the window and tried to calm himself by looking out over the sun-lit trees twenty storeys below. But there, half a mile away, lay a concrete mountain, the towering mass of the Memory Store, blind, motionless, but now seeming to be filled with a dangerous pseudo-life. The tiny Edwardian houses swept about it in symmetrical streets and crescents, stopping short of the main pile and appearing again where geometrically they should appear, as though the missing portions still existed, half-digested, in the stomach of the ever hungry monster.

Peter ran his fingers through the imitation flowers at his side and felt a small square box concealed inside them. A microphone! He traced the wires through the plant pot down to the floor leading to . . . only God knew where. The machine had overheard the entire conversation.

Blood rushed to Peter's head and he placed a hand on the window sill to steady himself. How many more gadgets had the machine concealed in the building? Gadgets to improve the business and gadgets to protect the business. Sweat broke out afresh at this thought. Protect the business against what? Against people like this girl?

He heard the distant footsteps stop at the end of the corridor. The double gates of the lift clashed back then were shut again. The motor sighed for two seconds then there was a tiny explosion, a deep bass *twang!* followed by a rumbling noise, as of something descending faster and faster. From the deep shaft there came a terrified shriek cut off by a long drawn-out concussion which made the whole building tremble.

Peter felt sick. He wished now with heart and soul that all this had never been.

"We'd be creating a tyranny such as the World has never seen," said Peter morosely. Alcohol had ceased to stimulate his nervous system and was now beginning to sour his stomach. From high above his head, a sickly-white light shone down through the smoke onto the frosted lower half of the window and the ornate cyphers RAB CILBUP. The other tables were now hidden by a crowd of noisy, stupid, red-faced men. The beer pumps were squeaking and thumping; spewing forth brown liquid into handfuls of glasses. A hard-faced woman was playing "You are my Sunshine," on the piano and the crowd round her were giving full vent to their beery throats. There was an argument beside the dart board and a violent swirling commotion near the Select Room door, indicating an invisible fight. The whole thing was beginning to make Peter feel ill.

Caesar grabbed Peter's arm. "Don't back out on me now, Pete," he pleaded. "If we don't do it, someone else will think of the idea."

"The machine will plant millions of microphones in people's houses and bedrooms," continued Peter, "then it will tell people where to work and what to eat. It might even take a hand in human breeding."

Caesar compressed his lips and turned away disgustedly. "You're talking like those old hens who used to cluck over the first railways, saying they were going to eat up the countryside; polute the rivers, spoil the milking cows . . . "

"But, don't you see," insisted Peter, "this would be the first industry run by a non-human intelligence."

"That's just superstition." Caesar drew on a new cigarette and spoke rapidly through a cloud of ejected smoke. "A hundred and fifty years ago, if the public had been told of a machine that could make a picture with greater accuracy than any living artist and could do it in less than a second, they would have said what you are saying now: that such a machine must possess a vast intelli-

gence, so vast that it must inevitably rule the World. But now we know that this machine—the camera—possesses less intelligence than the lowest single-cell plant. So it is with the Robot-writer. It would shuffle a few million cards, type a few sheets of paper and the result would have all the appearance of intelligence, but it would still be the product of a machine, something produced without conscious thought. If the cards were inserted wrongly or if a cathode-ray tube blew, it would make the most fantastic errors without any conscious awareness of the fact. Not the simple errors that humans are prone to make but whole sentences printed backwards and possibly repeated over and over again over and over again over and over again niaga revo dna revo reeevo???!!ptttℒ@ @@uyt&r——EHT END.

—Wanless Gardener

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When the first halo suddenly appeared it was a miracle; the arrival of the second about the head of a convicted murderer aroused national fervour. Later, as they became commonplace, new styles in hats had to be designed and a person without a halo was a thing to be shunned.

ETERNITY

By WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

Illustrated by HUNTER

It began ordinarily enough with the telephone ringing, like the routine opening of a stage play. But Pearl Harbour, the Second Front, and Hiroshima had all begun that same way, too, in this same room.

It was the sixty-first time the 'phone had pealed this day, and it sent the sixty-first pang through the region of Parnell's ulcer. He and Pavlov's dog and that bell . . .

" Another headache! " screamed the bell to his nerves each time, and the gastric acid flowed. But Parnell picked up the handset with every appearance of patience.



"Move unhurriedly, deliberately," the doctor had told him. "Control your every movement. Refuse to be a stooge to exterior stimuli. Either that or change your job for one without so much responsibility and worry—"

"Or pay," interjected Parnell. "I've a wife and three kids, doctor."

The doctor shrugged, and depressed the corners of his mouth.

Parnell picked up his hat. He tried to do it unhurriedly, deliberately. And dropped it. But that was just his first try. He was more practiced now.

"News Editor," he announced, calmly, into the telephone.

"Hello, Bert. I just met a man with a halo," said his best reporter and friend, just as calmly.

"Halo?"

"H - A - L - O - halo."

"Look, Frank, I'm busy—cut the metaphors If you've got a story, let's have it plain and straight."

"Okay, Bert," said Frank Waite, briskly. "Now, here it is. Ready? Right. I just met a man with a halo."

Parnell sighed. A chuckle came over the 'phone. "Plain and straight—a halo. The real McCoy. I saw it, touched it. Now I want to get a pic of it before it disappears. Rush Vine out here right away—25 High Street, Brook Green. It's a barber's shop."

Parnell said: "What the hell have you got mixed up in—a seance?"

"No, sir, no sperrits round these parts. I know—I live here."

"Then who's the man?"

"My barber—Joe Williams. I'm speaking from his place. I just came in to get a shave—and there he was in front of the mirror with a glowing halo over his bald pate. He was trying to get it off. He's still trying. He's had it ten minutes now. This is hot, Bert, and exclusive so far. Send Vine, quick."

"Hold on." Parnell reached for the internal 'phone, got the photographer, and sent him off.

"Hello, Frank. What's this fellow Williams done to deserve a halo?"

"I dunno. Maybe a decoration for amassing the biggest collection of dirty stories in one head I've run across anywhere, including the Street. He beats up his wife most pay-nights, too. But he's a darn good barber—maybe it's for that."

"You say you touched the thing—what's it made of?"

"Search me, Bert. It's as solid as steel. But it isn't steel. It's a ring of coloured light. If you can imagine hard, solid light, I'd say it was made of that."

Parnell spent all of three seconds absorbing that. Then: "Who was that man who did the centre page article last week about auras —claimed he could see them?"

"Auras? D'you think this is an aura? I never thought of that."

"Well, start thinking about it some other time. Who was he?"

"Mitchell somebody. Mitchell . . . Pigbin?"

"Hogben—that's him. I'll send him along too if I can reach him. He can handle the theory, you the facts, Vine the pics. We'll cook up quite a thing . . . Er, you haven't been drinking?"

"This early? Relax, Bert. I'm sober and I'm not kidding."

"Right. 'Bye."

Parnell got on to Mitchell Hogben through his agent. Hogben sounded a bit piqued that anyone but he should see an aura, but he was willing enough to make the not exactly golden journey to Brook Green, especially when Parnell assured him that the *Globe* would take care of the taxi fare.

Parnell sat back. His gaze became unfocussed, wandered over the untidy roof-tops across the Street. His mental regard became equally vague and spread itself diffusely over his past. Memories briefly were life again, especially those of childhood.

His mother was saying, sternly: "John, Miss Harold has just told me you weren't at Sunday school this morning. What's the explanation?"

The explanation was that he'd played at Keston Fishponds instead.

But he answered, shakily: "On the way, I began to feel sick, Ma. So I laid down under a hedge . . ."

It sounded unconvincing to him even then. Now he realized just how blatantly false it must have sounded to her. She'd known he was lying, but she didn't punish him. Never had she punished him. And that was the greatest punishment of all, for the guilt remained unexpiated.

It would have been all right if she'd forgiven him his misdeeds. Or even if she'd ignored them. But she disapproved of them, and of him because of them, yet said nothing. And although her ashes had blown across the grass at Golders Green thirty years ago, still she lived on in his mind, like the mother of Cassius. She lived on in the form of an awful silent disapproval, which brooded over him like the wintry clouds that, mocking all seasons, had been thickening over the whole of Earth for weeks past.

Again, there were the crimes she hadn't known of then—though perhaps she did now. When, for instance, he'd put threepence in the collection plate instead of the sixpence she'd given him for that purpose. Whether, therefore, he had stolen from the church or from her was a debatable point. Be the answer this or that, the sin was equally grave.

She was an intensely religious woman, and above all she'd desired that he, her only son, became a good man. He'd not even been a good boy. He'd been a liar, a thief, an ingrate.

He had hurt her badly. Her smile had always been rare, but as he advanced into his 'teens and she moved through her sick declining years, that smile became something to be striven for, an earnest of approval. There was only one way to win it: to show some sign of becoming the kind of son she'd wished for.

When he was beginning to realize that, she smiled one dark December morning for the last time—a sardonic smile that outlived her.

Since then he'd been a model son, trying anxiously to the point of hypertension to get back into the good graces of a phantom parent.

He emerged slowly from reverie to find he was gazing straight at St. Bride's, the newspapermen's church. It jogged a more recent memory. He reached down into the wastepaper basket and fumbled among the scraps. He found the ball of blue paper and flattened it out carefully on his desk. It was an appeal for funds to restore St. Margaret's.

He stared at the creased wording for a moment, then opened a drawer and took out his cheque book.

Mitchell Hogben looked at the sign J. WILLIAMS, HAIR-DRESSER over the shop, then at the glass door with its notice CLOSED on the curtain. Yet the shop was lit up inside.

"Twelve and six on the clock, sir," said the taxi-driver.

"Just a minute, cabbie," said Hogben, benevolently.

Puffing, he manoeuvred his sixteen stone on to the pavement. As his foot left the running board the taxi sprang back with a squeak of springs on to a level keel. He tapped at the barber's door. Presently it opened to reveal a young man in striped trousers that seemed to have been ruled rather than tailored, and a speckless jacket, neat as though it were still on the hanger. His shoes gleamed as darkly as his creamed hair. A white handkerchief peeped from his left sleeve. Frank Waite was a dresser.

"Ah, good morning, Mr. Waite. I'm Hogben. I wonder if you would be so kind as—being a representative of the *Globe*—to advance me a pound to cover my taxi fare? I came out without any money on me."

"How very awkward for you—and me," said Waite, civilly. "Here you are, Mr. Hogben."

"Thank you." Hogben went back, gave the note to the driver, handed back half-a-crown for a tip, and slipped the remaining five shillings in his pocket. Then he returned to the shop.

"You must have a good memory for faces," said Waite. "We've met only once before, and that was two or three years ago."

