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No. 20

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# Science Fantasy

Vol. 7 No. 20

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Editor : JOHN CARNELL

Cover and Illustrations : QUINN

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GERARD  
QUINN



*Author John Brunner is beginning to show his versatility as a writer in the wide variety of plots that he uses and we feel that the fantasy story will eventually be his best medium. This time he uses the parallel worlds theme but with an extremely fresh approach.*

# A TIME TO REND

By JOHN BRUNNER

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Illustrated by Quinn

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## I

Even though Tippet Lane was only some four paces wide, he wasn't going to make it.

Colin Hooper realised it a little too late. Gasping, almost as if he was physically drowning in the sudden redoubled downpour, he scrambled into the half-shelter of a doorway, wondering how it was possible to be so thoroughly drenched in a matter of seconds.

"What a *bloody* night!" he said angrily, noticing only after he had spoken that the doorway was already occupied—and by a woman, at that. He caught the light-blue sheen of her hooded macintosh as she turned and glanced at him. His first automatic guess was that she must be one of the many street-walkers who haunt the area about Shepherd Market; her voice, when she answered, startled him, for it was low and pleasant.

"It's all of that and some more," she agreed, sounding amused. Her accent was not quite a Londoner's, though her *o*'s tended towards *ow* and her *a*'s towards *i*. "Do you get much of this sort of thing?"

"More than we can do with," he nodded, taking stock of his condition. Water ran down out of his hair into his eyes. "And this lot looks as if it's set for a while."

The rain pounded and bounced on the roadway ; an occasional half-hearted tremor of thunder shivered in the distance. Cold wind picked the droplets up as they shattered against the ground and tossed them mist-like between the buildings. He hoped for a moment that there was going to be another temporary let-up in the fury of the storm ; then he resigned himself to a long wait.

He fished in his pocket and brought out his cigarette case, offering it wordlessly to his companion. She took one with a murmur of thanks. Wet finger-marks darkened the sides of his own as he set it to his lips.

When the woman bent her head towards the flame of his lighter a moment later, he saw her face clearly for the first time, and was so astonished he let the flame go out.

"Why—it's you," he said blankly.

"What on earth do you mean?" The girl—she was younger than he had guessed—paused with the cigarette between her slender fingers. Colin went on slowly.

"You had dinner at the Cresco Restaurant last night, didn't you?" he said, and the girl nodded, still looking puzzled. "The evening before, you came into the bar of the Crux Hotel for a drink. The same afternoon you had travelled on top of an 88 bus—and the evening before that you sat in the stalls at the Neptune theatre. That was the first time I saw you," he added as an afterthought.

"True," said the girl. "But how did you know? You saw me?"

"Noticed you." Belatedly Colin remembered he still held the lighter and kindled it again. "I wondered who you were—and why you were alone." The last few words came out before he could stop himself.

He knew exactly how her face must look, though he could not make it out in the shadow of her hood : he guessed the quizzical expression in her violet eyes, the slight tilt at the corners of her rather too large mouth, perhaps the faint wrinkle of her wide white forehead under her black hair.

"I'm flattered, I suppose," she said at length. "That you should remember me I mean." She shivered and glanced sidelong at the street. "Isn't this rain ever going to let up?"

Colin had hoped for a moment that she might admit having noticed him ; as it was, he gave an inaudible sigh and ran an irritable hand over his wet red hair. The wind was chilling his feet and legs.

Then a fractional sound behind him made him glance to see what moved ; it was the door against which they stood huddled. It had swung silently ajar until he could see into the interior of the building ;

faint blue light came from beyond. The sound he had heard had been a kind of swishing—brief, inconsequential. It had stopped.

The girl, sensing his shift of attention, followed his gaze. As she turned, there was a voice from somewhere out of sight.

"Would you not care to come in for a moment? The rain will not stop for nearly fifteen minutes, and it cannot be pleasant to stand outside in damp clothing."

Colin caught her eye; she shrugged, and stepped forward. "He's right. Anything's better than freezing out here."

The instant he set foot over the threshold, Colin realised what the swishing had been; his feet sank into the rich pile of a carpet better than any he had ever stepped on before. Even compared to the dull overcast outside, the light was dim, and its blueness unfamiliar; it took his eyes a moment to adjust.

"What kind of a place is this, anyway?" said the girl, stopping suddenly a pace ahead of him. Looking past her, Colin knew why she was taken aback.

Somehow, the place seemed impossibly big—as if it stretched for a mile to left and right. A clever illusion, obviously—but he wished he knew how it had been accomplished, and *why*.

Ahead of them, the deep carpet stretched towards a flight of low steps, with four or five risers reaching a height of perhaps two feet. Seeming to float above the dais which formed a continuation of the topmost tread, there was a disc of whitely luminous material looming out of the dimness.

"This is damned funny," he muttered. "What about the guy who called us inside? Where's he?"

"Please come forward," the voice invited them, as if it had been waiting for him to ask that question. "We realise you are perhaps startled to see this place, but do not be afraid."

Colin made a sudden decision. "I don't like this," he said firmly. He caught at the girl's sleeve to draw her back. "He wouldn't tell us not to be scared if there *was* nothing to worry about."

The girl shook off his hand. She had pushed back the hood of her raincoat. "Don't be silly," she told him. Her eyes were bright. "I rather like this place. It's odd—but that's only because it's unexpected. Anyway, it's better than Tippet Lane in a cloudburst."

She walked forward; after a second of irresolute hesitation, Colin followed her.

As they approached the foot of the steps, the speaker who had invited them in became slowly apparent, almost invisible in a pool of

shadow beside the glowing disc over the dais. He stood as still as a statue ; he wore a robe that flowed like silk to his feet.

They halted at the foot of the steps, and there was a long silence. Colin, acutely aware of the wetness of his collar and shoes, broke it.

"Thank you for letting us come out of the rain, but—"

The robed man gave no sign of hearing them. His voice came again, as bodilessly and sourcelessly as before, without Colin being able to detect the movement of his lips. "You are Vanessa Sherrieff?" he inquired.

The girl gave a little start. "How did you—?"

The man ignored her. "And you are Colin Hooper?"

"Yes, but—"

"Look at this disc," the man commanded, a sudden ring of authority in his tone. In spite of himself, Colin found he was obeying, and that the disc was not a plate of featureless luminescence as he had at first assumed. There was movement on its surface—spiral movement, as if a river of light were pouring into a whirlpool within the material. Fascinated, he tried to follow the stream, tracing it from the edge to the centre, wondering how the effect was achieved.

His arms and legs were stiff, and very cold. He fumbled for his blankets, thinking himself in bed, until the problem of how a mattress could be so hard penetrated his dull mind. Blinking open his eyes, he looked up into darkness.

There was the sound of someone stirring near him, and everything came back to him with a rush. He sat up.

He was on the floor of a dusty room, vacant except for boxes stacked in piles against the wall. A thin wash of yellow from a street lamp flooded through a narrow window against the ceiling. Vanessa—he barely remembered how he knew her name—was struggling to her feet a few paces distant.

He stood up and caught her as she swayed. "Are you all right?" he demanded.

"I—I think so." She put a hand, grimy with the dirt of the floor, to her forehead, leaving a smeared mark when she brought it away. "What happened?"

"Something damned funny," said Colin grimly. "Do you recall anything about it?"

Vanessa looked around slowly. "I know I came into that big blue-lit room. And then the man told us to look at the white disc—but that's all." She gave him an appealing glance.

"That's what I remember, too," Colin nodded. A thought struck him, and he looked at his watch. "Funny—either we've only been unconscious a few minutes, or—" He put his wrist to his ear.

"No. It's stopped. What time do you make it?"

Vanessa held up the little watch, shaking back her sleeve, to the light at the window. "Mine's stopped too," she said in a voice which started to tremble on the last word.

"Well, we must have been drugged, or something." Colin turned to see if there was a door visible. "We'd better get out of here quickly. Whatever happened, I'd like to get hold of that guy in the silk robe."

He found the door; it had a Yale lock on it, and he opened it without difficulty. He had stood back to let Vanessa come up to it before he took in what he saw outside.

"I'll be damned!" he said in a low tone. "Look—we're still in Tippet Lane!"

Vanessa shivered; he heard the rustle of fabric as she drew her coat about her more tightly. "And isn't this the same door?"

He pulled the door shut behind them, and they looked out at the drying roadway. "Yes, I'm sure it's the same," Vanessa went on, her breath quickening. "How did it happen? How did they do it?"

"I want to know why," said Colin savagely. He stepped forward, and at that moment the circle of a policeman's lantern beam raced up the wall and stopped on his face, dazzling him. Vanessa put her hand on his arm and pressed close.

The constable looked hard at them, wet cape shining on his shoulders. "Officer—" Colin began, and then paused blankly.

What was he going to say? That they had been drugged—by whom, they didn't know—after being lured into an impossible room—which was no longer there—for some purpose they couldn't guess at?

"Yes?" The policeman's voice was unfriendly and harsh.

Vanessa broke in. "Have you got the time?"

"It's about ten past three," said the constable without looking at his watch. He left the rest of the sentence unspoken, but it was nonetheless an eloquent comment of what he thought of them.

They started down the alley together; Colin could feel those unfriendly eyes on the back of his neck. When they were turning the corner, Vanessa gave a nervous laugh.

"You could almost hear his mind working," she said, attempting lightness.

"Ten past three!" said Colin, the implications suddenly hitting him. He set his watch as he spoke. "Look, can you believe what happened tonight?"

She caught his meaning. "No. Nor would anyone else, would they?"

"I wish I'd looked around a bit," Colin reflected. "I think I'm going to come back tomorrow—"



"You mean today, don't you?" A ghost of a smile flitted across Vanessa's face. "I know what happened is impossible and ridiculous; so probably there'll be a full explanation in the morning paper. Some society party with a new twist, perhaps—"

Colin was winding his watch; its spindle resisted after less than half a dozen turns, and he lifted it to his ear. "It still isn't ticking," he said in annoyance. "Must have been damaged . . . I'd better see if I can find you a taxi to get home. There's nothing else this time of night."

"Thanks, that won't be necessary. I only live five minutes from here." The violet eyes looked at him thoughtfully. "You're soaking, aren't you? You'd better come up to my place and get dry and have a cup of coffee before you do anything else."

Colin, not pleased by having to face the long cold ride back to his Hampstead flat, accepted gratefully, and started out in silence beside her.

## II

The flat was three-roomed: smart, with modern decor and one good modern painting on the wall. Colin waited in the middle of the main room while Vanessa, who seemed to have recovered her poise completely during their walk, turned on the electric fires. Crossing to a cupboard, she took out a towel and a terry-cloth dressing gown; as she turned to give them to him, she caught sight of herself in a mirror on the wall and grimaced at noticing the dirt smeared across her forehead.

"Soap, hot water and an airing cupboard," she told him, pushing open the door to the kitchenette. "I won't be a moment."

Left alone, Colin peeled off his soaked jacket and shirt and cleansed his hands and the side of his face where he had lain in the dust on the floor. It scarcely occurred to him to wonder at the thoughtfulness Vanessa had shown; later it was to puzzle him, but at the present time it seemed right, and that was all.

The dressing gown was meant for someone tall and thin; it fitted badly on his stocky five feet eight, but its roughness was comforting after the slick coldness of his damp clothing. He sank his hands above the wrists in hot water and waited till the warmth had communicated itself to his bloodstream; then he looked about him, found a kettle and the percolator, and began to prepare the coffee, still not wondering at anything, least of all how he could accurately guess where everything was kept. He listened to the tap running in the bathroom on the far side of the flat.

Before Vanessa came out, her dark hair sleek and her ivory skin glowing in contrast with the dark red housecoat she wore, he had

two cups filled for them. She sank into the wide sofa and took hers from him with a word of thanks ; sipping it, she nodded.

"That dressing gown isn't your size, I'm afraid," she said musingly. A question crossed Colin's mind, and it must have shown in his face, for she added briefly, "It's my boy friend's."

*Of course.* No other comment struck him but that ; how could this glowing woman be otherwise than sought by men ? Colin perched on the side of an armchair and looked at her. "Tell me about yourself," he said. "What do you do ?"

"I'm an actress." Vanessa sounded half-defiant, as if she expected him not to believe her. "Resting, in the cant phrase—or to put it bluntly, I'm out of work: I wish I'd stayed home."

Her accent immediately placed itself in Colin's mind : Australian, of course. He leaned forward. "But why ?"

"Why am I out of work ? Without being vain, I sometimes wonder about that myself." She cocked her head and gazed with critical appreciation at her reflection. "I know I'm good—"

Her head changed attitude abruptly, like the flickering movement of a bird, and the violet eyes were on him. "Yes, I *know* it—in just the same way as you knew that I take sugar and milk in my coffee, how strong I like it brewed, and that I drink it from a breakfast cup and not one of those fiddling little things most people like. Colin—" hearing her use his name for the first time gave him a ridiculous thrill of pleasure "—anyone else would have asked about those things. You didn't. Who are you ?"

"I don't quite see what you mean." He affected lightness. "Colin Hooper, age thirty, single, personnel selector for—" He broke off, seeing the impatience in her eyes. "All right, so that isn't what you mean. Up to six weeks ago I was engaged ; I would have been getting married the day after tomorrow, but something went wrong. Since then, I've had one extended drinking bout lasting ten days, a week's recovery from it, and a dose of fever, in the course of which I've imagined and dreamed things nearly as strange as what happened to me tonight. And you ?"

She set her coffee cup down with a frown. "It's the last in a series of odd happenings for me, too. I was doing all right Down Under ; I'd had three or four supporting parts in films which made money, I'd had the lead in a good play which folded after four days because it was too good—it really was—and I'd had the offer of a starring role in a new picture. About six weeks ago, too, I—I thought I was offered a contract with a British firm. On the strength of the promise, I threw up everything and flew here. And—" she looked lost and vaguely frightened, "—the man who made the promise doesn't exist. The

firm doesn't exist. I don't mean I can't trace them, either. I must be crazy," she added with sudden exasperation.