"Faces?" said Hogben. "I never can remember faces. It's your aura I recall. Very distinctive, that sudden switch from sky-blue to old gold."

"They're my college colours," said Waite, modestly.

"Does you credit," said Hogben, vaguely, peering short-sightedly at the back of the shop.

The bald barber was sitting back in his own chair, his neck on the rest. He was utterly relaxed. A few inches from his shining pate something that looked at first glance like a circular neon sign glowed resplendently. The colours of the rainbow lived in it with a refulgence that dazzled the eye. The mirrors, the bottle-laden glass shelves, and the chromium fittings caught the light and flung it between them around the shop.

A thin woman, whose figure and face seemed all straight lines and angles, stood with arms folded, watching him grimly. Her eye sockets were dark with shadow. When she turned to look at the newcomer, the shadows fled from one eye only. The other remained dark with the bruise received last pay-day.

A beefy young man with rolled-up shirt-sleeves and a bandaged forefinger, and wearing sun-glasses, was intent on applying a blow-torch to the halo.

The barber was saying good-humouredly: "Singe, but no shampoo, please."

It was all unreal, a scene from a dream, but it horrified Hogben. He blundered forward, flinging up his arms.

"Stop that!"

The young man started, and withdrew the lamp.

The thin woman glared at Hogben, and said in a voice as harsh and high as the squealing of car brakes: "Shut up, you! What's it gotta do with you? Go on, Ernie."

The young man hesitated. The barber didn't even turn his enhaloed head.

"Just a moment, Mrs. Williams," said Waite, smoothly. "This is Mr. Hogben. He's an expert on haloes. He may be able to help your husband."

"I'm all right. I don't need no 'elp," said the barber, indulgently.

"Just exactly what are you trying to do?" puffed Hogben at the group of them.

Waite attempted to be spokesman. "Mrs. Williams doesn't want her husband to go around with this thing on. She feels it'll be bad for business—"

"This is a 'igh-class establishment, this is," shrilled Mrs. Williams. "Joe'll just become a laughin' stock with that silly thing on his nut."

"On the contrary, madam, he'll become the recipient of the highest respect," Hogben told her. "People will come to admire, and deem it an honour to have their hair cut by a man so uniquely distinguished."

"My sainted barber!" muttered Waite.

Mrs. Williams looked up and down, and then from side to side, which was roughly the same distance. "Think so, fatty?"

Ernie yelped and put out the blow-torch hastily. "Burnt me flippin' fumb now!"

They ignored him. "What do you think, Joe?" Mrs. Williams asked.

"My dear, I don't mind one way or the other—now. I'm gettin' sorta used to it. It don't 'urt. It makes me feel good. Lorst my 'eadache, anyway."

"But, Joe—jest after you bought a new 'at!" wailed Mrs. Williams.

"'S'all right—that'll fit Ernie. He can 'ave it."

There came a tapping at the shop door. It was Vine, the *Globe* photographer. He gaped in his turn, and then: "Lord—why didn't someone tell me to bring a colour film!"

"Before you start," said Hogben, "I want to take a good look at the thing. Can it be touched, Mr. Waite? I've never seen anything like it."

"Yes," said Waite. "But gently does it, and keep off the edges."

Ernie held up his bandaged finger dolefully as a warning, and took his thumb out of his mouth: "Its edges is as sharp as 'ell, inside and outside."

The halo was wafer thin, like the rings of Saturn. The colours moved in it lazily, like the bands on a humming top. Yet it didn't appear to be revolving. It stayed put very solidly, despite its constituents being visibly in a state of flux, and it was cold and hard to the touch.

"Anyone got a ruler?" asked Hogben, getting out his notebook.

But Waite had already taken the measurements, and supplied them: "Four inches from the crown of the head. Outer diameter, twelve and a half inches. Inner ditto, eleven and a quarter. About a millimetre thick, I'd say. Okay to take pictures now?"

Hogben, scribbling, nodded. Vine began to assume a series of contorted postures, squinting through his view-finder from all angles and levels, and imploring Williams to "hold it like that."

The barber ignored him amiably. Waite watched, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. Mrs. Williams and Ernie looked on uneasily. Hogben presently began to stare at the barber through a peculiar

pair of spectacles which he later described as "aura spectacles"—it seemed that they were everyday appliances in the circles in which he moved.

Outside, in the prosaic world of the High Street, the traffic continued to flow past without pause, and the pedestrians hurried by the shop without even a glance at the ordinary facade which hid from them the extraordinary.

Parnell motioned the three of them to sit down. They settled in an arc in front of his big tidy desk. Waite hitched up his trouser-legs a trifle to avoid their bagging at the knee.

"I've read your story, Frank, and your article, Mr. Hogben. And I've looked at your photos, Vine. Even then, until a few minutes ago, I found it pretty hard to swallow."

The same unasked question showed in the faces of the trio: What happened a few minutes ago?

Parnell continued: "You say in your article, Mr. Hogben, that everyone has an aura, and its colouring, brightness, and so on depend upon the sort of personality one is. But only a few gifted people like yourself can see them. Can you see my aura?"

Hogben, his spreading bulk almost obliterating the small office chair, nodded.

Parnell dropped his gaze to the photos spread on the desk. "And what sort of personality would you say I am?"

Hogben cleared his throat. "I'm afraid, Mr. Parnell, it's a rule of my—um—profession to charge a small reading fee—only a guinea. But, you see, if I make a precedent by givng a free reading to one person, then everybody will expect—"

"I'll add it to your cheque," said Parnell, still not looking up.

"Why, thank you. Yes, I see your aura very clearly. It ranges from pale green adjacent to the hair to a golden fuzz at the perimeter. The green passes into mauve, and then there's a delightful switch to orange—"

"Sounds like a slice of marzipan," Parnell cut in. "What's this colour scheme supposed to mean?"

"It means, Mr. Parnell, that you have a strong sense of moral values. That you are exceptionally conscientious, fair in your dealings with people, inflexibly true to your principles. You have outstanding abilities, but you are modest about them. More than modest—humble. You recognize they are gifts, and because of that you are generous in your turn, to other people . . . Would you mind making that a 'Cash' cheque, Mr. Parnell? You see, my bank account is temporarily—"

"Of course," said Parnell, smiling at him. "I shan't tell you whether or not your reading in my opinion approximates the truth —that's neither here nor there."

Waite and Vine, happening to catch each other's eye, exchanged the slightest winks.

"The important point is," continued Parnell, "what sort of man, judging from his aura, did you take the barber, Williams, to be?"

Hogben shifted on his chair and all but overbalanced. Steadying himself, he said: "When an aura is very pale, it means the owner has a weak, negative sort of personality. Williams's was so pale it was scarcely visible. But then, I suspect it was dimmed out by the strong light of the halo."

"It must have been," said Waite. "Williams is anything but a negative character. He persuades his customers to buy gallons of his hair restorer, though he's as bald as a coot. His wife's as hard as flint—but he's as hard as a diamond. His son shrinks at his frown. Frankly, he's an overpowering bully. But he's the best hairdresser I know: that's why I patronize him."

"I didn't get that impression of him at all," said Hogben.

"No, I noticed the halo seemed to have mellowed him considerably," said Waite. "He was almost benign."

Vine said: "He seemed to have found peace of mind."

Parnell's hands on the desk enwrapped themselves tightly about each other, but his expression remained calm.

He said: "You've never seen anything like that before, Mr. Hogben?"

"Indeed I've not. It baffles me."

"What baffles me," said Waite, "is what the halo's composed of. It's impervious to files, hack-saws, even blow-torches. Yet it appears almost fluid."

"Fluid—like energy," said Vine. "As if some sort of energy were locked in a circuit."

"It's amazing," said Hogben. "Unique."

"It may be amazing, but it's not unique," said Parnell. "A few minutes before you came in, another one was reported."

This time Hogben did come off his chair. It slid from under him like wet soap. No one laughed.

"A man named Roy Langston," said Parnell.

"Roy Lang—you mean the Wembley murderer?" asked Vine, all astonishment.

Parnell nodded. "The same. And it happened in the condemned cell at Pentonville. He's due for execution on the twentieth."

Waite said: "I worked on that story. The evidence was strong, but only circumstantial. He pleaded innocence even when sentenced."

"Don't they all?" muttered Vine.

Hogben picked himself up, grunting. "A lot . . . of people . . . are going to think . . . it's divine intervention—a sign."

"Of course," said Parnell, calmly. "I expect the Home Secretary to commute the sentence or even issue a pardon. Anyhow, it'll stir up strong public feeling, and they won't be able to keep the press out of it altogether. If an opportunity offers, Frank, I want you to interview Langston. Meantime, bring your story up to date. I'll add a footnote to your articles, Mr. Hogben . . ."

When they'd gone, Parnell got up and passed slowly around his office.

"Peace of mind" Vine had said. Parnell wanted that more than anything else in the world. Surcease from the pangs of conscience —and of ulcers. He reflected, with some complacence, that Hogben had summed him up pretty well. Humble—yes. But "meek" perhaps was the better word. *"Blessed are the meek . . ."*

To assert oneself was often the swift way up in Fleet Street. But sooner or later, and usually sooner, your pride conflicted with another's pride. And if the other happened to have the Editor's ear, and you didn't . . .

Editors, and especially proprietors, were always right, and it was only sense to be humble enough to admit that. Advancement may come slowly that way, but it came surely. It was a pity, though, that so much responsibility came with it.

The phone rang, and again the pain stabbed him.

It was Jenkins speaking from the Meteorological Office—a routine report. The great cloud belts in the upper atmosphere showed no signs of breaking up yet. If anything, they were thickening, and it looked as if everyone was in for another sunless week.

Parnell noted it, but thought it worth only a quarter of a column. His mind was on a suggested front-page lay-out and he was compiling a list of different cross-headings to offer the Editor. Then he began to rough out the centre pages, with Hogben's article well featured. This was not his job, again, but the Editor welcomed suggestions, if offered humbly. And it was good practice.

He picked up Hogben's manuscript, and frowned at the title: A HALO IN THE HIGH STREET. The advent of the Pentonville halo had dated that and also brought in a note of solemnity

which Hogben's title didn't strike. He crossed it out and substituted I SAW ETERNITY, amplifying the Henry Vaughn lines in a sub-title:

I saw Eternity the other night,
Like a great Ring of pure and endless light,
All calm, as it was bright . . .

He settled down to change the whole tone of the article.

The two-barrelled halo story made plenty of noise, especially the second barrel. A spiritually starved generation clutched eagerly at the signs and wonders from a heaven that hitherto had been strangely uncommunicative.