"I see," Colin said thoughtfully. He did see ; he understood now how she had been able to take the strangeness of the night's events as calmly as he. Strangeness is relative ; once it passes a certain level, the mind adjusts to it. One does not question the lack of logic in a dream, and likewise, when one's life becomes as unreal as dreaming, acceptance follows automatically.

They fell silent for a few minutes. Colin was thinking of the vague visions which had peopled his period of emotional breakdown. There was something like a monkey in them ; when he was surrounded by cruel, relentless figures as shadowy as visions but infinitely more dangerous, he turned despairingly to that creature and it aided him—he did not know how. It seemed to him now that the evil persons of that time had worn robes like the man in the impossible room, but he could not be sure that was not an illusion of displaced memory. He could not be sure of anything.

"That—whirling disc," he said as it came back to him. "You were watching that when everything stopped, weren't you?"

Vanessa nodded. She opened a cigarette box on the table nearby and gave him one silently. "It was a spiral flow. In towards the centre. Hypnotists use things like that, don't they?"

Colin slapped his knee. "I knew it put me in mind of something. Yes, of course they do. That's what put us under—must have been ! But—" his voice grew puzzled, "—I never heard of a gadget that worked on people who were unprepared. You have to co-operate actively in order to be put under, don't you?"

"So I've always heard." Vanessa took a deep drag on her cigarette. "Me, I've always been too fond of my mind to hand it over to anyone else."

"I know exactly what you mean."

"And I don't see you could have found two people more unprepared than we were," Vanessa went on, reverting to his earlier remark. "I had a feeling about that place—I know you did, because you warned me to come out. If I had sense, I'd have done it. It got my nerves on edge ; that man in the robe, particularly."

"You know how it affected me?" Colin looked at her squarely, knowing that she was one person who wouldn't take the statement with a smile, no matter how ridiculous it sounded on the surface. "I felt as if I'd walked into another world. Not off to another planet, or anything of that nature—"

"Like one of these 'planes' the spiritualists talk of." Vanessa nodded full understanding.

"Exactly. And—" Colin shivered a little, "—of the other worlds I've heard of, this one could have done duty for just one. *Hell.*"

"Things working differently. I have a nightmare—that is, I used to when I was a kid. In it, I was always doing something perfectly ordinary, which took—you know—a bit of extra attention? And then it wouldn't go right."

"You would be sitting in class at school," said Colin with sudden cold certainty, "and you would work out a problem and get the answer right. And the teacher would tell you it was wrong, and you couldn't say anything."

Vanessa was looking at him with her mouth just a little open. When she spoke, she sounded breathless. "Colin, I asked you before, and this time I want to know. *Who are you?*"

The doorbell buzzed. Colin had barely had time to be surprised at her question, and part of his mind was still available to think in ordinary channels—so much of his life had to be spent entering other people's personalities that some of it rubbed off; sometimes his own thoughts followed the grooves worn for it by adjustment to thousands of strangers who were at home in the world.

He said, "Who's that? Your—boy friend?"

Still keeping her eyes on him, Vanessa slowly shook her head. "Larry's in Northumberland," she said. "I don't know who it could be—"

She got up and walked over to the door.

There was a man in an overcoat on the threshold—tall, with a certain dignity of manner; his hair was brown and crisp and oddly cut, as though it sometimes had to follow the shape of a head-dress that was not a hat. He seemed uncomfortable, though his clothes fitted him excellently; Colin was reminded of someone who has been talked into a part in amateur theatricals without really wanting to be.

"Good morning," said the stranger; his voice was distant and resonant. "Are you Vanessa Sherrieff?"

"Yes."

"And is Colin Hooper with you?"

A hint of shrillness rode on the edge of Vanessa's tone, like the bright line down the sharpened blade of a knife. "Now look, cobber," she said with exasperation, "I'm getting pretty bloody sick of people asking me if I'm me! What's it to you? Why don't you get out of here and start minding your own business? It helps!"

Two things were gnawing at Colin's mind. He got up and came to stand at Vanessa's shoulder, staring the stranger in the face.

"Yes," said the man, heaving a sigh. "Yes, you are he." He sounded distressed. "This, perhaps, you will not understand—indeed, it would be better that you did not. But I must tell you this—that you must go away, far away. Alone, each of you. Or you will be in terrible danger!"

"I don't know who you are," began Colin. Vanessa broke in.

"Whoever he is, he's ripe for the giggle emporium, isn't he?"

"I am Kolok," said the man, and there was something almost impressive about his unruffled dignity. "You do not know me, though I know more about both of you than either of you knows about the other, believe me. Where I come from, I am a person of some importance, even if I am nothing here—"

"President of Andorra, or something?" Vanessa seemed to be being deliberately crude in her attacks and Colin, suddenly realising that for some reason she was near hysteria, put his arm round her and felt her trembling.

"If I told you, you wouldn't accept it. All I can do is beg you—" his voice took on a pleading tone, "—to obey me. Go away from here! Never see each other again! The future of the world *depends* on it."

There was something ludicrous about the words; nothing about the terrible fervour with which they were spoken. Colin felt shivers slide down his spine.

They stood in silence for a while, hearing only the beat of rain against the windows. At length Kolok shrugged, his coat riding up on his shoulders.

"You will not do it," he said. "The others have been more clever than we. And yet, left to yourselves, meeting by chance for the first time tonight, you might have gone your ways for the rest of your lives and never given each other a second thought. Is what I ask so much, then?"

"Yes!" The word had burst from both of them together before they realised what they were going to say. Kolok shook his head in slow pity.

"They have indeed been clever," he said, and a gust of wet wind rattled like a drum-roll on the panes as he spoke. "I have failed, and that is all. Goodbye."

He turned to go, but Colin stepped forward. "Wait!" he said. He touched Kolok's shoulder and felt the cloth dry and rough. The shine of the man's shoes was fresh and undulled.

"You're dry," he said wonderingly. "How—?"

"There is no rain on the road by which I came," said Kolok. "Goodbye."

## III

At least this evening it wasn't raining. But it was cold. Colin stamped his feet and tried not to stare too hard at the strange door of last night. Several of Tippet Lane's overfull population of street-walkers approached him hopefully, but he had no trouble demonstrating his indifference to them.

What was behind that door tonight? Anything? Just the stacked boxes and the dust—or the blue vastness and the white, whirling disc that could seize the mind and make a man lose six hours without a whimper? Something dull and prosaic—or a whole new world?

He wondered what the passers-by would say if they knew that the temptation behind that door had suddenly made a respectable, social person like himself contemplate house-breaking.

Vanessa was late; he felt a stab of relief when she finally appeared, for he had been terrified that she might not appear, even though he knew subconsciously he might trust her with his life. But her lovely face was troubled as she approached at a quick walk, heels rapping the paving.

"With me," she said in a low voice; not questioning, he fell in beside her and walked on.

"What happened?" he whispered.

"Someone's following me. I know it. I haven't been able to catch sight of them, but I'm certain. Let's get somewhere where we'll be safe—look, over there."

She indicated a coffee bar which came into sight over the road, and they crossed a bare few yards ahead of a hurrying taxi; the driver hooted at them. Not speaking, they entered the bar and took places from which they could see the door.

Vanessa drew a deep breath. "I have the same feeling I had last night when we were talking to that man Kolok," she said. "Exactly as a cat must feel when its fur is brushed the wrong way—edgy!"

"And—?" Colin prompted.

"And I don't think Tippet Lane is safe for us. Something big is brewing there." She stiffened. "Look!"

Colin strained his eyes past the brightness inside the coffee house, trying to make out what it was that moved on the other side of the road. It looked incomplete. They struggled to bring it into focus, but it refused to come.

After a little while Colin relaxed, and found that the waitress was impatiently demanding what they'd have; he ordered absently, and when he looked again the thing had gone.

There was a girl at the next table ; dark, intense—but not naturally so, as Vanessa was, merely by dint of concentration ; her hair was cut in a pageboy style around her square face, and green-framed glasses with cats' eye lens forms suggested that she had tried hard to make herself interesting and failed. She had noticed them staring out and followed their gaze ; seeing nothing, she had shrugged. Now that there was a chance of catching their attention, she leaned forward.

" I think I know what you're looking for," she said with suppressed excitement.

" What ?" said Colin, startled.

" Yourselves !" said the girl in triumph. " A meaning to life—a message which doesn't call on you to believe the mystical assertions of the religions—"

Colin stared at Vanessa, who lifted one shoulder.

Something of the fanatical was in the girl's eyes as she looked at them challengingly. " Well, aren't you looking for a meaning to life ?"

" Everyone is," said Colin with an attempt at patience. He was only listening with one ear ; most of his attention was riveted on any sign there might be of Vanessa's furtive follower.

The girl noticed this, and half-relaxed ; they were to be spared the full treatment, then. But she was not giving up without a final shot ; she reached in the handbag she held and brought out a garish leaflet. " Read this," she invited. " It'll solve your problems if you care to do as it says—and that's the truth ! It's knowledge that moves mountains, you know—not faith."

She got up and moved away ; Colin glanced at Vanessa. " Who on earth was she ?"

" Real Truther." Vanessa seemed not to be much interested. " Larry's tied up with them somehow—lot of people are nowadays. It's a humanist religion, if you can follow that ; claims that man is the greatest thing in the universe, and anything that the mind can conceive it can achieve if it works the right way."

" How come I've never heard about it ?"

" You might not have, unless you happened to pass one of their churches, or bumped into one of their street-corner missionaries. They go for very particular classes of people—emotionally under-developed, intellectually over-developed, like undergraduates who haven't adjusted from their adolescent idealisms or loud-mouthed world-savers—" She shrugged.

" Humanist religion, eh ?" Colin nodded. " Something like that was bound to crop up, I suppose. Know how Haldane suggested that if someone at the end of last century had founded a religion whose



basic tenets included the existence of the ether and Kelvin causal physics he would have grabbed followers hand over fist and prevented the development of modern science?"

"Eimar O'Duffy," said Vanessa. "*Spacious Adventures of the Man in the Street*: all primitive anthropoid apes climbed trees ten feet high to escape sabre-toothed tigers, so the ones with short tails lived longest. I know."

Colin crumpled the leaflet and tossed it aside; from the distant table to which she had moved the adherent of Real Truth watched the motion pityingly.

"And is that all they have to offer?"

"No, there's something about the coming of the perfect man. Usual Messiah-pattern, except that this fellow's arrival is scheduled for sometime this year or next. I don't know what happens after that."

Their coffee arrived, and they sat sipping it in silence.

Vanessa set her cup down with a bang that made heads turn all round the room. "Colin, it's getting worse," she whispered. "Someone's very close indeed!"

Colin covered her hand with his own, trying to squeeze strength into her; he could feel it himself now, as if he was listening to the measured tread of a firing party walking down a long, echoing passage towards his own death.

Then there was someone standing beside them, who had stepped from a dark booth at the rear of the room. He looked up. "You!" he said in amazement and terror, drawing back. "What do you want?"

"Your safety!" said Kolok briefly. "Get out of here—quickly! I'll do what I can to head them off, but you'll be twice as safe if you split up—they can't follow you so easily."

Anger rose in Colin's mind; he stood up belligerently. "Who are you to order us around like this?" he demanded.

"I know what I'm doing, and that's more than you do!"

"Colin, let's go," said Vanessa. She stood up beside him. "I don't care about him, but let's just get away."

"All right," Colin nodded. With several backward glances at Kolok, he made his way to the door behind her, and when they were out on the street looked anxiously both ways.

"Where should we go?" he said. "Do you know?"

Vanessa shook her head; she sounded scared. "I can feel them all round us. Let's just walk until we're clear—if we can."

A hundred yards down the road something moved in an alcove; Vanessa shuddered, and Colin felt hairs rise on the back of his neck.

It might have been an animal, or something stirred by the wind—but he knew it was not.

Illogical terror growing in them every moment, they turned and twisted and doubled. There was no sign of a taxi, and they were in streets too narrow for buses. Besides, Colin felt that the strain of standing passively at a stop and waiting would have driven him insane.

They came at last into a small square where there were many people, ordinary-looking people though predominantly young, going into some building at the side of the exit street on the far side. Bewildered, Colin looked about him.

"I can't feel anything now," he said suddenly, and Vanessa tightened her grip on his hand.

"Nor I," she said, a world of relief in her tone. "But—where are we?"

Someone passing from behind them tapped Colin on the shoulder; he turned, startled, and saw it was the girl with green-framed glasses.

"So you did decide to come," she said simply. "I'm glad."

Then she passed on, leaving Vanessa staring in horror. "Why, this must be Mann Square!" she said. "That's the Real Truth headquarters over there—their late-night service must be starting."

"Why, Vanessa!" A man's voice, ebulliently cheerful, came to them, and the owner shouldered his way through the crowd towards them. "Last place I ever expected to see you—and after all the times I tried to talk you into coming, too!" He came up and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

"I—" Vanessa stumbled at a loss for words. "Oh—Larry, this is Colin Hooper; Larry Adderley."

Larry turned and perhaps noticed him consciously for the first time; Colin could almost feel physically the sudden flash of hostility which rose in the other, though nothing showed on his smooth, tanned face. Larry was handsome in a slightly weak way; his hair was fair and curly, and he wore a rather too perfectly tied silk square at his neck. Colin found himself wondering in spite of all what Vanessa saw in him.

"Come along, then," said Larry, after a long, searching stare at Colin. "The service is due to start in five minutes, and there are some very interesting rumours going around!" He linked his arm in Vanessa's; she went along acquiescently, and Colin, helpless to refuse despite his continued sense of urgency which lasted even though his apprehension had faded, fell into step beside them.

"Such as what?" he asked after a bit.

"About the arrival of The Man, of course." Larry seemed to assume that it was Colin who had persuaded Vanessa to attend;

thence, obviously, sprang his first jealousy. Colin decided the role was one which he would have to accept ; nodding wisely, he looked ahead up the steps into the building. On either side of the door, signs proclaimed in four-inch sans serif lettering that this was the First London Seat of the Real Truth.

Mann Square ; the choice was a little too obvious, surely ?

#### IV

The hall inside the building was bare and efficient ; circular in plan, it was ringed with concentric circles of seats which were filling steadily from the inside row. He judged that the place would hold about three thousand ; some half of the available space was filled.

In the centre of the roof was a light, effectively masked by mist to which it gave a quality of luminescence ; under the light and gazing up at it in attitudes which conveyed aspiration, indomitability and achievement, were two superb statues—a man and a woman.

The seats were very comfortable, and the air was fresh and satisfying with some clean scent ; in spite of himself, Colin found the tension of the moment taking hold of him. He looked for the girl with green-framed glasses, but she was nowhere in sight.

There was music from somewhere, and the lights were slowly getting dimmer ; the walls seemed to vanish into a vast blue distance. The process was more than half complete before Colin realised what it reminded him of. He seized Vanessa's hand, and from the trembling he could feel along her arm, he knew she had recognised it too.

Feeling like an animal caught in a trapfall, he turned his head to see if there was any route of escape, but the people on either side of them, including Larry, were leaning forward with expressions of near-idiot anticipation.

And then the voice struck from nowhere like the ring of a bronze gong.

"THINK !"

Behind it, unspoken, was the smallest suggestion of contempt for those who did not use their minds, the one thing that set man apart from the animals, the one vital force in the universe. Colin heard gasps from all around, and a hand clutched at his stomach.

The statue of a man turned and looked round the hall. It was no longer a statue. It *was* a man ; his robes swung out very slightly at the hem as he turned.

"KNOW YOURSELVES !"

A sob from somewhere yonder in this blue infinity.

"Remember that you control the universe," said the man quietly and behind him the statue of a woman turned into a globe of spiralling whiteness. Colin found time to wonder how the illusion that the spiral faced each separate person was maintained before he was lost.

He never remembered what had happened in that period of enlightenment. He knew that he looked into the heart of a sun and found the secret of its million-year life ; he knew that he controlled and owned and commanded the lives of thousands who owed him only love in return ; he felt that the solution to the riddle of the cosmos lay just within his grasp ; he could see it shining as it were in the palm of his hand, but when he closed his fingers he found only the smooth flesh of Vanessa's arm.

Slowly struggling back to consciousness, like a man who has dreamed of paradise and feels the memory momentarily slipping away, he looked about him. There was a man standing in the aisle, beyond the three persons separating him from the end of the row. Somehow he knew that the endless spiral was still pouring up there in the centre, but he did not need to look at it. Vanessa still lay with her head on one side, and Larry's mouth was slackly open. No one in the hall moved or thought except Colin and Kolok.

"It is not quite too late," said Kolok ; he spoke as if he was being slowly unburdened from a gigantic load. "I realised too late that their only purpose was to get you resonating with their disciples. After that, you would have opened the path. Tonight, after the service, they will say when the Perfect Man is coming ; we have yet time to frustrate their purpose. Wake her !"

Colin shook her shoulder, and Vanessa stirred and gave a little cry. "Colin, how could you — ?" she began, and then her eyes fell on Kolok. She stopped abruptly.

"Yes. Can you wonder any more that these Real Truthers have doubled their following in the past year ? When they can offer the illusion of perfect knowledge, of absolute power, and never hint at the eternal enslavement of the soul which they have bribed these people to demand ?" Kolok sounded more bitter than a man could be.

There was a sound behind them ; something heavy and not perfectly oiled was being slid back in grooves. Kolok whirled. "They're coming ! Quickly !"

Colin, not understanding, but knowing at least that Kolok was against these men who had the power to tie the mind under pretence of freeing it, caught at Vanessa's arm ; they scrambled over the inert bodies of the hypnotised.

"Under the dais!" Kolok ordered crisply. "It's the only way. I only hope I can get to you before they hear your souls—*Run!*"

Black shapes, incomplete like those that had melted in the shadows of the London streets, were gathering at the end of the aisle; Colin's nerve was stretching towards its limit.

Below the dais there was a black opening; they ran into it, not caring where it led so long as it was away from the hall of blue mists. There were steps beyond, ill-lit but with the evenness of new shaping, leading downwards. Gasping, they reached the foot of them and looked round.

A passage led off from that point in two directions at right angles to one another: one ahead, one to the left. Sounds of voices came down the branch facing them, and they dodged into the other. They ran forward into twilight.

Two hundred yards ahead, they halted suddenly, for a vivid blue line was splashed in paint across the floor, and symbols of some kind in the same colour were marked on the walls. Puzzled, Colin reached across the line.

Behind them, there was a voice raised in anger, giving orders from its tone, but too far away for them to make out the words.

"We'll have to go on," Colin said. He managed a weak smile at Vanessa. "Are you all right?"

"Except for being scared and lost, and all tangled up." She spoke wearily.

"This line doesn't seem to mean anything, at least," he muttered. Putting his arm around her and feeling her grateful for the touch, he led her forward.

Five paces beyond the line, they fell.

It felt as if they were falling at dizzying speed for thousands of miles; falling as far as Satan fell when he was cast into the pit; falling through the reaches of empty interstellar space, so far from the sun that no light came to them—and yet it lasted between one step and the next, and the floor of the passage was there to meet them when they next set down their feet.

And there was a man looking at them. A fat man with a dimpled face coarsened by rich living, in a blue robe with golden symbols embroidered on it. He wasted one second in not believing his eyes, and Colin, not knowing how he knew it was necessary, had brought his bunched fist up on the point of the deep-dimpled chin. The soft body sagged and leaned sideways to slide down the wall to the floor.

"Now we're in real trouble," Colin whispered. "Come on—let's find out where we're going."

"How did we ever get involved in this?" Vanessa was pale.

"I don't know. But after that session back in the Real Truth place, I have a feeling that someone is trying to run our lives for us—and if there's anything that makes me furiously angry, that's it!" He rubbed his sore knuckles against his coat. "Never knocked anyone out before," he added.

The passage ahead of them seemed to be the same as that behind—featureless, two hundred yards long. Glancing back, Colin wondered if Vanessa had also felt that incredible sensation of *dropping* while being aware that he was walking over level ground; since she did not mention it, he decided it would be as well to assume it was an illusion of his own.

"Why—we're back where we started!" Vanessa pointed; a flight of steps loomed up ahead of them, and a passage branched off to the left from their foot.

"We can't be," Colin insisted. "We haven't turned around—besides, this branch of the passage turns the opposite way from the other, remember? This must be a way out."

Cautiously, they climbed the stairs together, expecting that at any moment incomplete black shapes might gather ahead of them, or a blue-robed man come down towards them. Nothing like that happened; unmolested, they reached the top.

Colin let out a stifled exclamation.

For they stood under a dais; white light was shed softly from above them, and concentric rows of seats held people slumped in a hypnotic stupor.

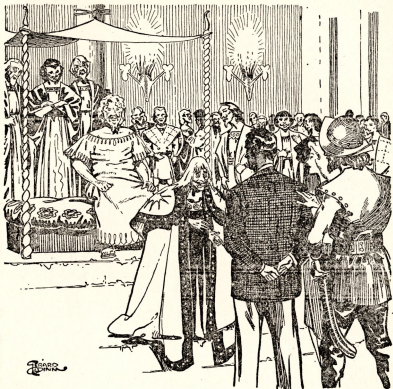
"It can't be!" whispered Vanessa; she seemed poised on the verge of tears. "It *can't* be!"

"Is there another of their—temples—in London?" suggested Colin in a low tone. She shook her head.

"Larry would have known if there was—Colin, look at their clothes!"

His eyes adjusting to the blueness again, Colin followed her directions. In the front row of the seats, barely ten paces from them now, there were five people: a stout woman in a floor-length coat with five big buttons, a youth with a sort of tunic and leggings fastened with brass hasps and a rakish beret now sliding down over his right ear, a man of middle age in a thick, comfortable-looking quilted greatcoat, and a boy and girl dressed identically in strap-fastened greatcoats without the quilting. Nowhere in sight was there an ordinary suit or a blouse and skirt; the garments were all coarse and functional. Peasant-like, Colin thought at once.

"Where are we?" whispered Vanessa.



"I don't know," he answered heavily. "But I've a hunch we're a long way from home."

This time, the black shapes became solid.

The four men came down the aisle between the seats with their eyes carefully averted from the sight of the spiraling flow of whiteness. Wanting to shout, to tear and break apart, Colin stood helplessly frozen in the grip of the blackness that was neither solid nor hard and yet was stronger than himself. He could not even turn his head to see Vanessa.

At the head of the group was a pompous, self-important man in a blue robe with gold embroidery like that worn by the man Colin had



knocked out in the passage underground. He looked at the captives with eminent satisfaction, and turned to the leader of the trio with him. They were all big men : bearded, with rough leather jerkins and thick belts about their waists. The leader wore a short sword, and his companions had cudgels of bog-oak slung by thongs at their sides, and casque-like metal helmets.

The man in the robe issued a crisp order in a high voice ; the language was completely unfamiliar to Colin. The two junior members of the quartette—he thought of them automatically as soldiers, without knowing—fell in behind himself and Vanessa, and seemingly without effort hoisted them off the ground

It was frustrating as well as intolerably humiliating to be borne like a sack of potatoes, impotently writhing to break the intangible bonds of the blackness about them ; Colin at length gave up the struggle and tried to control his anger enough to take in something of his surroundings.

Their escort trudged forward, leaving the hall where the stupefied thousands slumped in their seats, passing through wide double doors of carved wood guarded by sentries who bowed themselves forward and extended their cudgels on the upturned palms of their hands in a gesture of submission. They received a curt nod from the robed man.

Beyond the double doors they emerged into a passageway, high-roofed and splendidly carved, with statues of granite larger than life size at intervals down the walls. But the only light came from many guttering torches in sconces at head height, and a bitterly cold wind bent the flames half over towards the ground.

Where were they ? Who were these people ? How could the mere traversing of a few hundred yards below ground bring them out into what seemed like another world ? The questions beat at Colin's brain ; he had no answer for them.

The robed man was shod with sandals, but the soldiers had heavy boots which clumped on the stone floor and made echoes go running into the distance, until they paused before a second pair of doors. Guards in rows of three with pikes eight feet long raised and lowered their weapons across the passage as the party filtered between them ; a look of grim, set determination stamped their faces.

The doors swung back, and the robed man shouted something ringing and respectful ; he dropped to his face on the floor. The soldiers stood stiffly with their burdens held high.

They were in a room perhaps a hundred feet across—oblong, lit by what seemed to be pools of raw white fire in niches under the roof. The air here was warm ; plaintive music resounded ; tapestries hung on the walls, gaudy with red and yellow and blue.

Around the walls at intervals were knots of men and women, most of them blue-robed, but some in quilted coats and leggings. Slender, very fair men wearing only breech-clouts carried trays of beaten brass laden with bowls of food and cups of drink hither and thither.

Opposite the doors by which they had entered, a man in a robe of gold sat negligently on a wide, soft seat ; behind him a group of blue-robed men looked coldly down the line of the room. One of them called out something, and the escort moved forward again ; at length Colin found himself set down before the man in gold, who looked at him contemptuously. He had a heavy, powerful face with sensual lips ; his hair was carefully dressed to fall on the nape of his neck in thick, regular waves. His eyes were green, the colour of the sea.

Apparently very proud of himself, the pompous man announced—Colin guessed—the facts of his discovery of the intruders. The face of the man in gold changed as if a light had been turned off behind it, and insatiable rage burned in the air. The music stopped instantly ; everyone in the hall seemed to give a gasp of awe, and—

Colin closed his eyes and wished that he could vomit. The blue robe now concealed more and less than the man ; blood darkened its surface, welling through from inside ; the man screamed, clawing at the fabric and ripping it apart with his nails. There was a glimpse of the bluish-grey of entrails as the body struggled to pieces on the floor.

Two of the very fair men in breech-clouts came forward as if nothing had happened, caught up the corners of the torn robe, and dragged the remnants—it was hard to think of any other word—away. Terrified the sword-bearing soldier was on his knees, knocking his head against the floor, crying out in a pleading tone, but the man in gold wasted no more on him than an insult, and he got up and backed away, trembling, to stand to one side.

The man in gold made a beckoning movement without looking to see if it was obeyed ; his eyes were on Colin and Vanessa. Abruptly the intangible restraints were lifted ; Colin almost fell with the suddenness of freedom. He wanted to seize Vanessa and hold on to her, to comfort her—how she might feel by now he dared not guess—but he could do no more than stand, his mind whirling with a thousand questions.

In response to the beckoning, a figure in a robe whose blue was concealed by fully half as much gold embroidery as that of the man on the seat tottered forward, leaning on a stick ; Colin was unable to decide

whether it was man or woman, for it was very old, and only a few wisps of white hair clung to its wrinkled scalp.

It halted beside the man in gold, turned to face them, and spoke in a startlingly resonant voice.

"Since this poor thing is acquainted with your intolerably barbaric tongue, I shall have to make use of her to speak to you." A faintly mocking expression in the eyes of the man in gold accompanied this statement.

Colin hunted for his voice ; he seemed to have lost it beyond recall.

"I who honour you by addressing you am called Telthis ! Remember that. It is a name you will have cause to know well when I am ruler of your world as well as this one. It was opportune of you to find your way here, I may say ; you have saved me an effort which of course I could well make, but which would have been tedious."

The conviction grew in Colin : the man was insane.

But then—what was he ? This place was like nothing in the real world . . .

He felt an overwhelming desire to wipe that contemptuous sneer from the sensual, heavy face ; he assumed the thought showed in his face, for Telthis laughed, and the old crone spoke again.

"There is nothing you can do to harm me, Colin Hooper ! Nothing ! Neither you nor any other of your world of silly cripples can shift so much as the hair of my head unless I wish it. Of my goodness, I will treat you well, for you may be convenient to my purpose, but never think that you see in that a sign of weakness. Look !"

He signalled, and one of the fair men-servants came forward and stood passively facing the seat. Abruptly, there was a column of flame rising from his breech-clout and hair ; a wave of heat smote Colin in the face. Oily black smoke rose to stain the ceiling. Vanessa screamed, and Colin bent double, retching with horror.

Telthis gave them an amused glance, and waved to one of the soldiers. Briskly, as if they too were glad to be going, they bent Vanessa's and Colin's arms behind their backs and marched them forcibly from the hall. One last insane fact struck Colin as he brought himself to gaze around : the tapestries on the wall had changed since their entry, and were still changing, like slow, slow cinema pictures.