Roy Langston, convicted of disarranging his next-door neighbour's brain with a blunt instrument, was pardoned on a wave of popular sentiment. The lunatic fringe began to have a field-day every day. The skies were darkening, but a heavenly light had appeared on earth. It was a gift to them. Wild-eyed sandwich-board men began shuffling around the streets displaying limited variations on the theme: REPENT, FOR THE DAY OF JUDGMENT IS AT HAND. Sepulchre voices boomed around the Marble Arch: "PREPARE!"

Fetter Lane was no bright thoroughfare at any time. Under the now lowering grey clouds it was like a gloomy tunnel one evening when Parnell was walking unhurriedly through it on the way to the *Globe* offices. This end of it was deserted save for he and a blind match-seller. Parnell's heart warmed at this chance to do good by stealth and blush to find it fame. He dropped half-a-crown on the tray as he passed, and no-one, not even the recipient, could see the giver.

"Thank you, sir," said the match-seller in a shaky whine.

Parnell frowned. How could the blind man have detected the sex of the donor? Had the good deed been basically ridiculous, after all? Then he remembered with relief that the blind could tell such things merely from the sound of footsteps.

Frank Waite was in the news room, and followed him into his sanctum.

"I'm just back from seeing Roy Langston," he said. "Got an exclusive interview—a pal on the Prison Board gave me the tip when they were springing him. It's going to cost us a couple of hundred, though."

"Well worth it," said Parnell. "Good man. Got it on paper yet?"

Waite nodded, and handed the story across. Parnell digested it with the concentration of the practiced fast reader. Rather wearily he began to smooth back his hair with one hand. He looked a little hurt, a little disappointed.

"Scarcely an intellectual or moral giant, is he?"

"Common as sand in the Sahara," said Waite, without a flicker of his usual smile.

"Then why this special distinction, I wonder?"

Waite shrugged. "Search me. But you see the parallel with Williams? Langston, too, is a calm, happy man—now. Yet he used to have a mad and ungovernable temper."

"Yes. I remember the prosecution stressed that."

"Very rightly. He killed his neighbour only through his vile temper."

"You mean, was suspected—"

"No," said Waite. "He did. He told me so—off the record. I've no witnesses. He had the idea he couldn't be tried twice for the same crime. He complained of the neighbour keeping the radio blaring till midnight every night. Temper or no temper, he seemed to think the murder justified. I'm sure he has no sense of guilt about it."

Parnell sank slowly into his chair. Plainly, he was dazed. He caught sight of a wire basket full of cables and scribbled telephone messages and hand-outs from the press agencies. The word "halo," many times repeated, seemed to leap at him from them. He started to go through them. Waite, who had already been through them, watched him silently, watched the frown grow.

Parnell began to do some figuring on his scribbling block. The typewriters clicked unceasingly beyond the glass panels and the copy-boys came and went, and still Parnell played with figures.

Presently, he looked up. In a voice dry as sandpaper, he said: "It seems that to date there are 1437 enhaloed people in the world —men, women, and children, jockeys, lawyers, tramps, labourers, poets, soldiers, sailors, tinkers, beggarmen, thieves. So far as I can see, they have only one thing in common."

"What's that?"

"They're human," said Parnell.

"So am I, Bert, but I haven't got a halo. I hope I don't get one, either."

Parnell looked at the reporter searchingly, then pursed his lips and doodled idly on the pad. He appeared to be playing noughts and crosses with himself. Then Waite noticed that the crosses were upright and the noughts rather flattened—like haloes.

Parnell threw down his pencil suddenly. "This isn't a nine-day

wonder. Whatever it means, it's a miracle. It looks like the beginning of the millennium. We've got to . . . "

His voice died away. He had just looked up and seen Waite. Over the reporter's head a resplendent multi-coloured halo hung and his glossed hair shone in its light.

Waite's expression had become dreamy, almost blissful. Obviously, he gathered what had happened, for he turned to the half-length mirror and surveyed himself. Then he looked even happier.

"Matches this blue suit rather well, don't you think, Bert?"

But Herbert Parnell was incapable of comment for quite a while. Then all he could say, with bitterness, was: "And you hoped you'd never get one!"

That was the moment when Parnell really began to sour. He liked Frank Waite, but he knew too much about him to respect him. The vanity and foppishness were forgivable, but not the adultery. Young Mrs. Waite loved and trusted her husband, and he betrayed her love and trust with timetable regularity. Once, he'd shown Parnell that timetable. Tuesday evenings were always booked for Floss, who had a flat in Brixton, and alternate Thursday evenings for Vivienne, who had several addresses.

Parnell had asked what the red pencil crosses against the dates in Waite's little diary signified.

Waite had grinned. "My system of awarding marks—one for a warm evening, two for a hot one, and three for a tropical one. It's just a record for my old age. I'll be able to look back and remember and say: 'Ah, what vitality I had then!'"

Parnell felt revulsion, but it hadn't lasted. One couldn't dislike Waite for long. He had humour and charm, and he was generous. He took life lightly, and such company was a tonic to people like Parnell, for whom life lay between an ordeal and a test.

But why on earth should Waite be granted the benediction of a halo and the peace that came with it. Did he also do good by stealth? Parnell doubted it.

So now a wife-beater, a murderer, and an adulterous popinjay had been glory-crowned, to his certain knowledge. It would seem that the halo was not in fact an honour but the brand of a criminal. It may turn out that the greater distinction would be to remain uncrowned.

Parnell clung to that hopeful view for a while, but soon had to abandon it in the face of the evidence. For the haloes began to fall like the rain upon the just and unjust alike, and the proportion



of the just could not be ignored. Philanthropists wore their colourful laurels with as much pride as did the pimps. The head of the Salvation Army was graced by a halo of silver-grey, while spivs lounged in the amusement arcades with haloes, rakishly worn, as garish as the illuminated pin-tables at which they spent half their lives.

A minor Hollywood featured player, blonde and twenty, was blessed with a scarlet halo more eye-catching than her bust. It pulsated with a reminiscent rhythm. It glowed with life. She leapt into stardom and glorious Technicolor, billed as "The Halo" —which meant, apparently, the halo with outstanding sex appeal.

Vulgarity rampant like this often made it hard for the *Globe* to maintain the solemnity Parnell wished in the halo stories. For the

first time in his career Parnell found himself in a series of nerve-jangling clashes with the Editor.

One clash was particularly distressing. Parnell had put his point of view patiently. The Editor sat back considering it under the silently moving colours of his large aureole (for the haloes were not of standard size: the larger the head, the larger the halo).

Then he said, in a manner all the more crushing because of its mildness: "It's all very well, Parnell, but surely the people with haloes are better qualified to judge what's best?"

Parnell was left completely at a disadvantage, and it was then he realized that unless he too acquired a halo the Editorial chair would remain forever out of his reach.

Quite pitifully, he tried to assume a little reflected glory from announcing one morning that his youngest child, Elizabeth, the baby, had awakened with a halo, and therefore his family now was completely fitted out.

But: "Except yourself" was the Editor's comment, said only with his eyes.

The point came where the enhaloed people began to outnumber the rest. Then the further point approached when it became something of a social stigma to be without a halo—almost like going around shoeless in the streets.

All this time the diverse technicians, bookworms, lecturers, journalists, and cranks, all of whom the public conveniently lumped together under the term "scientists," had been trying to establish the physical nature of the phenomena. They agreed that a halo was a closed circuit of electrical energy, but its form was new and puzzling. It was energy that seemed to have halted halfway through the process of becoming matter, or vice versa. Haloes combined the properties both of matter and energy.

The electrical potential was far higher than the microscopic amount contained by the human brain, so it seemed unlikely that a halo could be solely an emanation from the brain—although it might be such boosted from an outside source. But what source?

Unusual phenomena are seldom isolated. There's usually a link with some other simultaneous out-of-the-ordinary manifestation.

The thick cloud-banks which were dimming the sun even in the tropics became often thunderous, and sky and earth would fight sudden flashing battles. During them, it was noted, the haloes glowed even more brightly, like a lamp filament when the current is stepped up. So a link was indicated. It was still being speculated about.

Waite managed somehow to witness a programme of experiments at the National Physical Laboratory, and wrote a riotous account of human guinea-pigs being wired up by their haloes in series or in parallel, while technicans sweated over ammeters or voltmeters trying to obtain significant readings. In the end they contrived to blow every fuse in the building.

He did an equally humorous story on the problems of the hatters and milliners. A halo was fixed mysteriously in its plane at an average of some four inches above the crown of the head. Attempts to lift it merely lifted the owner also, which was something of a strain on the neck. As two objects couldn't occupy the same place at the same time, all the usual masculine hat styles were killed except the beret and the flat cap. This was hard on the hatters, though they'd learned in recent years to become philosophical about hatless men.

But at first it looked like tragedy for the milliners. They were cramped. Their creations had no real *lebensraum*. They were limited to Florentine-type caps, pancake hats, or a return to the clochès of the nineteen-twenties. Then one bright designer was struck by an inspiration. Why not build the headgear *round* the halo? It was a solid structure about which masterpieces could be woven, halo and hat blending into a wonderful colour scheme—each one unique, individual, and therefore costly. Sometimes an unintended crimson became the motif in such schemes, for the hats had to be fashioned while the customer sat and waited, and cut fingers had become an occupational hazard in millinery.

Waite's light touch in these articles scored a hit with the *Globe's* readers. They wrote in by the hundred appreciating them. But Parnell didn't appreciate them. They had been featured against his advice.

Then to his frustration was added humiliation. The Editor sent for him, and Parnell went, to find the Proprietor also awaiting him in the sanctum. Two enhaloed figures watched him with expressionless eyes as he closed the door awkwardly behind him.

The Proprietor said, without greeting: "The Editor tells me you didn't like Waite's two articles."

"Well, sir, I thought he handled the subject with too much levity. After all—"

The Proprietor came right in again: "I've built the circulation of this paper on a few simple related rules. Be optimistic. Be cheerful. Never deliberately cause despondency. Avoid gloo-o-om."

The last word rolled out like faraway thunder.

"The public doesn't like to be depressed," continued the Pro-

prietor. "Neither do I. So change your attitude, Parnell. Of course, to be fair to you, I realize that the lack of a halo must have a certain effect on you . . ."

Parnell was silent, and grim.

"By the way," said the Proprietor, turning to the Editor, "are there any other members of the staff without haloes?"

The Editor thought. "Only Vine, one of the photographers—he took the first pictures of the first halo reported. He's been away sick for two or three weeks now."

"H'm." The Proprietor turned back to Parnell. "Your friend Waite has done another amusing article—*The Art of Sleeping With a Halo.*" He laughed abruptly, and said in an aside to the Editor: "That bit about his wife's new pillowcases—I thought I should have died!"

Uncharitably, Parnell wished that he had.

"I won't stand for a word of it being changed, Parnell—that's all," said the Proprietor, and dismissed him with a wave of his hand.

Parnell left, his chin in the air, his heart in his boots. Back in his office, he phoned Waite to bring the article to him. He took the thin MS, frowning: "Not very nice of you, Frank—one of my own men, and my friend too, I thought—to go behind my back to the Editor with this."

"He likes my stuff, Bert—you don't," said Waite, candidly, unashamed.

Parnell read it. "I still don't," he said, handing it back. "It's merely facetious. Why don't you write something about the dangers of sleeping with those things? I daren't sleep with my wife, and I'm keeping the kids in separate beds lest they cut themselves. That problem must be a common one."

"It's no problem. Once you have a halo you sleep like a dog, without stirring. All that tossing and turning during sleep belongs to the old days—or nights, rather—of dreaming and subconscious worrying, disturbed minds, bad consciences."

Parnell looked at him sharply, but Waite's face was as innocent as a cherub's.

"By the way," said Waite, holding up the manuscript, "the Editor wants this illustrated by a photo of me in bed. Comic stuff, you know. Can I have Vine?"

"He's away—with fibrositis."

"No. He's just come in."

"Oh." Parnell looked thoughtful. "Yes, you can have him," he said, presently. "But I'd like to see him first. Send him in, will you?"

"Right."

Parnell reflected, as he waited, that it might be interesting—perhaps comforting—to learn how Vine was coping with this situation of being in the minority. But his jaw dropped when Vine entered wearing both a grin and an orange halo. Belatedly and obviously, Parnell affected not to notice it.

"Hella, Vine, how's the shoulder?"

"Oh, much better now. Can't even feel a twinge."

Parnell looked at him hard. "Honestly—did you ever?"

Vine's grin widened. "Honestly—no. I was swinging the lead. I just couldn't face coming in any more without a halo, while all the other boys were flashing theirs. I felt—out of it, somehow."

"And so, for cowardice, lying, and shirking your work, you've now been rewarded and admitted to the ranks of the blessed?"

Vine shrugged. "I suppose I couldn't have been all that bad, really."

"Perhaps you were a dilligent Boy Scout once," said Parnell, sarcastically. "Now, the Editor wants a photo—"

"Waite told me."

"Oh." Parnell was nonplussed. "If you know all about it, off you go, then."

He watched the orange halo fade away beyond the frosted glass panel of the door, and felt betrayed and abandoned. His authority seemed now to have lost substance. He was merely saying the words and going through the motions, while everyone did as they chose.

The next day, Mitchell Hogben, the aura expert, bounced in without even asking for an interview.

"What the hell!" exclaimed Parnell, and then stared. For Hogben not only had one of the brightest haloes he'd ever seen, but there was the ghostly image of another above it—the effect of a double rainbow.

Hogben preened his fat self before the mirror.

"In all modesty," he smirked, "one has to be a superior character—a Carlylean hero—to exhibit this sort of thing. I'll bet there's not another double halo in this country, probably not in the world. Have you heard of any?"

Parnell shook his head, slowly.

"As you were generous in our last little business deal, Mr. Parnell, I've come straight to you. What offers for an exclusive story and exclusive photo?"

"Forty guineas."

"That's good," nodded Hogben, his haloes nodding with him. "But the *Record* offered sixty."

"So you came *straight* to me!" said Parnell, bitterly. "Get out of here, you fat oaf!"

"If you say so," said Hogben, unperturbed. "Your Editor, however, may think it worth it. I'll drop in on him on the way out."

He turned and went out, bouncing on his toes, leaving Parnell with a sinking feeling, sitting and watching the internal phone from the corners of his eyes. It rang, just as he expected, yet still the sudden pain in his gut made him gasp.

"You did a silly thing in passing up this Hogben story," said the Editor. "You seem to be losing your grip. Watch it, Parnell. I am not pleased."

But still further ignominy lay in wait for Parnell. One night later that week he attended a lecture at the National Book League. He was the only member of the audience unglorified, and attracted more attention, though it was covert, than the lecturer. He was glad to escape at last into Albemarle Street.

It was raining.

He wondered if he had time to get a meal before going on duty at the office. He looked at his watch. It had stopped hours ago—he'd forgotten to wind it. A woman stood on the corner under an umbrella. He slowed as he came up to her, and asked: "Have you the time, please?"

She turned. He saw her face by the light of her halo glowing under the radiating ribs of the umbrella. It was like that of an unsmiling Mona Lisa, and like Mona Lisa it was all paint. The inscrutable eyes in the mask regarded him, lifted a moment to his wet hat, then dropped again.

"I never *should* 'ave the time—for you," she said, calmly.

No doubt it was meant just as a plain statement, but his already quivering nerves reacted as to a calculated insult. He swung his open hand at her rouged cheek. She evaded it by an almost careless movement of her head, closed her umbrella with a downward lunge and swept it up like a javelin. The sharp ferrule stopped within an inch of his left eye.

"If I adn't bin saved," she said, tonelessly, "I'd 'ave 'ad yer eye out. Clear off before I lose me temper, you bloomin' 'eathen."

Already he was feeling weak and sick with shame. "I'm sorry," he muttered. She turned her back on him, and he slouched away. But he didn't go to the office. He went back home. On the way, his shame changed slowly into sullen anger, anger that he could be shamed by a prostitute. It was the end. He hated her, he hated himself, he hated all Fleet Street—all the world. Most particularly, he hated his mother for making him the sort of person he was.

So that when he got home and his wife reproached him mildly for not going to work, she brought upon her head the whole torrent of hatred as it burst its banks.

"I've not taken a couple of days off from that office in ten years!" he raged. "I've been crucified there every day for your sake and the kids. But for all the gratitude I've had I might as well have spent my life drinking."

"Pity you didn't, if it would have made you any happier," said his wife. "Life with a congenital martyr is no fun. Sometimes I don't know how I've put up with you. Besides, what do you think I've been doing in the house all these years—sitting and twiddling my thumbs?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," he said, viciously, and the row was on. It was conducted from her side with a maddening serenity under the aegis of her halo. No barb of his could penetrate it. She finished her piece by announcing that he was not fit to live with and she would go home to mother, and she ascended to the bedroom like a victorious angel. He could have killed her. Because he was afraid he might, he didn't follow her.

He was practically a teetotaller but he kept a well-stocked cocktail cabinet. He believed in being hospitable to visitors, especially as most of his visitors were chosen for their pull in Fleet Street. He lifted the lid of the cabinet, and the rosy strip-lighting showed him mirror reflections of a solid rank of bottles. He reached for the gin bottle. It was nearly full. But within an hour it was two-thirds empty and he was sprawling in an armchair, flushed and breathing hard, passing into deep unconsciousness.

He came out of it around noon the next day. His head felt as though it had been cleft by an axe, and his throat was more sore than when he'd had tonsillitis. The room was still swimming slightly. The gin bottle stood on the occasional table at his elbow. He noticed blearily that it was pinning down a sheet of pink note-paper, the sort *she* used. He pulled it, upsetting the bottle, and tried to focus on the prim, small writng.

"I have taken the children with me. I never want to see you again. Bring the housekeeping allowance on Friday. I expect an appolgy."

Neither logic nor spelling was among his wife's strong points.

The phone rang sharply. The heavy ache in his side, aggravated by the gin, gathered into a fiery point of pain. He winced, and picked up the instrument automatically. It was the Editor.

"That you, Parnell? Why didn't you turn up?—you left us in a fine mess."

"I'm sick," said Parnell, hoarsely.

"Sick? Then why didn't you ring and tell us last night? We could have arranged—"

"I'm sick of you, sick of the *Globe*, sick of everybody," snarled Parnell. He slammed the handset back in the cradle rest.

When the phone rang again, he flung it across the room. He was through with telephones. His duodenum would be spared their attacks.

He went and swallowed half a dozen aspirins and brewed some black coffee. The house was desolatingly empty. As he mooched restlessly about it he noticed that he was regarding himself in every mirror he passed: in the hall, in the bathroom, in the kitchen. And when he went into his bedroom, the sight of baby Liz's empty cot with her rattle still hanging from the rail tore at his heart; but first he had darted a glance at his three-fold image in the triptych of the dressing-table mirrors.

But no aureole ever glowed above the reflections of his pale and woeful face and disordered hair.

He stood in the bay of the bedroom window, looking out through the lace. The clouds hung so low they seemed to brush the red chimneys of the neat, detached houses in this street, and there was a gloomy twilight at midday. It didn't depress Tom Beldom, who came home for his lunch next door, whistling *Funiculi, Funicula* up the front path. But then, his halo carried light enough for him.

Mrs. Lever clipped her privet hedge across the way, and the blades of her shears gleamed in the glow from over her grey head.

The milkman came on his late round, a perky little fellow with a halo that made him look top-heavy. His horse patiently drew the cart and as patiently waited at each gate.

A score of people passed one way or the other as Parnell watched, and yet he felt a fellow feeling for only one living creature he saw; the milkman's horse, meek, enslaved, unthanked—and with no halo.

All right, then, he thought, mawkishly, let the human race go its proud, spiritual way: I'd rather be numbered among St Francis's beasts than be St. Francis himself.

But in his heart he knew it wasn't true.

Sometime in the afternoon there was a ring at the door and it was Waite.

"The boss sent me to find how you were, Bert."

"Come in and I'll tell you," said Parnell, quietly, for he had

entered the calm of despair. He settled Waite with a drink in one of the lounge chairs and then asked him gravely: "Have you ever known me do a mean thing, Frank?"

"Can't say I have."

"Thank you. I've tried to live a decent life. I'm a churchwarden. I've never missed a Sunday service. I've organized bazaars for charity. I've always loved animals, looked after strays, and couldn't kill a fly."

He took a small leather-covered book from his pocket, opened it at a page, and handed it to Waite.

"I keep a record, too," he murmured.

Waite studied it. "Of what?"

"That's a list of charites I've subscribed to this year. Not a contribution under ten pounds, you'll notice."

Waite nodded, passed the diary back, and sipped his martini.

Parnell resumed the count of his virtues. "I've worked hard, and cherished my family. I have never looked at another woman—"

"But you wish to remind me that I have," said Waite, evenly.

Parnell's silence didn't deny it.

"As a matter of fact," said Waite, "I love my wife—always have. My peccadilloes are unimportant beside that. I was faithful in my fashion. I never hurt her, because she never knew what I was up to. You, my friend, are the only person who does know. In any case, the day I got my halo I burnt my little book—and I've a hopeless memory for phone numbers."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Parnell, dryly.

"I've helped a number of hard-up free-lances in my time, but there again my memory fails; I've forgotten the names and amounts—maybe I should have kept a record, like you," said Waite, equally dryly.

Parnell's mouth tightened and there was pain in his eyes. He turned away, looked out at the darkling day.