## V

They were pushed forward into a narrow room : there was a rough bed, a wooden stool and a slop bucket in it, and the walls were of grey, thick stone. Bars blocked the one high window, and behind them there was the grating noise of bolts being forced stiffly down unlubricated guides.

The instant they were alone, Vanessa turned blindly to him and hid her head against his shoulder, sobbing deep, tearing gusts drawn from complete lostness and fear beyond speaking. Mechanically stroking her hair, Colin stared blankly at the bare wall and let her rid herself of it, wishing a little that he could do the same.

When he felt the racking sobs abate, he guided her gently to sit down on the hard mattress of the bed ; it felt as if it was stuffed with straw. She looked up at him, her face regaining calmness.

"I'm—sorry," she said. "I couldn't help it. It was that man—Telthis. He *did* that, didn't he? Burn the man himself?"

Colin nodded grimly. "I think so. Ruler of this world, he called himself, didn't he? Then some of our dictators have been no worse than naughty children in comparison."

Vanessa fumbled in the handbag which she had somehow managed to cling to, and brought out her handkerchief to dab dry her cheeks ; Colin found himself feeling glad that she did not use eyeshadow, for despite all she was still looking beautiful, and dark smears would have weakened what remaining confidence she possessed. Then she found a packet of cigarettes and gave him one.

"How long have we been—wherever we are?" she asked.

Colin shook his head. "I haven't got my watch. I took it to a repairer and the man said he couldn't find anything wrong except that it didn't go, so he kept it to check it again." He wanted to talk about familiar, real things, and not about a crazy universe ruled by a barbarian despot and policed by club-carrying soldiers in leather jerkins. He took out his lighter and flicked it.

Nothing happened.

He tried again, and sniffed the wick suspiciously—the spark was fat. The smell of petrol vapour was strong enough to make him blink, but a dozen further tries failed to make the lighter work. By then, Vanessa had struck a match ; that burned, and he breathed the smoke of his cigarette with unexpectedly sharp pleasure.

There were too many questions bothering him for him to start worrying about the failure of the lighter now ; he dropped it back in his pocket and put his arm about Vanessa. A movement caught his eye, and he glanced round to see a spyhole in the thick door slide open. The astonished face of one of the soldiers took in what they were doing, and the man cried out. Raleigh's servant, thought Colin irrelevantly—never heard of smoking.

A curt voice which sounded familiar broke in on the soldier's incoherent exclamations ; there was a pause, and then the bolts slid back again. Excitedly, Colin and Vanessa turned to face the door.

A blue-robed man seeming almost bowed by the weight of the complex gold symbols on the garment entered and tossed back the hood which shaded his face. "Kolok!" said Vanessa in astonishment.

"Yes. I have not much time, but now I must explain to you—you are past the point where fighting back would not help a little." Kolok stepped forward and took the wooden stool; sitting, he spread out the robe which fitted him indefinitely more naturally than the ordinary clothes they had seen him wear before. Of course, the robe was—must be—ordinary to him, Colin realised. His assumption about the way the other's hair was cut, too, was justified: an oddly formed gold and white cap exactly covered the unshaven area.

"The first thing I'd better do is shock you into believing," said Kolok shortly. Colin felt the cigarette in his fingers twitch away; it dropped to the floor. Vanessa's handbag fell over, and the contents spilled out in tumbled disorder on the bed; his shoelaces untied themselves with a jerk. Finally the stool on which Kolok sat rose two feet in the air, so that its occupier was unsupported, and then lowered itself to the floor.

"I daren't do anything spectacular, or someone might sense the activity and try to scan your cell. I daren't be discovered here. Does that convince you?"

Shaking, Vanessa whispered, "How did you do that? Was it hypnotism—or did you really float up off the ground?"

Kolok made an impatient gesture. "It doesn't matter. I don't know myself—we gave up the definition of *real* long ago. If you had got up and come over, all your senses would have confirmed what you saw, and until I wanted otherwise you'd have been unable to discover anything different. Since it appeared the same to me, I suppose I did *really* float. Have you any idea where you are, or how you came here?"

Colin shook his head. "We can't be anywhere on Earth," he said in an awed voice. "A place like this couldn't be without our hearing of it—"

"You are on a planet to all intents and purposes Earth," interrupted Kolok. "It's called Troms, but it circles the same sun at the same distance and has done for the same period of time. It has the same continents and islands, and human beings on it. But it is separated from it as two sheets of paper are separated in a closed book—or perhaps you might say it is distant in the direction in which two copies of the same statue are apart."

Hazily, Colin mumbled, "Fourth dimension?"

"Fifth—one not belonging to either Earth, yours or ours, but indispensable, for it keeps them apart. Do you understand?"

"It's like the—the infinite universe conception," said Vanessa. "If the universe is infinite, then somewhere there's a world the same as ours, and there is no way to tell them apart."

"No." Kolok shook his head. "I'll tell you more and see if you follow me. Our best clairvoyants compiled this theory of the truth—it's not proven, but it serves the purpose of any hypothesis. You can use it to guide your guessing."

"We do not know whether when we cause a thing to seem so, it is so, as I told you. Perhaps the cosmos is a figment of the minds of mankind; certainly the massed minds of the race is the only force known to be powerful enough to change it. You are to understand that long ago—perhaps ten thousand years ago—it was changed. A woman was born with a certain genetic factor (I use your terms; actually I could not translate our own for you) which both her sons and her daughters inherited. A savage tribe descended on the settlement where she lived and carried off one of the daughters, when she was still a child. A few years later, the attacked tribe retaliated, and one of the woman's sons, by then a warrior, unknowingly took his own sister from the choice of women divided among the victors."

"Their child had the power which I have. The gene, you would say, was latent and required inbreeding to bring it out. And in your world, the tribe discovered this power and was afraid, and the child was killed before he could pass the trait on. In this world, he kept the secret of it until he was too strong to be displaced. And from that, you may tell why though you are on the same island on the same planet, a short march from the same river, you are not in a town called London, but in Eglar-Garthon, capital city of the dominion of Telthis, the ruler of the world."

"But—"

"The descendants of that child keep the power! When their minds serve their lightest whim, what need for tools and weapons?"

Colin felt a cold shiver go down his spine. Indeed, when a man had *complete* power, what chance was there of his refraining from its use?

"Why are we here?" said Vanessa slowly, as if afraid to hear the answer.

"The power is an extensive one," said Kolok obliquely. "With it, the gifted one can sometimes see a little into the future, more often into the past, as well as across oceans and into the earth. And some can see a little in the fifth direction. Telthis is one. Telthis has the most complete armoury of mental weapons ever owned by one man—"

why else would he be ruler of the world?" Kolok added, sounding bitter. "And, not being satisfied with one world, he made up his mind to try and add a second to his collection."

The mock flippancy, it seemed plain to Colin, was an attempt to hide deep-seated hopelessness.

"So he ordered certain of his senior adepts to discover a way of breaking through the barrier which separates the two universes. And that is where you two became involved."

Vanessa leaned forward breathlessly. "How?"

"Consider: you are an actress, and a very good one, I am sure. Colin has spent his working life dealing with people; he has a flair for assessing them which has never let him down. You carry—both of you—the genes which united in my world to produce Telthis and all our ancestors.

"The handicap under which Telthis is working is this: though the power of mind alone suffices to break through the continuum, it is the most difficult of all mental tasks; at first, the break could be supported for moments only. The followers of the Real Truth, welded together by hypnotism, helped a little by reinforcing the pathway from the other side, but their minds were merely ordinary human beings'. There was always the possibility that stronger allies could be found.

"He found them: you two. If he had been prepared to be patient; if he had so organised things that you married and had children, he could have called on fully developed minds to help him—for the potential exists, always. Your children, if you had them, would have all the talents we have, less, naturally, our life-long training. As it was, he did not want to wait so long. He therefore simply arranged it so that you would meet under circumstances in which you were free, under your morality, to continue the association. Yes, he organised your coming from—Australia? I thought that was right—and made certain Colin did not marry . . ."

He caught the rebelliousness in Colin's mind and gave him a pitying look. "Don't feel angry with Telthis," he advised. "It may be justifiable—but it's a waste of time and effort, for there is nothing you can do against him."

Colin contented himself with grinding his heel viciously down on the butt of his cigarette.

"That evening when Colin saw you for the first time, he remembered you, Vanessa. He sensed the thing you have in common. When you accepted that fact and him with it, in the doorway in Tippet Lane, you opened the way for the first time without the aid of massed,



hypnotised minds. The door of a prosaic little storeroom became the door to another world.

"Now, with success in his grasp, Telthis is determined to wait no longer than he has to. He had intended to leave you here, working on your minds until you were in despair—and the subtlety of his methods of persuasion is infinite ! In the end, you would have helped him gladly ; when and wherever he chose, you would have brought about the coming of the Perfect Man ; his servants from this side would have poured through, their disciples in the Real Truth congregations would have welcomed them and aided them, and two worlds would lie open to him."

"This Real Truth—it's your religion, this side, isn't it?" said Vanessa slowly. "Then—who is the Perfect Man?"

Kolok laughed without humour. "Telthis, of course !"

They thought about that in silence for a little. The ultimate egomaniac, Colin's mind ran on : achieving divinity in his own lifetime . . .

"You said 'would have'," he reminded Kolok. "What do you intend to do about it?"

"At present I can only try and hide you from him ; in a little while, I may be able to get you back to the other side. There you *must* split up ; it quarters the chance of them finding you. After that—" he shrugged, "—we can do little more than hope. Oh, I, and the people who think as I do, will struggle to stop him, but—the things he could do ! Not a weapon in your world is swift enough or deadly enough to stand against even the lowest priest of the Real Truth, against even an apprentice adept, much less against Telthis. He could stop an aircraft in mid-flight and hurl it to the ground ; he could bring together the components of an atomic bomb while they were still in the arsenal. And believe me, that would be the first thing he would do if there was opposition."

"And you," said Colin. "Who are you?"

An odd expression passed quickly across Kolok's face. "I was the priest he put in charge of the first seat of the Real Truth in your world," he admitted slowly. "I was one of those who opened the gate, too. But—" his voice took on a note of pleading, "—I had never seen anything better than my world ! I had never conceived a life in which naked power was not the only criterion, in which no adepts ruled a class of slaves by right of might. When you have had a chance to compare your world and mine, you will know why Telthis's success would mean disaster."

His manner changed abruptly. "Now I must get you away from here. It'll only be a temporary advantage ; as soon as Telthis finds

out about it, he'll look back into time and discover my part in it. I shall confuse the facts as well as I can, but at best it will mean a short delay. When you are on your own—and you'll have to be, for a little to leave the mental record incomplete—beware of the—the—there is no word in your language ; we call them *trnak*, and they were used to trap you in the tunnel."

"What are they?" Colin demanded. "The black shadows, you mean?"

"That's right. They are—well, it is possible for a trained adept to stop himself, Permanently. Your science would call it inhibition of entropy. It's non-reversible, of course, so no adept except one contemplating suicide would try it. Instead, they use failed apprentices, children, idiots, people with recessive talent . . . They can be forced to project the stasis, but in their case it is weak. Yet every one of those shadows, as you call them, represents a human life ; when the stasis is returned by mental command of an adept to its originator, he or she is forever more still than stone—mind locked in the last command, body never decaying or reacting . . ."

"The Medusa," murmured Vanessa, shivering. Kolok gave her a thoughtful glance.

"Perhaps. I sometimes wonder how much legend in your world is due to faint recollection of the time before our universes parted. Our history is perfect, of course—passed as it is from mind to mind—except for the ordinary forgetfulness of the human brain."

He got to his feet. "Come with me," he said, and the door swung open. Beyond, the guard lay still on the floor ; no one was in sight along the torch-lit passage, but of course here that meant nothing. People might be watching without using their eyes.

## VI

Kolok gave directions in a low tone as they hurried along, and was satisfied when they repeated them without a mistake. When they reached a stairway leading down towards a courtyard under a cold night sky, he turned and looked at them.

"Good luck," he said briefly. "In your world that means something. Even if everything in this one is at the mercy of man's whims, maybe the wish will serve nonetheless."

In the courtyard, there was movement ; an ox took half a dozen paces forward, and a rough farm cart, its after part covered with a thick cloth, rolled protestingly forward.

"It isn't a pretty vehicle," said Kolok sourly, "but the best we can do. If I were to use mental force it would alert every priest between

here and Algnu-Bastharn half around the world. The journey isn't long."

Colin made to look at his watch, and then remembered. "When will we be there?" he asked.

"About the middle of the fifth watch. We count time here by the sun. There are ten watches in a night, ten in a day. Perhaps half past eleven in your time, or one hour hence." He cocked his head on one side. "Things are happening! Hurry—and good luck again!"

He turned and went back into the building; chilled by the icy night breeze, Vanessa and Colin descended to the courtyard and scrambled on to the rear of the cart under the thick cloth. There was a strong animal smell. They caught only a glimpse of the driver, who was keeping his head stolidly forward; Kolok had said he would control the man so that his mind would receive no information Telthis or his agents could dig out.

Before they were settled, the cart rolled forward; it paused after a few yards, and then the creak-grind of its axles took up a monotonous slow cycle.

Colin put his arm round Vanessa and tried to make her comfortable against him; it was good to feel the warmth of her, he thought. "What a hell of a way to travel!" he said sourly.

"What else did you expect, Colin? After all, the adepts have no use for vehicles if they can fly just by thinking about it, and their slaves would never develop anything better after that. It's—it's as if one of those *trnaks* had settled on the whole population, isn't it? Inhibition of entropy, as Kolok said. As it was in the beginning, is now, and if Telthis has his way, ever shall be. Excuse me if I'm being blasphemous, but these Real Truthers seem to have set an example." She shifted, trying to pull down the covercloth and perhaps warm herself under it.

"Oh, but I'm beat!" she added. "Colin, I ought to be excited and scared and everything else all at once, but I just can't find the energy. Except when I think about that man being—burnt." There was no passion in her tone. "I want to try and get some rest even if it's only so I can be angry again when I wake up. Do you mind?"

"Mind? Why should I? I wish I felt that I could sleep. But I'd have nightmares. Go right ahead."

Somehow she had clung to her handbag despite all; she pushed it up towards the front of the wagon and pillowed her head on it. After a few seconds she closed her eyes.

A little light came from a low moon nearly full to their left and seeped through cracks in the sides of the cart; by its wan rays Colin looked at her face composed and yet resolved. The axles creaked continuously in the background.

Crazy ; illogical ; incongruous—his mind suggested all the possible descriptions of their situation and rejected them all in favour of the paradoxical truth : *right*.

Lying in an oxcart in a crumpled suit, without a watch to tell how time was passing, without a lighter that would work so he could smoke a cigarette, without a single thing to comfort him except that he knew—somehow—Kolok had told them the truth. How many other worlds, then, lay beside his own, wondered Colin ; if, in his own world, the chance of someone being born who had the power to change the continuum was a matter of one man not marrying, one woman being lured from her home half around the world by a trick, how many times had chance produced the same result ?

Not often, he decided. Kolok had said one woman had been born who carried the genes : a mutant, then. If her seed had survived in the brothers and sisters of those two children who harboured the talent in latency, and in no others, time would have scattered it far and wide. Ten thousand years was a long time, true, but if it had happened again it might not have happened in a society where the first reaction to the unknown and feared was : kill !

Or would it ? Witches had been burned until recently, as the world's age went ; there had been mediums, fakirs, Houdini and Home . . .

It was too much ; he was tired, as well. He passed a limp hand across his forehead and looked down at Vanessa sleeping beside him. A wisp of hair had strayed down over her face ; he brushed it away. Then he did something which he suddenly realised he had been longing to do for more than a day ; he bent his head and gently touched her lips with his own.

She was not asleep.

The cart jolted to a stop ; when it had stood for a moment, they realised they must be at the end of this stage of their journey. Stiffly, they got to the ground. They were on a rough, muddy road ; firelight through the ill-shuttered windows of lowly huts dotted the hills about them, and clouds had come up to cover the moon. It was very eerie.

The driver, sensing somehow that they were down, prodded his ox with a vicious-looking six-foot goad, and the ponderous wagon creaked away down the road. They were alone.

"Now we wait and see," said Colin with affected lightness. "Let's get out of the wind if we can—" There was a stunted hedge alongside the road, he noticed, and a tree of fair size adjacent to it promised a little shelter against its trunk. They went up to it ; there was no grass verge or border, for the poor land, untouched by more than primitive agricultural methods, was ploughed for every inch it would stand.

Even so, the crop of turnips near where they were looked scanty and ill-doing.

"It's the poverty of it which terrifies me," said Vanessa, looking round. "These—these hovels within an hour's walk of the centre of London, as we'd measure it. And did you look at the faces of the people in the temple where they caught us?"

"No," admitted Colin. "I was too busy worrying about what had happened to us."

"They were horrible! Pinched, and sort of fatuously eager. Like the Chinese in the old days, starving themselves to get opium because it was the only protection they had against reality. They can't be thinking any more, you know."

"I see what you mean. The religion is complete in itself. The priests would have to convince their followers with demonstrations otherwise; as it is, they just delude them with that hypnotic gadget. Did they use their ability to overawe people when they went through to our side? Is that how they got their first adherents?"

"No, they didn't." Vanessa huddled closer to him; the breeze was bitter. "Larry told me about it. They just talked, I think—persuaded a few people and got them under hypnosis, and then let them carry the message. There can't be many people actually from this world over in ours. You remember Kolok said it was difficult to keep the path open?"

"Then how did we get here so easily?" Colin went on quickly, answering his own question. "Of course. We're supposed to have the latent talent—maybe there was some sort of residual stress that we managed to get through."

Vanessa glanced up to look at the blur of light filtered through cloud which marked the position of the moon, and gave a soft cry of alarm. "Colin—look, what is it?"

He followed her gaze, and saw something crooked and angular glimmer white over the field across the road. He stepped forward, trying to see it more clearly. "It's too big for a bird," he said in astonishment. "Do they have animals in this world different from ours? Watch out, it's coming this way!"

The thing swooped across the road; he ducked and put his arms round Vanessa as it settled a few paces from them, and pressed her backwards away from it.

It looked ghastly—like a ghost in the thin moonlight; when it moved forward, Colin felt like running for all he was worth.

And then it spoke, in a clear, pleasant treble voice, and told them not to be afraid. Instantly, they remembered: flying was part of

human ability here, and this creature, then, could be no more than a child.

"Who are you?" said Colin, more fiercely than he intended to because of his heartfelt relief.

"I am called Ishimu, so please you," said the child in an accent like Welsh but very heavily inflected. "I am a boy apprenticed of the temple to Egla-Garthon, but I am sent by Master Kolok to guide you to shelter. I regret I am not here earlier."

Colin was beginning to make him out more clearly now. He stood about ten feet away, but the raggedness of his clothes let the pale flesh of his thin body show, and it was almost incredible that he did not tremble with cold. And then the cloud left the moon for an instant, and Vanessa's hand closed convulsively on his; he gave a sharp gasp.

Ishimu was not standing. He was poised two feet from the surface of the road. He could not have stood—perhaps he had never stood in his life—for his legs were bent up, like warped matchsticks, under his hips. His eyes were closed, and somehow they both knew together that it was not from choice.

When he remarked on their reaction, there was a world of sadness in his tone. "You do not have people such as me in your world, maybe? You are surprised? It must be a good world that you come from."

Embarrassed that he should have been shocked, Colin hastened to answer. "Yes, we do have people like—like that, Ishimu. It isn't strange to us."

"But you do not have them at every street corner," said Ishimu bitterly. "That I know from Master Kolok. You do not have children less fortunate than I—less able to make their minds serve instead of legs—crippled as I was by a hungry mother to excite pity and beg money for bread!"

"In—in India—" said Vanessa. Her voice quavered. "They used to do it there—"

"They *do* it here," said Ishimu decisively. "But we can waste no more time. I am to take you to a place of shelter and conceal you until Master Kolok arrives. Prepare yourselves, for this will be new to you."

The weight pressing on the soles of Colin's feet ceased abruptly, and he found himself, with Vanessa beside him, standing a yard from the ground. Ishimu had floated up with them, and was still on their level.

Colin panicked for an instant: the thought of being helpless, under the control of a ten-year-old boy—for Ishimu could be no more than that—repelled him, and he dropped six inches.

"If you remain calm," said Ishimu dispassionately, "you will be quite safe. We go now."

Colin took a deep breath and relaxed. At once, they were streaming upwards and away; the ruddy glow of the hovel windows beneath them shrank to dots. He found himself close enough to Vanessa to reach out and take her hand, and on doing so looked round at the crippled boy a little further away.

"Thank you, Ishimu," he said.

There was no response that he could see or hear, but warmth and security enveloped him, and gladly he gave himself up to the knowledge of Vanessa's nearness and the sheer pleasure of unprotected flight.

Birds have this, he found himself thinking. A young cripple called Ishimu has it—and that is *right*. But the power itself brought forth Telthis—and is that a bargain?

## VII

They dropped perhaps three miles away into a clearing in a copse; smoke from the chimney of a hut stung their eyes as they descended over its roof. Almost sorry to be back on the ground, they awaited directions.

"Enter," said Ishimu flatly. "I have prepared everything."

"You came from here when you met us?" Vanessa suggested, walking forwards as the door swung wide with no one near it—they were accustomed to that now.

"By no means," said Ishimu, sounding mildly surprised. "I prepared it on the journey—I can do such things, so why should I not?"

They had no answer to that; silently, they entered the hut. It had only one room, and the windows were blocked with shutters, the chinks stuffed with rag, but the floor was swept and there were torches burning in wooden sconces on the walls. Rough-hewn chairs were pulled up to an oak table, and a joint of meat turned slowly on a spit over the bright fire whose smoke they had passed through overhead. A wooden bed spread with sheepskins occupied the length of the wall furthest from the door.

"Be seated," said Ishimu. The chairs grated back on the floor. Slices of meat broke from the joint; platters floated from a shelf beside the door on to the table, but Ishimu's thin face with its sunken eyelids betrayed no hint of strain.

"You will pardon me," he said, and crossed the room to sink into the softness of the sheepskin couch. "I must ascertain what Master Kolok is doing, and when he will be here."



And he can look into the future . . .

"If you can look into the seeds of time," murmured Vanessa, "and say which seed will grow and which will not . . ."

Colin was surprised to find that the appetising smell of the meat made him ravenous ; he nodded at the table. "Let's take the chance and eat," he suggested. "We may need it."

Vanessa agreed, and they set to. There were no knives or forks, of course—in this culture which had been static since ten thousand years ago, no one would have wanted to provide such things for the peasants, and the priests and adepts would not need them. Vanessa was dainty in this as in everything else, but Colin found his fingers growing greasy and uncomfortable, and he was glad to wipe his mouth when he had finished.

They lit cigarettes, for Ishimu was still sitting silent on the bed ; Colin's lighter again refused to work, and he swore at it angrily. Ishimu spoke quietly as they leaned back in the hard seats.

"There is much confusion," he said wearily. "I cannot make out much except that Master Kolok will not be here an hour from now. I shall try again later. Meantime, you are tired. If you wish to take the bed—"

Colin glanced at Vanessa. "You take it," he suggested. "I feel all right for the time being, but you must be all in."

She nodded her thanks and gave him a quick smile.

When Vanessa was stretched out and had closed her eyes, Colin shuffled his chair nearer to the fire and looked at Ishimu. The boy had moved on to Vanessa's vacant chair.

"Ishimu," he began hesitantly. "You have so many powers—can't you—?"

"What?" said Ishimu, his face impassive.

"Well—cure your disability?"

The cripple laughed as harshly as his unbroken voice would allow. "There are limits to all talents, Master Hooper," he said. "And it is as well ! Never mention that where Telthis can find out about it. It is the only consolation for those he grinds down that to him too death must come at last ; his powers will fail with age, and one younger, stronger and cleverer than he will strike him down. But again, it is that which drives him on—makes him cruel, impatient and ruthless."

His forced detachment weakened, and he turned his sightless gaze on Colin with something akin to eagerness. "In your world," he said, "it is possible to cure sickness ? Actually to fight it ? To mend the broken body ?"

"Sometimes," said Colin slowly. "Tell me, do you know here about the germs which cause disease ? The little creatures which infest the bloodstream of a sick person ?"

Ishimu look blank. "Do you know that matter is made up of millions on millions of little particles called atoms? Do you know that the stars are suns like the sun but many times further away?"

"This is true?" demanded Ishimu, sounding incredulous, and Colin sighed. Of course: they relied on their senses. To a man's unaided vision, a solid is solid and a star a star, a light nailed to the sky. So to a man's perception, no matter how talented he might be. Germs must be as undetectable to Ishimu's mind as to his own naked eye; the chance of slowly straightening those warped legs, of renewing the wasted tissues, was beyond the conception of minds not capable of visualising the separate parts composing the whole man . . .

"Tell me about this world of yours," said Ishimu with a touch of envy. "It must be a strange, wonderful place."

So Colin told him. A little—not varnishing the truth, but stating facts, yet the effect was as if he had been telling a fairy tale to a child just old enough to think for himself—incredulity struggling with a longing to believe that such marvellous things could be. Watching the hint of sadness that tugged at the corners of the cripple's mouth, Colin was aware of the astonishing fact that he was lucky; even in his own world, he was blessed with things he had always taken for granted and which millions on millions of people thought of as the features of the Earthly Paradise.

"In my world," he said suddenly, "man had to work for his advantages; he used his hands and his intelligence. In this world, it seems to me, everything came too easily; barbarians with infinite power had no criterion to restrain their animal instincts, so what they wanted, they took, and what they couldn't have, they broke, like petty jealous children. Tell me about this world, Ishimu."

"I can do better," said Ishimu, a little pride coming back into his voice. "I can show it to you." He felt in a pouch on the belt that held his rags together, and took out a little silver mirror with a spot of light in the middle of its polished side. The spot shifted to the rim, and then the mirror twitched so that it seemed to pour continuously along spiral paths towards the centre. Colin felt his body relaxing, and his mind expanded.

And he saw: the cold, hungry queues waiting for the temples to open for the daily service, waiting to hear again that the sufferings of life were worthwhile because they were decreed by the Perfect Man; the peasant farmers struggling to plough their over-used land with thin oxen and wooden shares; the soldiers patrolling the streets in leather jerkins, their clubs on their shoulders, and driving beggars by

the dozen from the corners ; the fine houses of the adepts under tropical skies, surrounded by groves of fruit trees, within hearing of the weak cries of negro slaves being whipped to work which the mind of one of their masters would have finished in minutes . . .

Slowly the picture of the world grew in his mind. In each country the peasants lived and died, perhaps without going more than a day's march from home in their lifetime. Draft animals pulled their vehicles—camels here, horses (but more rarely) there, oxen for the most part ; a few fishing communities had boats, a few trading organisations owned coasters which plied up and down the calmer waters—but when the adepts could cross the oceans without trouble, what need for bigger vessels, for more advanced vehicles ? And everywhere the adepts, the priests and viceroys of Telthis, watching the people and stamping out each suspicion of originality and by implication rebellion.

The certainty came to him : this must not happen to my world ! And yet—what was there for him to do ?

He came back slowly, with the taste of despair in his mouth, to find Kolok in his priestly robes standing beside the table. The man looked weary and anxious.

He spoke to Ishimu in his own tongue ; the few brief words were supplemented with rapid changes of expression and a gesture of impatience ; Colin guessed that much more passed between them than what he heard. The boy went out through the door faster than the eye could follow.

Vanessa stirred and woke up ; seeing Kolok, she rose.

"You've eaten and rested," Kolok nodded. "Good. I've sent out Ishimu to return to his dormitory in the apprentices' house at the main temple—Oh, but you've never seen such a hornet's nest !" He sat down as if suddenly overcome with weariness.

"You've sent him back into the middle of it all ?" echoed Colin in disbelief. Kolok gave him a short hard stare.