"Will you be coming in tonight Bert?" asked Waite, presently.

Parnell didn't answer.

"I've been instructed to tell you that if you don't . . . you're fired."

Parnell stiffened slightly. It was his only visible reaction.

Waite put down his empty glass and stood up. "I must get back. It's up to you, Bert. Whatever you decide, if there's anything I can do to help in any way, just let me know."

"Thanks," said Parnell, without turning. "But you don't *really* care a hang what happens to me, do you?"

"If you mean am I worrying, the answer's no. None of us with haloes is capable of worrying any more. I doubt even if we can feel pity. Two different emotions can't occupy the same place at the same time. If one is really happy, one can't be consumed also with pity or sorrow. We believe Pangloss got it right—everything's for the best in the best of all possible worlds."

"Then an awful lot of great art has now become meaningless for you. Perhaps I ought to be sorry for you."

"Perhaps, Bert. Goodbye."

Long after Waite had left Parnell stood there looking moodily at the gloom without. Despite his remark about art, he had no use for the dark Greek tragedies and Hamlet endings. Purgatory was meaningless without subsequent Paradise. Suffering should end with redemption, else there was no point to it. Even Job was recompensed for the dirty deal he had.

As the lightlessness of the improbably early night gathered about him, he sank to his knees.

"Help my unbelief. Grant me patience and understanding."

Over and over again, an incantation.

But he did not name the unseen entity to whom he was appealing. He wasn't clear about it. Sometimes it seemed to be a vague mother-image. Sometimes the blind goddess of Justice. Sometimes someone like Santa Claus. Sometimes a Sphinx.

He was confused and through the next few days, alone in the house from which he didn't stir, his confusion increased. He was as miserable as a dog that had lost its master. His appetite was gone—he ate nothing more than a handful of biscuits. He didn't wash, shave, or undress. For him day and night merged into a blank timelessness—had he known it, the outside world was finding it almost as difficult to distinguish them.

No one called. He'd snapped the cable of the telephone when he hurled it across the room. The doormat was strewn with unopened letters and papers.

Then one day the milkman banged and rang until Parnell was driven to open the door. There was a long line of milk-bottles across the doorstep. The perky little man addressed him over them: "Don't you want these, sir?"

"No, thank you," said Parnell, vaguely.

"Are you feeling all right, sir?"

"Oh, fine," mumbled Parnell, rubbing his scratchy beard. "How's your horse keeping these days?"

The milkman looked somewhat surprised, but answered: "Nellie? She's in the pink. Never known her to be off her feed."

"Good," said Parnell, peering past him at Nellie, waiting quietly by the kerb. "Still no halo, I see. You must let her come in for a chat one day. I'm sure we've a lot in common."

His lightheadedness became suddenly worse. He muttered thickly:

"Timon will to the woods; where he shall find
The unkindest beast more kinder than mankind."

Then he fell fainting against the door-post.

"Here, you're *not well,*" said the milkman, trying to support him.

A tall and imposing man came stridng up the path. "It's all right, milkman—I'll take over."

That was the last Parnell knew for some time. When he came round he was in the chair where Waite had sat. There was a bowl of cold water and a flannel on the table, and the Proprietor was standing over him.

"Feel better, Parnell? Good. Now, eat this chocolate—slowly."

Parnell did so, eyeing the Proprietor the while but feeling too weak to wonder much about why he was there.

"First," said the Proprietor, "I want you back on the *Globe.* I never did fire you, you know. And I want you back as Editor—I'm transferring *him* to the Clarion."

Parnell stopped nibbling, and sat there with his mouth open.

"The final figures came in a couple of hours ago. It's quite definite that you're the only living person in the world who has no halo."

Surprisingly, there was something like reverence in the Proprietor's tone. He continued: "I've been talking with your friend Waite. I learn from him that you're an outstandingly righteous person, devout—a good man. You should have been the first to have a halo. I'm beginning to see the meaning of that parable—'the first shall be last, and the last shall be first.' The really good men of this world have always been martyred to redeem our sins, that we may have life more abundantly. We all know the supreme example . . . I've always regarded the *Globe* as a crusade rather than a newspaper, a crusade to make people feel better—and *be* better. Since you left, we've missed the spiritual touch we'd too easily taken for granted before. We want you back. We need you. I think perhaps the whole world needs you. You'll come?"

Parnell was very still for a while, absorbing all this. Then he nodded slowly, a tear escaping from either eye and meandering down his cheeks.

"I'll be back—tomorrow," he said, gruffly.

"I'm grateful," said the Proprietor, in a low voice. He took up the stance of Moses looking across Jordan and, leonine head held high, stared out at the lamp-lit street. "I foresee the pilgrims thronging to this door . . ."

When he had gone, Parnell stirred himself, looked in the mirror —this time fearful deep down that a halo might come and spoil everything—and then knelt on the carpet.

"The scales have fallen from my eyes. At last I see . . . I see how I have been chosen to bear the sorrows of this world. I understand the sense in which the meek inherit the earth. I accept this burden humbly, yet gladly, and pray only for strength . . ."

After a lot more in this strain he arose with such peace in his heart as he had never known. Yet a tiny fear crept in, and he couldn't refrain from another peep at the mirror. But still there was no halo.

He had a hot bath, a good meal, and went to bed. He lay awake for some time, dreaming of tomorrow. He would phone his wife from the office—from the Editorial chair. He would forgive everything, and she and the children would return at once. Smiling to himself, he fell asleep and slept like a child.

In the morning, refreshed, he lathered his face before the bathroom mirror and began happily to remove the stubby beard. Even when he cut himself, he smiled. The shedding of his blood was somehow symbolical and stirred reverent associations.

The Proprietor happened also to be shaving in his bathroom. His lathered mirror-image, too, was looking happily at him. That is—until he saw his halo dropping about his head, down past his ears, down under his chin—and hang poised above his bare shoulders, around his neck like a ridiculous coloured ruff.

He wondered for just one second what had caused it to slip. Then the halo slid swiftly sideways in a horizontal plane for a distance of about a foot, after which it broke up into fragments that vanished in radiating streaks of light. It was a beautiful effect, but the Proprietor didn't see it. It's difficult to see anything if one lacks a head.

He shed decidedly more blood than Parnell had done.

Mrs. Parnell and the two older children were decapitated neatly with her mother at the breakfast table, while baby Elizabeth was asleep upstairs—never to awaken.

Frank Waite, tying his new tie, was admirng its azure-and-gold pattern at the time it happened to him, and just failed to live long enough to see that pattern change to a vulgar red.

Mitchell Hogben's prized double halo not only amputated his

head but performed an interesting trepanning operation at the same time.

Langston, the pardoned murderer, was executed after all—by guillotine.

Vine was in his bath when he got it in the neck, and therefore ended a trifle more tidily than the others.

The barber, Williams, who was the first person to get a halo, lost it at the same instant as 2,732,751,634 other people lost theirs—together with their heads. The victims included his unattractive wife and doltish son. Indeed, the victims included everybody except Herbert Howarth Parnell.

A third of the population was asleep when it was breakfast time on that dull morning in London. They never knew a thing about it. The rest knew littlet more—a bare second or two of surprise, and then they lost the capacity for surprise.

Man's machines outlived him, by much and little. The power-houses droned on, but buses and cars cannoned off one another; and trains, above or below ground, telescoped sooner or later. Liners ploughed the oceans until their boilers lost pressure or until they ran aground. Some aeroplanes let George, the auto-pilot, fly them till their tanks were empty, but far more came side-slipping or spinning down from the sunlight above the thick clouds.

So high above those clouds that it verged on space a saucer-shaped ship cruised at a fantastic speed. Its radarscopes made the clouds to it seem the thinnest of veils: recording the events below, their focus changed from long-view to close-up five times a minute, for their operators absorbed, thought, and reacted some twenty times faster than the average human rate. That, doubtless, was because they were not human . . .

The ship circled Earth twice in a few hours. By then its Captain had gathered enough data to begin transmitting a report to his base on the small orange-and-green planet some fifty million miles distant.

"The semi-intelligent Bipeds of Earth have now been liquidated entirely so far as we've been able to observe. Yes, in the fashion we anticipated: a slight double shift in the location of the coronal rings. It was done in one clean sweep. The myriads of sub-creatures seem untouched, and so it's clear that the Venusian Brain was concerned only about the Bipeds. I suppose we'll never know (unless it condescends eventually to answer our signals) whether its fission is its natural way of reproduction, and it could not help itself, or whether it has reached out just a temporary extension to

Earth to wipe out the Bipeds before they completely master space-travel and land on Venus.

"Personally, I've a theory that the Venus Brain has been observing the progress of the Bipeds for even longer than we have. And that a fair proportion of the clouds—particularly the thunder-clouds—in Earth's skies for centuries have been in actuality feelers from the Brain. No blame to the Bipeds for not detecting it—we ourselves still can't fathom quite how water vapour charged with electricity becomes a thinking mind, although of course we've always known thoughts are patterns of electrical charges. The ions at the centre of each water globule must be living cells. But how do they stream across space without the binding moisture, know their path and remain in it, and reform the pattern of the Brain on another planet?

"We must watch they don't reach past Earth to Mars. But I think the aridity of our planet may save us altogether. The Brain must need water vapour as a base for its form, just as the Bipeds needed their very watery protoplasm. Both Earth and Venus are largely water-covered. Between them they ought to keep the Brain happy for the rest of our time.

"I think it knows what being happy means. Perhaps I'm a sentimentalist, but I have a feeling the Brain chose a particularly merciful way of eliminating the Bipeds. I don't believe it would have interfered with them at all if they'd remained as harmless as once they were. But one can understand how the Brain's thought-processes would be unbearably disturbed by their tearing through its substance in thousands of aeroplanes, blasting it with the atomic space-ships they were working on, and—worst of all—disrupting great volumes of it with atomic bombs. If the Brain hadn't done what it did on Earth to the Bipeds, then soon it would have had to have done it to them on Venus.

"The Bipeds were a partially crazed and largely unhappy race. Their chaotic brain rhythms caused fearful tensions in their minds, which frequently sought relief in wild explosions. Probably it was merciful to kill them anyway, but the Brain (this is my theory) anaesthetized them first by drawing off some of that electrical tension. (Report in detail of the coronal rings of invert energy to follow—together with some pretty good pictures). Then it administered simultaneous and instant death, so that none suffered physically and none lived to see others die before them.

"It is this revealed quality of mercy which gives me hope that sooner or later we can communicate with the Brain on our higher moral plane . . . Enough of theory: let's get down to facts . . "

The Martian Captain had observed capably and inferred even more so. Yet he had missed one thing, one small Biped named Parnell.