"Yes, why not ? He'll be safest there, oddly enough. No one but I knows the full extent of his powers, Hooper. He is something without parallel in history, that child ; beside him, Telthis at that age was a fumbling amateur. He has hatred to drive him, and in this world that is an all-important force. If it were not for the fact that he will not live long, he might one day topple Telthis and perhaps rule the world with a lighter hand . . ."

"You've—looked to see ?" Colin suggested, and Kolok nodded.

"In a little while, he will burn out. And, of course, he knows it. He has seen."

A shadow seemed to fall across them for a moment ; Colin was aware of an illogical tightness in his throat. He had taken to the crippled

boy instantly, and the certainty that the liking was due to be ended made him feel lost.

"What's actually happened?" Vanessa demanded.

Kolok shrugged. "Telthis has made an example of the guards who let you pass, but that was to be expected. He still has no reason to suspect me, fortunately; he thinks that your powers released you. Having found no trace of you in the temple or anywhere in Eglagarthon, he has now alerted two continents. Adepts are feeling for signs of your mental activity; patrols are searching city and country for you—finding nothing, of course, Telthis has assumed that your powers are beyond anything we have met before, and the next stage will probably be for him to punish the adepts whom he believes to have misled him about you. When the wave of excitement has passed over us—" he laughed shortly, "—we shall simply move back into Eglagarthon, to the temple, and back into your world."

"But what are we doing to *stop* Telthis?" Vanessa demanded. "And how many are working against him?"

Kolok hesitated for fifteen seconds. At last, in a low tone, he spoke. "For the first, everything in our power. For the second—there are two of us."

Blankly, Colin wondered if he had heard aright. Kolok leaned forward and went on, "Yes, two of us! Ishimu, whom I have protected and taught to hide among other children, passing as one of the average struggling apprentices in the schools, and myself. I think Telthis knew that if too many passed into your world and saw what it was like, they would feel as I do; therefore he sent me, whom he could trust, as he thought, and no other priest. Besides, it was a hard task to send even myself, as I told you. For the rest—"

"You just overawed a few people with your powers and let them proselytise the others?" Colin suggested, and Kolok shook his head.

"I have never used my powers in your world. Telthis had banned it; he was to be revealed to the Real Truthers as the Perfect Man, capable of anything; he wished to make the maximum impact on their minds. And, of course, since I have been working against him, I have not dared do anything which might reveal I was disobeying that order."

"If you're the only priest who has been into our world, how about the man in Tippet Lane?" said Vanessa.

"You were in our world," said Kolok shortly. "You had been brought through. One of our senior adepts met you, doubtless." He threw up a hand suddenly, as if listening; they waited in strained silence.

When he relaxed, he got to his feet. "We can go," he said. "The searchers have left Eglagarthon, and Telthis now believes you have

either hidden some distance away or already returned to your own side. Ishimu flew you here, didn't he? Then you won't be alarmed—"

The fire went out; the torches on the walls died into smoking embers. Bed, table, chairs, all seemed to break apart and crumble dustily down. Last of all, the hut itself dissolved, and they stood under the stars. The cloud had cleared to the west.

"That too is one of Telthis's weapons," said Kolok glacially. "I think it *not*, and it is—not."

The weight came off their feet suddenly, and they were flying towards the faraway city at a rate that almost blinded them with tears in their wind-stung eyes.

The low-built, ugly hovels on the outskirts of the town passed beneath them. The pattern of Egla-Garthon was simple: the many rough roads led like the main strands of a cobweb towards a vast complex of stone-built houses in the centre, of which the huge steep-roofed temple was the most immediately recognisable. Few people were abroad; a torch carried head-high through the streets bespoke an occasional body of patrolling soldiers, but that was the only sign of life.

Colin felt a mounting sense of futility. The whole world was like this—held in a hammerlock by the effortless power of a few men whose dreams turned to reality at a thought . . .

There was a cry from Kolok, and he turned his head to see an anguished expression pass across the other's face.

"I can't hold you!" Kolok cried. "They've spotted us—they're thinking me down—"

The world seemed to rush to meet them; as they fell, a sound of shouting rose about the point over which they were descending, and torches showed how men were running to meet them. Vanessa stared down in horror at the swiftly growing buildings.

"Do something!" Colin shouted emptily; Kolok could only shake his head.

And at the last moment they checked abruptly; the shock made their guts seem to float loose. The world spun dizzily, and blurred; when their sight cleared again, they were standing huddled together in a dark alcove, a stone wall hard at their backs.

Vanessa closed her eyes with sheer relief; putting his arm about her, Colin demanded of Kolok, "What did you do?"

"I did nothing—they were too strong for me. It must have been Ishimu. I have never felt a blast of power like that—perhaps twenty adepts were driving us down . . ." He shivered, as if at the narrowness of their escape, and looked about him.

"Clever," he murmured. "We are in the forbidden area—no one but Telthis is strong enough to break the stasis holding it. And he probably will not dare to attack us for fear that with our supposed vast powers against him, reinforcing the stasis, even he might fail. But it will be no more than a respite."

He paused, and then added in a low voice, "Unless we can get to your side again, we have failed. If we were a few hundred yards nearer the temple, I could break through for us. Here, I can sense only a little strain in the continuum, and with the stasis to contend with, my hands are tied." He held them up in the faint starlight, the sleeves of his robe falling away, as if he was trying physically to rip apart something invisible.

"All I can give you is calmness," he said at length. "We tried. That is all. But we did try."

"The end?" said Colin steadily; he was aware of the cold rising in his brain.

Kolok pointed to the mouth of the cul-de-sac in which they stood; shadows a little blacker than the rest melted and reformed shiftingly. The *trnak* were coming.

"It will take a little while yet," he said. "But it is sure."

Colin looked down and found Vanessa pressed against him, her face turned up to his. He had hardly realised before that to her, stocky as he was, he was almost tall.

"It seems ridiculous," he said lightly, knowing that he was not afraid because Kolok had lent them both strength, "to tell you this now, but I *must* tell you—Only you know, don't you?"

She glanced again towards the rising, thickening blackness. "Yes, I know. I thought I had been in love before, my dear, but now I realise something I couldn't see clearly—that I felt stronger and more confident when I had someone to depend on me. Like Larry. Weak men who needed my support. I was selfish even when I thought I was being most kind, because I enjoyed the knowledge of superiority . . . But you—" she looked him in the eyes, "—are my equal. It sounds conceited even now, doesn't it? But it's true. I—"

She reached up and brushed at her eyes. "I realised too late."

"And yet—if we had married, had children, they would have opened the way to a world like this." Colin voiced the thought which had been preying on his mind. "Is it better like this?"

She shook her head. "Who knows? Who knows?"

Colin glanced at Kolok; the strong dark figure in his robes stood as still as a sculpture, gazing outwards. An intolerable sense of loss and anger overcame him, and he broke away from Vanessa to take two quick paces towards the implacably advancing *trnak*.

He felt detached, confident, as if he was slightly drunk. He knew that everything he was going to say would be absolutely right.

"Telthis!" he shouted. "Are you out there? Can you hear me? You thought you could frighten us with your powers, didn't you? You thought we'd tamely give in and help you because you were bound to win? Well, you were wrong! We aren't downtrodden slaves, broken by ten thousand years of despotism by you and your forefathers—we don't have a million slaves for every free man. You can see across the world; you can build and destroy and you can fly, and you think that sets you apart—but in the world from which we come anyone can fly, anyone can speak and see a thousand miles, and one man can lay waste a city. But we had to learn how to do it; we had to learn it with the use of our hands and the intelligence of our minds. When we've known that, Telthis, do you still think you can grind us down? Do you think you can stamp on two thousand millions of men and leave the print of your heel on them?"

He stopped; behind him, Kolok murmured something grateful in sound. Yes, somehow, there would be a way to stop Telthis. There must be. For if there was not, then the human race was never fit to survive at all . . .

The *trnaks*, as if driven forward by a surge of anger, swept towards them. The first had almost reached Colin when he found himself unable to wait for it passively any longer; a blaze of rage welled up in his mind, and he cursed it and the power behind it to the blackest hell he knew.

And there was a shout from Vanessa: Colin! *Look!*"

He whirled, and almost fell as he tried to touch the hard stone wall. It was no longer there; through blue mist there shone the faint dim radiance of yellow—electric light.

Kolok thought faster than either of them; galvanised into action, he seized their arms and charged the wall that was no longer a wall. The sensation of infinite falling overcame them for an instant which felt like eternity.

And they were in a London street.

## VIII

A little red washed the eastward sky in earnest of approaching dawn; the air was warmer because of the presence of the largest city in the world. Deserted, the roadway stretched into the night.

Colin felt giddy; holding his head, he turned to Kolok. "Ishimu?" he asked. "Did he do that?"



Kolok was regarding them both strangely ; after a long pause, he shook his head. "Not Ishimu not I nor Telthis himself could have opened the way in the grip of *trnak*," he said wonderingly. "How could you not know? How could I not have known?"

"Known what?" Vanessa's voice was weak with relief.

"That you have the power!" said Kolok fiercely. "You have it, and you have never learned to use it! And we thought it was waiting for your children to inherit—"

"I have no powers," said Colin flatly. "You must be mistaken. Anyway, what does it matter? We've got away—"

"Yes, but what can we do from this side?" said Vanessa.

"I am still the priest in charge of the Seat of the Real Truth," Kolok reminded her. "What I built up, I can destroy—with the same tools. Tonight there is another service ; if I can only have the chance, if Telthis fails to see that I'm working against him before then, I can reverse the hypnotic conditioning and maybe close the gates."

"Tonight," said Colin slowly. "Today's waiting is going to be the worst part, then."

Vanessa fumbled in her bag for the key to her door ; a voice came from beyond, mockingly, amusedly. Larry's voice.

"Come in, my dear, and bring your friends with you. It isn't locked, you know."

Vanessa glanced sharply at Colin and Kolok ; then she pushed at the door and it swung wide. Larry sat on the sofa, wearing the dressing gown that Vanessa had lent Colin ; a cigarette spiralled its white smoke upwards between his fingers.

They looked at him, as they were meant to do ; they did not notice the four men waiting behind them until it was too late. They did not even have the chance to fight back—steel-strong fingers found the arteries in their throats with expert precision, and they lapsed into unconsciousness.

When they woke, their hands and legs were tied, and they were disposed in the armchairs and on the sofa ; Larry, his face expressionless, was turning over a heap of objects on a low table. Among the items Colin recognised the contents of his pockets.

"You fools," he said, looking up and seeing that they were at least partly awake. "You most of all, Master Kolok, for turning renegade when triumph was assured. The truth must prevail!"

He stubbed out the cigarette which he had been smoking ; Colin guessed by it that they had been out for fully ten minutes.

Feeling for a fresh one, Larry went on, "I am taking your post, you know, Kolok. I shall have the honour of being in charge of the focus from which the power of the truth overcomes the world. Think

of it ! A world in which the mind of man rules everything—away with the whims of nature, away with the clumsy makeshift machines with which we've tried to dominate it—"

"You're mad," said Vanessa harshly.

Larry laughed. "Thank you, darling," he said. "I shall have something very apposite to remember you by, shan't I? A perfectly stupid and misguided statement. Because I am not mad. I am one of the few sane people in the world—one of the few brave enough to try and stand up to the universe on man's terms, not on the universe's."

He set the fresh cigarette between his lips, picked up Colin's lighter from the table, and flicked it. Colin did not realise until a moment later that it had lit first time, but when he noticed the fact, it began to gnaw at the back of his mind. Somehow, it was important.

Larry went on, dropping the lighter again, "I suppose it was inevitable that there would be a few fools like you who wanted to stand in the path of progress. After all, the human race isn't perfect—"

"But can't you *see*?" Vanessa demanded. "That's exactly why it's impossible to allow the use of power so great!"

"So you'd set yourself up as an arbiter of what is and what isn't good for mankind, would you?" said Larry softly. "I'd always suspected that having me around made you feel superior—that you were power-hungry. Now I know. You wouldn't be satisfied unless you could dictate the future of the world!"

Vanessa bit her lip; with a compassionate glance at her, Colin broke in. "You can say that when you've been duped body and soul by a megalomaniac such as Telthis?"

Larry's mouth set in a hard line. "I ought to break your neck for that, Hooper. I would, if it weren't that you'd miss your ultimate defeat if I did. Telthis rules a whole world by the power of his mind! Anyone should be honoured to be recognised by such a great man."

Colin felt sick with despair; he lowered his gaze. Kolok, his eyes set on Larry's face, murmured, "Ultimate defeat?"

Larry smiled grimly. "Of course, you wouldn't know, would you? The date is today. At a mass meeting in Trafalgar Square, the Perfect Man will enter his new domain."

With that as a parting shot, he walked out of the room.

They did not speak for a long time. Finally Kolok whispered, "If he was only older—weaker . . . He's over forty now, but that means he has perhaps fifteen years of unhindered rule—"

"Only fifteen?" said Vanessa sharply. Colin glanced at Kolok, and suddenly the wisdom which had lent him an air of oldness dropped away; he saw with clear eyes that Kolok himself could be no more than twenty-five.

"Fifteen at most," said Kolok. "There's some comfort in that. In my world a man who reaches sixty is unusual, you know—"

"On this side, he will have doctors and medicine," said Vanessa. "Fifteen years? His grip won't be broken in under thirty! And by then, he will have done his work."

The crowd surged like a sea. Banners flapped in the wind; they bore slogans reading: *KNOWLEDGE MOVES MOUNTAINS* and *YOUR MIND IS THE GREATEST THING IN THE WORLD* and *THE TRUTH MUST PREVAIL* and *MAN IS MASTER*.

The lions were hidden by climbing people; traffic was slowed to a crawl. Anxious police, not expecting a response so large, were frantically trying to control the crowd, and yet it was hardly necessary. They were determined but orderly; a kind of confidence was in the faces of the Real Truthers, and the merely curious, who had come to see what it was all about, didn't care strongly enough to struggle.

A wooden platform draped with bright cloth had been set up facing the National Gallery; around it, moving slowly, men in blue robes were grouped. They were the first of the new slaves, Colin knew; standing with Vanessa where Larry had insisted on placing them to watch their hopes dashed forever, he wondered how long it would be before Telthis showed his true face and they realised how false their belief had been.

For they had no powers, these blue-robed men; Larry and the rest were only ordinary people who had tasted the sweetness of despotism and did not know that it hid the acidity of raw cruelty. Bribe into betraying a world, Colin thought.

Speakers addressed the crowd from the foot of Nelson's Column and from little daises at intervals among the assembly; hard-headed men and women came to laugh and remained to listen intently. There was no denying the attraction of the lies they were hearing.

Kolok, deprived of his priestly robes, sat with his head in his hand on the edge of one of the fountains nearby; a man whom anyone would take for a casual hanger-on stood at his side. He was a guard like the two who stood waiting with Colin and Vanessa.

A sound like the breaking of a violin string filled the air, and instantly there was amazed silence across the square. Into it, Larry's voice rang out.

"He comes!"

And what will their reaction be? Colin looked greyly at the waiting thousands. Will they flee in terror? Will they realise in time—?

And yet it was already too late. It had been too late for ten thousand years.

He put his arm around Vanessa, and they gazed at the platform ; over it, blue mist was gathering, in the midst of which vague shapes could be discerned.

The crowd seemed divided ; the Real Truthers were experiencing the fulfilment of what they had been told, and the casual passers-by were allowing themselves to be pleasantly impressed by what they assumed to be an ingenious trick. Better than the average run of political meetings, doubtless, thought Colin. Free entertainment.

And after this ? In the end, they would go willingly as others did to seek temporary escape in the illusive omniscience of the services under the white spiral which lulled doubts and made a slave seem master of the cosmos ; before that happened, though, Telthis would have to fight long and hard—

His victory, though, was forgone.

The shapes were moving forward now ; men were coming out on to the top of the platform. Armed soldiers jumped to the ground beside it—there seemed to be scores of them—and forced the crowd back. Panic hung in the air ; a riot was struggling to be born. Amazed and frightened, the supervising police took a few moments to believe their eyes.

After the soldiers came blue-robed priests, looking contemptuously at the rabble in the square and with even greater disdain at the proselytes from this side who rushed eagerly to meet them.

And then—Colin felt Vanessa stiffen against him—Telthis was there. His greedy eyes surveyed the hushed, uncomprehending crowd ; the tension built like the charge on a thundercloud. Vaguely, Colin was aware of Kolok rising and stepping forward.

A wordless cry broke the spell ; astonished, for it came from above, they glanced up and saw something pale move on the parapet around the statue at the head of Nelson's Column. Telthis seemed transformed by a tremendous anger ; he flung up his right arm—

"Colin !" said Vanessa. "It's *Ishimu* !"

In that instant, the pale figure fell. Like a wounded bird—like a broken doll. There were screams. Telthis, his face suffused with blood, seemed to be struggling to do something, but Colin paid no attention. He and Vanessa broke away from their stunned escort and forced a way to where the still body of *Ishimu* lay on the stone.

Amazingly, he seemed little injured ; his left arm was bent at an impossible angle, and the side of his chest seemed even hollower than before, but Colin knew his hurt would be internal. He shouldered aside confused, well-meaning fools and bent over the blind-eyed face.

"*Ishimu* !" he said. "*Why did you do it ?*"

The nearest thing to pleasure he had ever heard from the cripple was in the tone of the answer.

"I wanted to feel what was in Telthis's mind at the—at the moment of his finding out . . ." The voice weakened. "I wanted to tell him he had failed."

"What? How?" Colin spoke commandingly, but the small head rolled sideways and the wasted body relaxed, limp. He rounded on a watcher nearby.

"What are you standing there for? Get a doctor! Get an ambulance! Hurry!"

The man looked wondering, as if he was asking himself why he had not thought of the idea for himself, and disappeared into the press. Vanessa dropped to her knees on the stone and looked down at Ishimu's still face; her eyes were sad and faraway.

Colin looked around for Kolok, but could see no sign of him. There was shouting and fighting on the site of the platform where Telthis had appeared—

The blue mist had vanished.

Scarcely daring to believe his eyes, he scrambled up to see better, and found he was witnessing the downfall of a tyrant. Telthis was still on the platform, screaming; his robe was torn and he was stamping his feet as if he wished the faces of every man on earth were under them. In another moment he was overcome: a spasm threw him to the ground and he lay there kicking and moaning. A blade went up and caught the light; its point dripped red, and the soldier wielding it let out a cry of triumph. An instant later, twenty men and women had tried to attack him simultaneously, and he had gone down. He did not rise again.

Millions like ants whose nest has been doused with water, the blue-robed adepts and priests clawed for the entrance to their own world and safety, but the empty air from which they had come was once again, and this time forever—empty air.

Still not quite understanding, Colin put his hand in his pocket absent-mindedly, weak with relief. His fingers met a scrap of folded paper, and he took it out and looked at it. There were words on it in a stiff, uneasy writing:

*"You asked me once why Telthis trusted me. I am his son. That's why I must give my life to close the gate. Think well of me sometimes—Kolok."*

And in that moment Colin saw it all.

Efficiently, having recovered from their surprise, police were moving in to quiet the crowd. Two of them got up on the platform and lifted

down Telthis, the Perfect Man, still weakly struggling with limbs he had never had to learn to use. With bells ringing, cars and Black Marias forced their way around the square to carry off the rioters. The story, perhaps, would be pieced together eventually, and disbelieved but for now there was no question of danger. The crisis had passed.

Colin got down and showed the note to Vanessa : she read it blankly. "But—how?" she began.

"Ishimu saw it first," Colin answered, gazing at the broken boy. "I had the clue in my grasp, too, if I'd thought about it. My watch stopped, Vanessa—do you remember? My lighter wouldn't burn, over on the other side. And Kolok said that we have the power ourselves—but we couldn't use it until we were in danger of death, in *his* world.

"Here, man accepts a law of cause and effect. Perhaps it's subconscious, but it rules out the use of mental powers, just as in the world which knows no machinery the minds of the people prevent machines from functioning. It's a different kind of reality. Maybe Kolok was right when he said his people had decided to give up trying to define the word—maybe there are degrees of reality, and things are all real to some extent. I doubt if we shall ever know, now that Kolok has closed the way."

"How could he do that?"

"I'm not sure. I can guess, though. He told us about the *trnak*, didn't he? It's a stasis, he said—inhibition of entropy. They used weak adepts, apprentices and failures to project it because it was permanent, and their efforts were poor. But Kolok was a trained adept, a senior member of the group, and Telthis's son, moreover. What he must have done is to project his *trnak* to close the opening into our world. Now Telthis is gone, there is no one that side who can break it down, and no one here knows how to. He's got rid of Telthis; he's given his own world another chance, and he's saved ours."

He raised his head. "Ishimu will be able to tell us."

"What?"

"He isn't dead, darling. He's breathing. Feel his pulse. We can get him to hospital soon. He's never had proper medical care, or good food, by the looks of him."

"But—is it fair?" Vanessa looked him in the eyes. "He will never be able to use the powers he had again—he may be able to walk, but he will never again fly."

"He has been expecting to die, Vanessa. I think you'll find he's willing to accept life in place of death—and has he been deprived of so much? No, surely not."

"I think you're right," agreed Vanessa slowly, after a pause. "Shall—shall we adopt him?"

"Of course," said Colin, a great joy filling him. "He'll make a wonderful elder brother for the rest of them."

"But you said—"

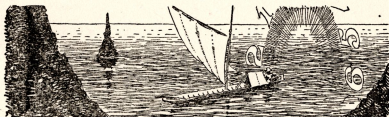
"Don't you see?" he pressed on. "There's no fear of what happened in the other world happening here now! People are probably being born now with the power Telthis had—they must be, for Kolok said we had it ourselves. But in this world, man has had to fight the universe every step of the way. It's taught us discipline and self-control, and turned us from a tribe into a society. And maybe, one day, it'll make us into a civilisation. We, in this world, have been cured of the spoilt-child attitude; we've learned better. People just won't tolerate, even if they don't realise it, unfettered self-indulgence and greed."

The crowd was thinning now; an ambulance was struggling to get past them and pick up the injured. He signalled to the nearest to come for Ishimu.

"Do you see?" he said tensely to Vanessa, and she nodded, her eyes shining.

"Yes, I see," she said. "And I believe it."

—John Brunner





*'Fantasy'—as a subject theme—has a far wider range of possibilities than science fiction. It doesn't have to rely upon scientific premise for the basis of its plots, yet can encroach upon the bizarre and weird—as this modern story of a guillotine.*

## CUT AND COME AGAIN

By JOHN KIPPAX

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It was Lugan's boast that he never turned down a worthwhile job. Not that he, rich, prosperous and a little self important with success, would have used the word 'job': commission sounded better, and Lugan knew that people always tended to accept a man at his own valuation. With the passing of the years, the valuation had gone up and up, until the fact that Lugan had been employed was a *cachet* in itself, and one which he took good care to see was not abused or over-used. Lugan liked to be just a *little* difficult of approach, just a shade diffident: it paid. And it was easy for him to be so: with his pink face and his imposing mane of white hair, his striding walk and his expressive hands, he was a man who commanded respect even from his clients. But it was true that he never did turn down a job, for

the simple reason that only those who could pay, and pay heavily, ever got near him with a proposition.

What was he? Lugan would often permit himself a dignified smile at the memory of that occasion when it had come to him what he was: he had given a low musical chuckle, and had at once ordered new cards, of the most expensive engraved kind, which read '*Piotr Lugan: Re-creator.*' Perfect, he had thought, perfect, yet there is a touch of humour about it, I think. Will it be obvious to other people? No matter, it pleases me, and I am an artist, a re-creator.

And Lugan, though his detractors sneered at him, and passed remarks (not in his hearing), about the size of his head, was all he said he was. Who but he could have recreated with such astonishing exactitude the intricate and lovely Adam ceiling work which the disastrous fire at Ponton Hall had all but completely destroyed? Who but he could have undertaken the repair of the rare tenth century screens discovered in a cave in the To-Ka hills of western Japan? Who but—? His was a name known not for what he said he was—a re-creator: da Vinci would have been proud to have known him, though it is doubtful if da Vinci would ever have been able to understand how Lugan could delegate so much of the work he had, and yet still make it appear that it was all his own. Perhaps da Vinci would not have worried: each master has his own way of doing things.

So it was one evening when he was at the height of his very exclusive fame that he made the acquaintance of the *Societe des Amis de Pelletier*. The westering sun was shining through the broad windows of his monastically severe lounge when his Indian houseman brought him a card. Lugan, who had been idly sketching on a pad looked up and took the card, a quaint thing of unusual size.

"Really Kras: he should know that he cannot come now to see me personally. Did you tell him I was in?"

"He said sir, that he knew you were in."

"He knew: what is he like, this M. de la Follette?"

The man's brown hands waved and he shrugged diplomatically.

"He is—strange, sir."

"How so?"

"His dress is most unusual sir."

Lugan gestured at his own green and yellow shirt and his purple corduroys. "So is mine."

Kras permitted himself the luxury of a smile.

"It is relative sir, as you say. You will see that he represents a certain organisation."

Lugan studied the card again.

"H'm. Sounds historical : curious. I have never heard of it." He pulled himself upright, and stretched. "Very well then, show him in."

Kras left the room, and a moment later showed in a tall man who, as soon as he was past the threshold, stopped and bowed with what seemed rather exaggerated courtesy.

"Mr. Piotr Lugan ? I am Henri de la Follette."

Lugan had been in the act of pouring himself a whisky and soda : the sight of the visitor made him splash in a sudden and eruptive dash of soda, which caused him to jump.

"Damn ! I beg your pardon. How do you do. Have a drink ?"

De la Follette inclined his head.

"Thank you."

And by heaven, thought Lugan, I need it. The visitor's appearance had startled him considerably, prepared in some measure though he had been by the cautious description that Kras had given. The man was clad in a rusty black, with narrow trousers and a long much-buttoned coat. White lace was at his wrists and throat, and his hair was curiously long and curly, with greying patches at the temples. But it was his face that made the picture so arresting : his chin was long, his cheekbones very prominent, and his eyes were deep set under thick brows on each side of a hooked and twisted nose. His face was seamed and lined as though with hardly born care, and two great furrows, one each side of the nose and each running past the thin, downturned mouth to the chin, gave him the appearance of a lean and unhappy bloodhound.

He accepted the whisky, inclined his head and said "Your health, sir."

"Cheers," said Lugan.

Was not the voice, thought Lugan, the most interesting thing about him ? It was resonant, of a quality that was deep and yet in which so many of the upper partials were clear, so that it boomed and fluted at one and the same time.

"A curious wine," remarked the visitor, "but very agreeable, nevertheless."

"Do sit down," suggested Lugan. He himself remained standing : it was not often that he had the feeling that he was being dominated : he had it now, and he felt that it must not be allowed to grow.

De la Follette made himself comfortable.

"I was recommended to come to you Mr. Lugan."

"Naturally : I never advertise."

"That is, I was told that in addition to being most painstakingly accurate, you are also very discreet."

“Discreet? Certainly. I am also completely honest.”

“Oh, please.” De la Follette held up a white hand. “What my—our organisation have in mind is nothing illegal, I assure you. Nevertheless, discretion would form part of our understanding, if you agreed to our proposition.”

Lugan bowed his head with practised dignity.

“Of course.”

The visitor rose and walked to the broad window, and looked out into the beautiful twilight garden, with its broad flagged centre.

“I notice, Mr. Lugan, that your garden is totally enclosed.”

“Yes.” Lugan came and stood beside him, wondered what that had to do with it.

“With, I see, what appears to be a central drain just by the pond.”

“Yes?” Lugan was a little puzzled.

“And that over there, beyond the hedge, is your workshop—your own place?”

“Yes. But that is my experimental workshop—for my own private research. My workmen are in the town, in the workshops where all my commissions are—”

“I know, I know,” interrupted the other, “but you could do some work in there, all by yourself, if you were specially commissioned?”

“What do you mean, exactly? I have a number of trained craftsmen who work under my close supervision. If I were to leave them to do work wholly on my own, the cost would be enormous. With my present commitments, it could not be otherwise.”