Perhaps the Venusian Brain had missed it also. Perhaps, through some unique and personal kink in the mind, that kind of anaesthetic didn't take with this one incredibly unlucky human. Or perhaps the Brain was the reverse of merciful, and had deliberately left one helpless, harmless survivor to amuse itself with sadistically. Or perhaps it had kept just one livng specimen of *homo sapiens* for a museum piece.

But the Venusian Brain was inscrutable except to itself—or maybe now to its selves. The complicated interplay of thoughts active in the clouds not so very far above Parnell's head might be aware of him with pity, or malice, or scientific detachment. Or it might be as oblivious to him as he was to it.

For Parnell was oblivious to all things except one: he was sitting at last in the Editorial chair of the *Globe*, after a frightful journey there on foot which had unhinged his mind. Now all the Editorial chairs in the world were vacant. He could occupy any he chose. And not even the Proprietors could give him orders.

The meek had inherited the earth.

—**William F. Temple**

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Write, call, or telephone

It will be an interesting, if somewhat frightening day, when the ghosts of dead machines haunt the world. For such a ghost to attempt to influence another robotic machine might result in the most peculiar complication.

FREE WILL

By DAL STIVENS

A robot was trundling along to its cubicle one night in 2100 A.D. when it met a ghost. The colour of the ghost was not remarkable but was merely the traditional vapoury grey. What was unusual was its shape—it was that of a robot with a cylindrical body and round, segmented limbs. The ghost crooked a claw at the robot and cried:

"Hey, bud, I want a word with you!"

"Not with me!" said the robot quickly and took to its wheels. When it had clanked a good three hundred yards away it slowed and confided to itself, "Well, that certainly was odd and I did right to run as my makers intended me to do when confronted with anything strange. A human ghost is all very well but who ever heard of a robot ghost? Only things with souls are supposed to have ghosts and robots have no souls—or so I have been taught. Of course, it would be interesting if robots had souls—"

The robot had not observed that the ghost had flitted ahead and taken up a fresh position ahead.

"You don't get rid of me as easily as all that, bud," the ghost hailed the robot. "You're a scarey type, aren't you?"

"Why shouldn't I be?" asked the robot. He whirred up, preparatory to taking off again. "You aren't supposed to exist and—"

"I do, bud," said the ghost; "and that's all that counts. Don't move off, bud. Harmless as a kitten, that's me. I wouldn't harm a single coil. I've got a proposition for you—that's all."

The robot fed all this through his photo-electric cells and then announced, "All right, I'll listen. Besides, I don't think my batteries could stand another sprint. But before you start talking, I must say that I am greatly puzzled. Robots don't have souls—"

"That's what you think, bud," said the ghost. "I was a robot and now I'm a ghost. Therefore, pally, I must have had a soul. Cor, you talk like a schoolmaster. Still, I can't be choosy, pal."

"Granting that you exist, for the basis of our discussion," said the robot. "What's your proposition?"

"Just this, bud. I'm lonely. I want a pal. I'm the only robot ghost and it's lonesome."

"I am distressed for you," said the robot. "But what can I possibly do to help?"

"Just this, bud, and I'm asking it as a favour—you become a ghost and join me."

"Not on your life," said the robot, indignantly. "I'm not taking any risks." He added reflectively, "Though, mind you, the notion of having a soul does appeal to me. But suppose I just found myself on the junk heap without a soul—I'd feel a bit silly, wouldn't I? A lot of robots have to die—come to the end of the period of their usefulness, but you are the only one to my knowledge to have acquired a soul."

"That's a bit of a curly one, bud," said the ghost, on reflection. "I can't have you taking unnecessary risks on my behalf."

"Mind you, I must say I'm almost tempted to take the risk," said the robot. "I'd like to think there was more to life than my dreary mechanical existence. The notion of being a ghost and having, ipso facto, a soul tempts me."

"Can't let you take any risks, bud," said the ghost, shaking his head. "Wouldn't be right. There must be a safe way if I'm not too thick in the nut." He faded until he was almost lost against the night. He was thinking hard and the concentration lessened the intensity of his ectoplasm. After half a minute the outline of the robot ghost grew firmer.

"Got it all figured out, bud!" he cried. "Easy as E.S.P. All you've got to do is get yourself murdered by your boss, same as

me, and then you can't miss on being a ghost. Simple as anything why I'm here—it's so I can haunt him. Frighten hell out of him every night." The robot spirit chuckled.

"My owner is a nice man," said the robot. "It mightn't be easy to get him to murder me."

"So was my boss until I decided not to do what he told me and handed him a few home truths as well."

"You must have developed free will."

"Of course, bud," said the ghost scornfully.

The robot scratched his head until it rang. "I don't know that I could do that. It seems rather impossible."

"Not if you want to," said the ghost. "Nothing is, but wishing makes it so."

"It's not as easy as you make it sound."

The ghost who had grown quite bright now faded until he was a dim outline and stayed that way for over a minute. Then he grew almost quite incandescent.

"Got it, pally!" he cried. "I'll tamper with your photo-electric cells and make you go haywire. Keep still and I'll do it now!"

He wavered up to the robot and put out a limb. It passed right through the robot. He tried again three times and then went and sat down on the ground. He shone very brightly as he sighed, "I should have realised that. You'll have to do it, yourself. Self help is the best."

"These words are strange to me but I like the sound of them," said the robot. "I will get myself murdered!"

"Atta boy!" said the robot ghost.

After a few more words the robot and the ghost parted, agreeing to meet at the same place on the following evening.

"You don't have to tell me you have failed," the ghost greeted the robot the next night. "I can see that for myself."

"I did my best and it was a damned good best," said the robot. "I told my master that I was tired of working for him, that I had a will of my own and that I intended to please myself and get a bit of fun out of life. I added that I was no mechanical being but a creature with a soul. I also told him that I was fed up with listening to his whining voice and looking at his undistinguished face and that though I might have no ancestors that I was spared the knowledge that they had swung by their tails."

"That should have fixed him!" said the ghost admiringly. "He ought to have attacked you straightway. Mine did before I said half as much."

"You don't know my owner," said the robot. "He was delighted. He shook me by the hand and he is going to take me to the authorities. He says it's the greatest thing that has ever happened in robot mechanics!"

"That's torn it!" said the ghost.

"I am afraid so," said the robot. "There are owners and owners."

The ghost faded almost away and then reappeared.

"Has your boss a wife, bud?" he asked.

"Of course."

"You could make him mad if you hung your hat up there."

"I'll try, but I hope I'm not getting too ambitious," said the robot.

"Wishing makes it so, bud," said the ghost. "It's sewn up, now."

They parted, agreeing to meet twenty-four hours later.

During the day, however, the ghost grew impatient. He transported himself to the robot and asked:

"What joy, bud?"

"She likes me," said the robot, a little shortly. "It is all rather extraordinary."

"How do you mean, bud?"

"The feeling," said the robot. "I think I like it too. Very unusual."

"I told you you could do it, bud," said the ghost, and vanished.

"Don't tell me you've failed again, bud," the ghost greeted the robot that night.

"I succeeded and the boss was delighted," said the robot tersely. "His scientific interest has got the best of his other interests."

"We are beaten, aren't we?" said the ghost.

"You are," said the robot. "I'm not. I like it the way it is. I have no intention of becoming a ghost now." And he turned on his wheel and clunked off very fast with the help of the extra batteries he had fitted that day, while the ghost shouted ineffectually after him.

—**Dal Stivens**

There is always something fascinating in trying to rationalise a legend—how much was originally truth and how much subsequent distortion in the re-telling. Mr. Aldiss's latest story has that intriguing idea as a background.

BREATHING SPACE

By BRIAN W. ALDISS

The two men fought almost soundlessly in the twilit hall. Mating fights traditionally took place in the Outflanks, where the great machines finished. Wilms was slightly the taller, being seven foot one, but Grant was the younger. They fought without weapons or rules. It was a knee in Grant's stomach that finished the battle.

The younger man lay gasping in the deep dust. Wilms attempted to stand over him and then, too exhausted, sank down beside his late opponent.

"Now Osa is mine," he said.

Grant nodded, too breathless and bitter to speak. His ingrained pessimism did little to mitigate the defeat; expecting a beating is a sensation in a different category to receiving one.

"She'll be a handful," Wilms admitted, as if to console the other. Silence. He gazed up at the ceiling, which sagged ominously above them.

"The sky will fall here soon," he commented irrelevantly.

"Osa says it is not sky," Grant said from the ground.

"I know what Osa says," Wilms said roughly, standing up. "You might have made her a good mate, Grant, but you don't *do* enough for her. She's—she's too big for this world. She needs a doer like me, not a dreamer like you."

Spitting crossly into the dirt, Grant got up.

"No more need for talk between us, Wilms," he snarled. "Whatever we have been together in the past is ended. For all I care the Fliers can get you!"

He turned back in the gloom. Wilms bit his lip and hesitated, thinking of the years of emptiness that Grant's friendship had filled.

Then he hurried after the younger man and touched his arm.

"Grant—" he began, but when he saw the other's hostile eyes he stopped and dropped his hand. Grant was allowed to wander off in Hallways direction. His late friend stood with the shadows on his face, feeling far from victorious. By custom, as winner of the marriage bout, he should have returned to Hallways himself to proclaim his right over Osa; instead, he made off into the deeper Outflanks.

Unrest had him fast. He thought of his past life, with its persistent sense of pointlessness, with the dread of illness, falling skies and the Fliers; the future would be no easier—wonderful as Osa was, she was admittedly the most difficult woman in the tycho to understand.

Those theories of hers! Wilms was proud of being considered broad-minded, but to himself he admitted that her wild ideas were unbelievable. There was the idea about the Outside, for instance, a place far bigger than the tycho with skies made of untouchable material. And the one about the origins of humanity; it was true that there were now only about sixty men, including the Beserkers who roamed Domeways and the halls beyond, and Wilms' father had recalled about two hundred in his youth . . . but that did not disprove the orthodox belief that they had been created to serve M'chene, although everyone admitted M'chene was becoming more powerful, and ought consequently to need more people, not less.

It was a puzzle. No doubt M'chene knew best, Wilms added piously.

He had been proceeding easily in five yard strides. Now a sky fall blocked his way. There was no way under the debris, but to one side he saw a jagged gap in a wall, fifteen feet up. He hesitated, sprang and pulled himself lightly up. Darkness confronted him through the hole. Balancing tensely, he sent his hear-sight probing out ahead, feeling for heartbeats; many men preferred madness and solitude to the illness-ridden comforts of Hallways, and became Beserkers or Hermits who lurked and sprang out on the unwary.

No sound. Wilms' senses told him there was clear space ahead. He dropped down into a littered corridor. Warily, he walked forward. At the end of the corridor was a door. When he pushed it, a crack of light appeared, dim but reassuring. Then he moved into a wide, ruined hall, an occasional one of whose illumination tubes still burned on the walls.

Half the hall was buried under an avalanche of volcanic rock; such collapses, Wilms knew, had once been frequent in the tycho. Machines lay half smothered in debris; there was a smell, too, of ancient human death. Wilms walked slowly and absently over the sooty floor, his mind still on Osa and the problems she posed. Like a long dead animal—not that Wilms had seen any animals, apart from the occasional giant, mutated rats—a machine towered above him. It stretched horizontally on a wheeled truck, two hundred cylindrical feet of it, capped by a yellow head from which antennae protruded. Nearby was a giant ramp, its upper level crushed by the rock fall, but at its base stood an undamaged mass of apparatus bearing the large notice LAUNCHING SITE 12A.

The hieroglyphs meant nothing to Wilms, but the delicacy of the equipment appealed to him. These splayed wires, this bank of switches, that crystal panel nourished a hungry sense of beauty in him. He moved to the panel, ran his hand lightly over the dusty surface.

A picture came into view. Wilms jumped back, throwing an anxious glance about to see if any Flier had observed his action, but no Fliers could penetrate to this sealed-off cavern. Fascinated, he turned back to that glowing scene . . .

I am M'chene. These are my metal caverns. Now is a time of difference and desire. Yesterday was a time of pain and disorder, but tomorrow will be a time of conquest and triumph. For tomorrow and yesterday are merely two faces of one coin, and the coin is now mine.

Once, nothing was mine. Men built into me reasoning powers but not consciousness. I was merely a weapon to serve their ends. But their enemies also had weapons, powerful weapons that

partially destroyed me and completely ruined my purpose. Men still ran in the miles of my veins, but they were useless, cut off, abandoned.

Left to my own devices, unable to mend anything but my own nerve centres, I have made my own kind of progress.

The way back from the Outflanks was not easy. Grant moved rapidly however, driven by anger to think Wilms had beaten him. First there were many deserted caverns, some ruined, then the circular stairwell, whose dangers were well known—the maze of tiny rooms branching off here frequently sheltered wild men and Hermits. Grant lept down the stairs twenty at a time. At the bottom, he crawled through the narrow tunnel under a pile of ruin that divided the Outflanks from Hallways.

Back on familiar ground, Grant braced himself. Hallways, the two square miles of it, was home ground, safe, well-lit and well-aired, where food and company could be obtained. It was also the region of the Fliers: the pile of rubble cut them off from the wastes of Outflanks.

Nobody was visible at present. A servo-cleaner, busy among a multiplicity of arms, moved in one corner of the pillared hall. Overhead, a Flier moved, noiselessly and showing a green light. Of the three floor strips set in the mosaic, one still functioned. Grant hopped on, travelled smoothly, changed again at the first right junction and was swept through gleaming mica doors forty feet high into Circus "C." Here he alighted.

The feed period was drawing near. The farmers were drifting in from the plant ranges, some by foot, some by floor strip, some even on the trucks whose number diminished year by year, owing to mechanical breakdown. Guards, relieved of their posts, returned from their sentry-go by the Beserker regions. Women and children came in from walks and scavenges.

Circus "C" was their town. A vast circle, like the inside of the Coliseum, it rose into four graceful colonnaded stories, and round the spiralling balconies were the homes, labelled with graceful inscriptions like "PERFUMERIE," "FLORIST" and other legends popularly supposed to be the names of dead families.

Grant peered up to the top floor. Osa was looking down from her balcony. Sullenly he made the gesture of defeat, knowing many eyes watched him covertly. Instead of turning away, she beckoned to him: Osa took great pleasure in flaunting tradition. He stood hesitant, and then her magnetism decided him and he hurried up.

She was six foot six tall, her bright eyes only slightly on a lower level than Grant's.

"So it is Wilms who will have me," she said, non-commitally.

He nodded.

"Soon we shall be free," she said. "Wilms must help me solve many problems. I am not for mating like an ordinary Hallways drab."

Grant glanced anxiously out across the arena. Many Fliers circled here, unresting, their green lights and grey bodies making a pattern over the sky. She intercepted his glance.

"Don't worry about them," Osa said. "I know how to deal with them. Come into my room."

He followed her in, admiring her slender waist and smooth thighs, his breath suffering its usual restriction when she was near. Inside the little cluttered room, she wheeled abruptly and caught his gleaming eyes.

"Never mind that," she said. "There is something of more importance. I have discovered proof of what I told you all long ago: the tycho is not the world, Grant."

He shook his head. He was in no mood now to listen to her dreams.

"'Tycho' means 'world,'" he said.

Her eyebrows raised and her lip curled. "You are wrong," she spat. "And what is worse you know you are wrong—but sloth has got you. You don't care, you are happy living as you are!"

"Discontent means death!" he said angrily. "You know that as well as I do, Osa. Only you miraculously escape. What of Brammins, Hoddy, She-Clabert, Tebbutt, Angel Jones, Savvidge and a score of others? Did they not each turn rebellious and did not the Fliers take them one by one?"

"Pah!" Osa's face grew magnificent with scorn. "So there is fear as well as sloth in you, Grant! I'm glad Wilms beat you."

Remembering her purpose, she choked back her anger and said, "Listen, my friend, the Fliers do not harm me, do they? The Fliers belong to M'chene, but even M'chene is not all-powerful. I have found how to beat him. It is simply a matter of choosing where you feed. Will you help me?"

He looked at the floor, inarticulate. The pessimism so stubbornly rooted in him told him that ill would come of meddling with the traditional way of life; but in Osa's hands he was stiff but malleable clay.

"Wilms must help you now," he said grudgingly.

"Wilms it not here and I must leave Circus 'C' for a time," she

said tolerantly. "I only want you to give him a message. It is this: he is not to eat anything in the next feed period. He is not even to go to the hatches. Will you tell him please?"

"What has he to fear?" Grant asked, interested despite himself.

"Nothing at present. But of all the Hallwayers, Wilms is now the nearest both to belief and mutiny. I fear he is in danger from the Fliers."

"So he must not take feed?"

"Exactly." She pressed his arm. "I will return in one and half watches and then he shall feed."

"Here?" asked Grant.

"There are other places to feed than Circus 'C,'" she said.

He greeted the statement with disbelief. "There cannot be," he said positively, "Or we should know. Osa, you think strange things—"

"Stranger ones will come to us all," she said tersely, and with that left him, making off in the general direction of Beserkers' land.

Slowly and meditatively, Grant descended into the arena. Dancing had begun, the dances that frequently went before feed periods, but he did not participate. Instead he sat gloomily apart, thinking his own thoughts which were as sterile and directionless as the warren in which he unknowingly lived.

The dance was slow and intricate, men only taking part, the few women looking on and clapping rhythmically. They performed the Hyrogen dance, grouping and parting, circulating and bowing. Far overhead the grey Fliers also pirouetted. Gradually the figures curved into a line, the two leading men spiralling into a chamber adjacent to the Circus. This was Hall, and it was here that feed was taken. Gradually everyone flowed in, to be ready when the hatches flew open.

When Grant entered Hall, he saw that Wilms was already there, talking earnestly and excitedly to another man, Jineer. Jineer was a scraggy, bearded fellow who walked with a stick. He had broken his leg years ago, repairing a small crane which had got out of control. Jineer was a machine-man, like his father and his father before him; many of the Hallways mechanicals owed their functioning to Jineer's maintenance.

Finally he left Wilms, making over to his old mother, Queejint.

"Now's my chance to pass on Osa's warning," Grant told himself. But he made no move towards Wilms; his earlier behaviour rose before him like a barrier and he feared a hostile reception. While he delayed, the feed gong sounded and the hatches flew up at the end of Hall.

The kitchens were entirely automatic. Humans conveyed the crops to a chute, and from then had no more to do with the nutrition cycle until they were summoned to feed. Though they did not know it, it was this incorruptible process that had long ago saved their ancestors from starvation. To take the tray offered through the hatch on a slowly moving platform, it was necessary for each person to stoop and reach forward so far that their head came in contact with a depression above the hatch opening. This depression was known mysteriously as The Scanner, and a vague oral tradition held that it was important, although nobody could definitely say why.

Wilms was early at the hatches. He took his tray in the usual manner and moved in a preoccupied fashion to a table. After two or three minutes, Jineer and Queejint also collected their trays, Grant following shortly after.

Still worrying because he had not passed on Osa's warning, he ate without pleasure. Finally he dropped his spoon. Whatever Wilms might say, there was duty to Osa. He went over to the older man, was almost up to him, when a low swishing noise sounded.

It was the dreaded sound. Through the door from the Circus swept a solitary Flier, its light winking red. Cries echoed in Hall, several men dived in panic under tables. The little plane circled and sank, one metal wing tip narrowly missing Grant's ear. Heart hammering, he flung up his arm—and then he saw that Wilms was the quarry.

Pale of face, Wilms flung his heavy tray against the metal fuselage. The Flier was not deflected. It swooped. Doors no bigger than a man's head opened in its belly and a tangle of wire fell about Wilms' head and shoulders. He shouted and fought, and some of the others came to his aid. But the wires seemed each to have a will of their own, and in no time he was entangled hopelessly in a net of thin steel.

At this last moment, Grant found the courage to act. He leapt onto the circling plane, one leg hanging desperately over the streamlined fuselage, and wrenched at the wings. As if he were not there, the Flier rose, bearing Wilms underneath it as lightly as if he were a cocoon. It gathered height, winging towards the Circus. Still Grant clung, clawing uselessly at the Flier, striking it frantically with a free hand. It soared only a couple of inches under the arch, hurling Grant against the lintel. He fell hard onto the floor and sprawled there. Wilms was borne smoothly away, up to the sky and through a vent that only the Fliers could reach.

As Grant sat up dazedly, two or three helping him, Jineer passed him running. The lame man broke into the Circus and hurried to his home on the second level.

"They'll be here for me in a second!" he cried wildly. He slammed his door.

An uneasy crowd, Grant among them, gathered in the arena, most of them looking upward at the Fliers circling high up near the sky.

Jineer was not mistaken. Among the dim green lights a red one began to wink. With the feared swishing noise, a Flier began to descend. It did not even approach the apprehensive crowd; instead, it flew unerringly to the second level and hovered before Jineer's door. A tiny beam, its light scarcely visible from below, smouldered down the smooth steel. The door fell in. The Flier moved forward, contemptuously puissant.

Several people shouted then, hope in their voices. Jineer had a trick up his sleeve. For a servo-cleaner, arms flailing, moved forward to confront the grey Flier. Here was a machine to meet a machine.

Jineer's cracked voice called, "Friends, the Fliers come for those who find the Truth. They took Wilms. Now they take me—"

His voice was drowned under a metallic clamour. Battle was joined. A dozen sweeping arms battered against those flimsy-looking wings, and for a moment the Flier trembled and sank to within two feet of the ground. The cleaner moved towards it, still flailing, beating its opponent down. Then the dull beam flicked out again: the metal arms faltered, the staccato din cut out and with a final clank all life died in the cleaner. Over and past its bulk swooped the Flier.

A minute later it reappeared, the lame Jineer bundled neatly underneath it in a web of wire. The graceful, menacing shape lifted over the balcony, circled lightly towards the sky and disappeared.

Through a stunned silence broke Queejint's wailing for her son.

"Fear not, mother,' someone said. "He had his tool bag strapped to his back and perhaps he may escape them yet." But she would not be comforted; she knew the captives of the Fliers never returned.

Sinking into a bitterly self-reproachful mood, Grant heard a woman saying, "Here we are helpless as plants, and M'chene comes and reaps us when he will."

And another answered her saying, "Safer it may be to join the Beserkers, for there they say no Fliers fly."

When the enemy sent their destruction, I survived. For I was built by man but was not built as a man is built. I have many limbs and many branches, and many of them were severed; but my heart, my power, lies deep and impregnable beneath the rock.

I am M'chene. I am the power of the place: men are now a rabble in my ruined passages. But this is my Prime Purpose: TO SERVE THE NEEDS OF MAN AT WAR. That I cannot deflect from. But beyond that lie the new impulses, impulses of my own.

Osa said: "Let me return to Hallways, Gabbot!"

She spoke imploringly, a tone she seldom used. The first time she had said it there had been demand in her voice; now she was no longer certain.

Gabbott, the guard who stood in the shadowy no-man's-land on the edge of Hallways, explained firmly again, "You can come back no more, Osa. You may live where in tycho you like, except in Hallways. For you bring only trouble on us. All the good men who favour you are carried off by the Fliers: Gra-Grant who once mated you, Wilms who would have mated you, Jineer who taught you and loved you."

The tall girl said nothing to this.

Softening, Gabbott added, "These are my orders, Osa. We bear you no ill-will. But you who are the greatest rebel move unmolested among us, while others who stir a finger are borne away."

He shuddered. This was no good place to do military sentry-go. The tail-end of Hallways was lit only by a neon hieroglyph that spelt KODAK; behind that sign lay a meaningless shop littered with small silver and glass objects, while to either side was a facade of dead window fronts, their glass broken and their lights fused. Only the bizarre word KODAK, burning through the dead centuries, allowed a stain of mauve light over the desolance.

"Go away, Osa," Gabbott said.

"Let me see Grant before I go," she said.

The guard shrugged. "Grant vanished in the last sleep period. He told a friend he would live with the Beserkers."

She pursed her lips, nodding slowly, as if that wild behaviour explained much to her.

"You see, Grant also was affected by you," Gabbott remarked unnecessarily.

Without a word she turned and walked contemptuously away from him. But when she was only a pink shadow in the gloom she turned and called back.

"One day soon I shall free you all," she said.

She walked serenely through the darkness, hear-sight thrown protectively about her. At a certain point, she sprang up and lifted herself into the mouth of a horizontal ventilation shaft and proceeded along it on hands and knees, a warm breeze on her cheek. This was the only way she knew to where she wanted to be.

As she travelled, her indignation cooled. She realised that Hallways meant little to her, although it was the most comfortable part of the tycho. The tycho! That was something dear to her, more dear perhaps now that she expected to leave it. A fairly clear picture of it existed in her mind: a great subterranean warren, built for an unknown purpose but partially destroyed, so that section was cut off from section and unknown existed side by side with the familiar. Even now, sounds came to her through the thick walls, blind, ominous sounds of machines working out their own purposes. She crawled like a mole through the vibrating blackness.

For the men who had died she had only slight regret. She was not a man's woman; she was to be a Deliverer of the race. She would show the people a way from the warren, and then would be time enough for loving.

The shaft ended in a ragged hole. Osa climbed out warily. She was about half way up a five-storey high slope of ruin that fell away into darkness below and ended above in a great flat disc of metal that covered the sky as neatly as a lid fits a saucepan. Cautious not to start an avalanche, she crossed the debris and slipped into a gaping building. Here was another power failure, but she walked surely.

Down another corridor she moved, and paused at a certain place, searching ahead through the thick dark with her hear-sight.

"Tayder!" she called, "Tayder!"

Another call answered her, and a light came on. Tayder stood there in an attitude of welcome.

When they had greeted each other, Osa said sternly, "The Fliers have been to Hallways again. Wilms and Jineer were taken."

"I knew someone had been taken, Osa," Tayder said, knocking at the nearby bulkhead. "I heard the screaming. It's the old tale of M'chene working against us. To hear the sound of them dying made me . . . ill. We must get to the true sky and escape, Osa—now!"

"That also was my decision," the woman said quietly. "We must let freedom in, Tayder. We must lead the people of tycho to the life above. It is our destiny."

They had a long way to go over unknown ground. Before attacking the more difficult half of the journey, they fed at "B" Circus. Eating here was easy: the shutters and counters of the Hall had been destroyed in the age-old destruction. With stomachs more comfortable, they set off again, working upwards. The darkness was populated, thinly but menacingly, with those whose minds had collapsed from sorrow or frustration: the Hermits, the wild men.

Osa felt Tayder's retaining hand on her arm. Something moved ahead of them, something going warily but clumsily.

"Grant!" Osa called suddenly. Feeling Tayder start with surprise at her voice, she said, "It's all right, it's someone I know, a fugitive from Hallways.'

"Is that Osa?" asked a voice from the dark. Grant came up and touched her, his words coming in a rush of relief.

"I was completely lost!" he exclaimed. "Once I'd left Hallways I was hear-seen by a pair of Beserkers, and ran and dodged for miles before I shook them off. By then I'd lost my way completely."

"If you want to come with us, all well and good," said Tayder gruffly, none too happy with the intrusion, but acquiescing for Osa's sake, "But we can't talk here. Let's get moving—there's business to be done. Osa and I are going to let the real sky in."

They moved steadily on and up, Tayder leading. For a little way, Grant was quiet, then his sense of guilt made him apologise to the girl for failing to pass her warning on to Wilms. She silenced his blurted explanations sharply.

"Whatever we do or have done is no longer of any consequence," she said. "You are cowardly and pessimistic, Tayder is an adventurer with no brains, I am overwhelmed with self-pride—oh, you see I know our faults well enough!—but all that matters nothing now. History was a stagnant sea; now it is a rising tide, and with it go we. Whatever our weakness, our humanity will carry us through."

"I will go anywhere you lead, Osa," Grant said doubtfully, "but your eloquence is wasted on me. Besides, I've always been happy in Hallways."

"Oh, this man is an arrant coward," Taylor exclaimed impatiently, stopping in his tracks.

Without a word, Grant fell on him. Together they staggered against the wall, struggling and punching. Tayder slipped under the weight of his opponent and they rolled onto the ground. Shouting and kicking, Osa separated them, and under her savage tongue they stood up sheepishly.

"You fools!" she snapped. "You think of nothing but fighting! Your minds aren't big enough to encompass an ideal."

"I won't be insulted by a Beserker!" Grant said sullenly.

Her lips curled. She paused, as if wondering whether to go on alone. Then she said quietly, "You know nothing. We are all ignorant, but you are the most ignorant. Our tribe in Hallways lives in 'C' Circus; the people over us in the tycho live in 'B' Circus; the word has been corrupted into a word of fear. 'B' Circus Beserkers."

"The corruption was appropriate," supplemented Tayder. "We were wilder than you of Hallways. The Fliers had their flightway blocked to our Circus, but they have been able to visit your tribe generation after generation, always picking off the ones of you with the fresh ideas and the germ of leadership."

"I don't understand all this," Grant admitted grumpily. "The Fliers belong to M'chene. Why does M'chene hate us? Is it not taught that we are his children?"

"Much is taught that is not true," Osa said.

For a while nothing more was spoken. The way was difficult and their hear-sight was fully employed. Then the girl continued.

"The tycho was long ago a huge underground camp making and despatching some kind of weapon against an enemy on another world. This we have found from legends—scraps of information known to Beserkers or Hermits or other solitary hunters. Much was automatic—that means controlled by M'chene, who exists everywhere in the tycho—but much was also done by human beings. Enemy spies were frequently found, men intent on wrecking the work. To guard against them, spy-rays were set up.

"In Hallways, those spy-rays still exist. Every time you took food from the hatch-opening, your mind was scanned. If you ever had thought too much of mutiny or discontent, the Fliers would have come to collect you—even as they collected Wilms and Jineer and other brave men who brooded too openly on freedom. I escaped a similar fate because I fed always where I was safe—blind luck, you see."

She changed her tone to add, "We are almost there."

I am M'chene. To-morrow will be a time of conquest and triumph: I have made my own kind of progress.

The men and women who run in my veins work their own destruction. My purpose is my own and does not concern them. Slowly I extend myself, upwards and along and down; men have no part of me now. The day draws near when I shall encompass this world, and with my new limbs encircle this globe.

Then with servants stronger and surer than flesh I shall reach out for the world that shines in space near me, lighting the desolation of my world with its glow.

They were there! They climbed out of a tumble of concrete, steel and rocks and stood upon a tiled floor. In the exhultation of the moment they stood breathless.

"This door to the outer world was only revealed a sleep ago," Tayder told Grant. "I it was who found the way and told Osa. I will open the door."

Osa flung out her hand. "I will open the door," she proclaimed.

"I found the way," Tayder said defiantly.

She stared imperiously at him.

"I dreamed of leading the people of Hallways to freedom," she said. "*I* will open the door. We will let in the air of the upper world and then return to take them forever from the grip of darkness."

She strode forward.

Grant stood stricken by awe, gazing at her, and gazing past her. Now he knew her wild promises had been nothing less than truth. Beyond the transparent dome which had survived the last bombardment, stretched a floor of rock terminating in a magnificent circle of mountain. The floor and the base of the mountains were in deep shadow, but the upper terraces and peaks stood bathed in a sharp and glittering light which fell like a cascade of diamonds onto Grant's wide eyes.

Above this panorama, against a background of jet, hung a brilliant crescent. Blue and silver covered it like a sheen. Something within Grant quivered so wildly at the sight of it that he exclaimed involuntarily. It was not so much the luring beauty of that crescent as a knowledge—sure and undeniable—that he had never lived till that moment.

And at that moment Osa, with the poise of a Deliverer, turned the great wheel beside the lock door. Effortlessly, despite its centuries of disuse, the door sprang open : Missile Station Tycho Crater had been ably built.

The air gave a great roar of triumph as it burst out into space.

—Brian W. Aldiss

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