De la Follette gazed in bleak sadness out of the window at the secluded garden. His voice had a dying fall, it seemed to Lugan, which served to make the evening shadows deeper.

“We can pay, Mr. Lugan,” he replied. “Even for your own personal, undivided attention for this exacting and private work, we can pay. Indeed, should you accept and execute the commission to our entire satisfaction, other callers like myself will no doubt follow.”

Lugan decided that he might as well test the other on the business of payment, at least.

“Assuming I accept, my own personal working fee is approximately one hundred pounds per hour, with a minimum of five hundred pounds.” As he said this he stood back in a slightly superior fashion, not wishing to miss any of the effect that this should have produced on the face of his visitor. He was disappointed: de la Follette’s face creased in what might have been a smile, and he inclined his head.

“We are quite willing to pay that for your renowned skill, and for your complete discretion.”

"Your society must be very rich."

"We—have enough for our needs."

Lugan crossed the room and pressed a switch : the flood of light helped his teetering confidence.

"What is your commission then?"

De la Follette took an envelope from his pocket, and extracted a crackling parchment, which he unfolded before handing it to Lugan.

"Can you make that, Mr. Lugan?"

Lugan was astonished : of course he could make it—so could any handy schoolboy.

"A guillotine?"

"Precisely." De la Follette's eyes seemed to shine with a strange enthusiasm. His tall figure hooked forward in eagerness, and his voice sounded all a tip-toe as he added : "And could you set it up for us?"

"Set it up?" Now what, Lugan asked himself, did the man mean? Could it be that—? No, ridiculous! He consulted the drawing again.

"What's the scale of this model : how many inches or centimetres to a foot?"

"Why," came the reply, "I said 'set it up,' Mr. Lugan. We want a full size guillotine, set up in your garden here." He walked again to the window. "So wonderfully private. You see, we shall want to see the model working before we pay that considerable fee of yours." His eyes glinted like chips of anthracite : it occurred to Lugan that this was a person who always got his own way, might even have come this evening knowing that he would get his own way . . .

"Agreed Mr. Lugan?" The eyes glittered : the comparison of the rabbit and the snake was one which Lugan dismissed from his mind as soon as it came to him, though he could have sworn that the man's teeth were pointed in the second they were bared in a wintry smile.

"Agreed," said Lugan. He twitched a thumb on the parchment of the drawing in a nervous gesture.

"I will tell the other members of the society, and I shall probably bring them to discuss details with you. In the meantime, perhaps you would be good enough to prepare a detailed estimate?"

Lugan nodded, his eyes fixed on de la Follette. The capacity to say no, once strong and ready, seemed to have dwindled.

"Good. Then I will bring my associates to meet you tomorrow, if you can be here just after lunch."

Lugan rang for Kras, and the visitor was shown out, and Lugan sat for a long time looking at the paper de la Follette had left. It was

a strange thing : here were people prepared to pay him his own artist's fee for work which could well have been done by a good handyman.

Lingering over his coffee, Lugan reflected that he had had quite a busy morning. He had got out measurements, had been in touch with his stores for the delivery of the necessary timber and metal. The size of his estimate, a comfortable round two thousand pounds, tended to make him forget to wonder what was behind it all : eccentric, yes, but he had met eccentricity before, and not minded it. There were some he knew who considered Piotr Lugan eccentric. His musings were interrupted by the entry of Kras : the Indian, normally as urbane as a trained servant should be, now seemed a little upset.

"The—they—there is Mr. de la Follette—and *others* to see you sir."

"His associates presumably." He stared at Kras in mild astonishment. "Come man, what is the matter with you ? Show them in."

Kras gulped.

"Yes sir."

But at that moment the booming voice of de la Follette sounded from the door.

"We are here, Mr. Lugan : may we come in ?"

Lugan's reply was unnecessary : they were in, and they seemed to fill the place with something more than their mere physical presences. Mere ? It was scarcely the word. The three *beings* who entered made Lugan stare, and caused Kras to slide out of the room with more than his accustomed speed. The foolish phrase—'the customer is always right' rang suddenly and repeatedly in Lugan's head until he felt foolish.

De la Follette, who seemed proud and happy, introduced his associates.

"Mr. Lamorne."

The fellow was dressed in a dun-coloured costume which seemed to belong partly to the present day and partly to the latter end of the eighteenth century. But any interest evoked by his clothes was lost to Lugan in the fascinated contemplation of the fellow's face. His head was of such a size that it was practically a deformity, with great ears, a nearly bald pate, and a neanderthal brow. His eyes were green and deepset, the nose was excessively short and broad, and great flaring nostrils spread a third of the way across the mottled face. Lugan suppressed a shudder, and forbore just in time to shake hands with Lamorne, for he glimpsed the size of the hands on the ends of the thick stumpy arms. He said "How d'you do ?" to Lamorne, and gave a stiff bow, the while his scalp tingled and small eels seemed to writhe about his calves.

De la Follette carried on with the introductions.

"Mr. Bolsan."

Mr. B was a little man, round like a barrel : his eye sockets were so deep that his eyes were not visible, and when he spoke from his square livid face he showed cracked and blackened teeth : his scalp, devoid of hair and crenellated like the skin of an old lizard writhed abominably as though of its own volition, regardless of whether its owner made any movement or not. He wore what seemed to be nothing else but an old grey dressing gown which reached down to his ankles.

"Hoo do yoo doo?" he hooted rather than said. Lugan controlled himself with an effort, braced himself again and bowed with what he hoped looked like dignity.

"And Miss Hecate."

Ladies last, thought Lugan. *Ladies!* His gorge rose as he saw the brown wrinkled skin, the hook nose, the piercing eyes of the last of what was apparently the total membership of the *Societe des Amis de Pelletier*. Who was Pelletier that he was revered by such people? Miss Hecate was, if anything, the least inviting of the four of them, perhaps because she looked incomplete without her broomstick. Lugan surveyed once again the frizzy little hat perched atop the unkempt locks, the cloak tight-wrapped, and tied under the scraggy dewlap, and determined, as he bowed for the third time, that he would not, *not*, NOT, ask any more questions than were absolutely necessary. He did not shudder when Hecate gave him a grisly smile, and neither did he flinch when de la Follette chuckled with dreadful bonhomie.

"Now that you have met my associates, perhaps we can all sit down and know what progress you have made."

Lugan heard himself say yes. They all rustled and sat down, and gazed at him placidly with their strange eyes. Lugan thought of offering them drinks and smokes, and then decided against it : he did not think he could bear any advance into affability.

"Now," said de la Follette : "What progress have you made? The cost, for instance?"

Lugan watched the other closely as he said "My fee will be two thousand pounds."

Not a flicker of surprise : nobody flinched. But Mr. Bolsan hooted "Guineas."

"But pounds would—"

"Guineas," said Bolsan firmly. "Didn't you tell him we only had guineas, Folly?"



"I'm sorry," apologised de la Follette. "I should have explained, we have only guineas : you do understand I'm sure."

Lugan did not understand, but it seemed ungracious of him to say so, so he inclined his head and mumbled over the drawing.

"What wood?" asked Hecate sharply.

"Er—pine," said Lugan.

"Pine?" she sounded contemptuous. "Pine! That's for coffins. He! he!" She cackled suddenly, and Lugan felt unsteady. "For coffins, eh, Folly dear?"

"Ash," grunted Lamorne. "It must be ash. Think of Pelletier : he had ash, Folly, take my word for it. Can this man get ash?"

De la Follette looked enquiringly at Lugan : it seemed to the recreator that this man was superior in upbringing, indeed, in every way, to the others.

"Could you make it ash, Mr. Lugan? I believe that Lamorne is right you know."

Lugan tried to weigh up the request, tried to see if he could remember the name Pelletier and what it meant, and found that all he was able to do was wag his head and acquiesce. Yes, it was possible to get ash.

Lamorne sat writhing his hands around his enormous neck, as though testing it for strength.

"Of what steel is the blade," he enquired : "Will it take a good edge?"

This jolted Lugan more than anything had done so far.

"You want—" he looked anxiously from one bizarre face to the other, "—You want it *sharpened*?"

Four intense pairs of eyes gazed at him in surprise : then little Bolsan began to chuckle at an almost subsonic level, and Lamorne and de la Follette joined in, until Hecate completed the quartette with a screeching treble. Lugan did not know if he shuddered outside, but inside he began to quake. Then de la Follette called for silence, and explained with ill-mustered gravity.

"Yes indeed, Mr. Lugan : I am most particular about that." He gave a twisted smile. "You see this is my party—I use the word colloquially—and I want everything to be exact."

"Charcoal smelted," grunted Lamorne, who had returned to holding himself round his grotesquely thick neck. "Should be the old process : would need quality stuff like that for myself I'm sure."

"You'll have it, I know," croaked Hecate.

"Hand made," said Bolsan, "that's the stuff."

"Ah," murmured de la Follette obscurely, "Pelletier."

Lugan could not stop himself from goggling at this conversation.

"I will see that it is sharpened, and that the steel is of the highest quality, but the process to which your friend refers is now so out of date that—"

De la Follette waved a hand.

"Understood." As he rose he assured the others "I am satisfied that everything will be in order. I hope that you agree that we have selected the best man for the job? You know his reputation."

They rose, their eyes flickering and secret. They made little noises of approval. Little Bolsan approached and whispered "I'm the treasurer you know. I shall be most happy to pay you in full as soon as the terms are carried out. Guineas too." The repulsive gnome seemed to have a private joke bubbling within him. "He! he! We have only guineas."

With little nods, the three of them left: de la Follette remained for a moment.

"I will keep in close touch, Mr. Lugan: this thing means so much to me—to us. Remember that upon receiving proof of the machine's efficiency—of its perfection, in fact—we shall be very happy to pay you your fee. I imagine that care and discretion are part of your stock in trade."

They were, thought Lugan, but never had they been so much needed as now: was it his imagination which made the sun seem to shine brighter when his last visitor had gone?

Secrecy was not really difficult: he had few visitors, Kras was completely incurious, and beyond a few visits to his workshops he was able to concentrate in private upon the fearsome thing which de la Follette had commanded. Within a few days the twin beams with their tora-like cross piece were reared up on the paving, near the drain by the side of the pond. Lugan reflected that it was probably a neater and better job than the real thing of a hundred and sixty odd years ago. He had worked hard, the more so he believed, because he did not want to dwell too much upon the people who had commissioned him to make it. It was difficult, even with the thing nearly completed, to really visualise it in action . . .

De la Follette rang to say that he would come round that evening: while waiting for the man, it occurred to Lugan to look up 'Guillotine' in the encyclopaedia. It was interesting. The machine had been invented just before the reign of terror of the French Revolution. After it had been tested by trying it out on dead bodies from the hospital at Bicetre, a German firm got the order for making the first ones. The first official executee lost his head on the twenty-fifth of April, 1792, in the Place de Greve: his profession highwayman: his

name . . . Pelletier. Kras' entrance caused Lugan to close the book with a snap. The servant showed in de la Follette, whose first words seemed filled with sepulchral pleasure.

"May I inspect it Mr. Lugan?"

Lugan took a deep breath : it seemed to steady him. Perhaps *now* things would begin to be explained.

"Of course." He led the way out into the garden. He found that his heart began to pound steadily as he stood by de la Follette as the latter paused in seeming rapture to gaze at the double finger of the machine as it pointed into the evening sky.

"Wonderful, wonderful, Mr. Lugan. It has poetry. Yes yes : this is undoubtedly the best way." He began to walk to the guillotine. "May I see it work?"

The ratchet clicked loudly as Lugan began to wind the blade upwards : when the dreadful diagonal cutting edge was about shoulder high de la Follette put a detaining hand on his shoulder, and with evident joy ran a finger along the metal.

"Perfect !" he breathed. "Please wind it up."

Lugan obliged, watching the blade mount into the sky : when it reached the top of the fall from somewhere it took to itself a gleam of light, and Lugan shuddered : *his* creation.

"Now," said de la Follette : "A test."

Lugan started. "With what?"

"We-ell." The other looked round, and picked up a four-inch timber, hefted it, and put it through the neckpiece.

"Now."

Lugan pulled the rope, and the blade, hurtling down, went *clump* through the wood as though nothing were there. The tall man creased his face in satisfaction.

"Very good indeed : I should remember to grease the grooves for tomorrow." Again, the thin smile.

"Yes. We shall call on you—about five. Then, if all goes off satisfactorily, Bolsan will pay you." He tapped the drain with his foot. "A pleasing point, that."

Then he left.

In his dream, Lugan had been doing strange things, like buying lengths of ash timber that were always an inch short, or blackening his face trying to make charcoal for smelting, and all the while finding himself laughed at by weird, cretinous faces which appeared for a moment and then vanished jeering. He had a companion who was trying to help him, a companion whom he did not know, as the person had no face. Every time this being found a good piece of wood he

would dig Lugan in the ribs, and Lugan would protest. Now the digs came harder, and Lugan protested more, until he became aware that the light of his room was on and that someone was trying to wake him up by digging him in the ribs. He opened his eyes slowly, and then he opened them very fast, and sat up. Standing round his bed were Hecate, and Lamorne, and little Bolsan, who carried a fairsized sack. Lugan felt grateful that he had seen them before : he could not imagine what it would have been like to have awakened to the first sight of them.

Lamorne squeaked " Can you please get up Mr. Lugan ? We are ready."

Lugan heaved himself up and rubbed his eyes : he seemed to understand less and less about the whole affair. But as he surveyed the evil trio he was filled with a great, stomach pulling uncertainty.

" Isn't it—rather early ?"

" Just before dawn," cackled Hecate. " Didn't he tell you we'd call at five ?"

Five. *Five in the morning !*

" We must do these things properly you know," coaxed Lamorne.

" And you want your money don't you," put in Bolsan.

Yes, thought Lugan, yes indeed : for this thing, I am really looking forward to my money. He made a move to get out of bed. Lamorne wagged his monstrous head.

" Let him get dressed then." He spoke to Lugan. " We will wait for you down in the yard."

Lugan watched them file out. As he dressed it seemed that he was half numb. The implications of it all were unbelievable, especially when he remembered the name of their society. But he had given his word, and so far, there had not been any laws bent or broken. And his fee was two thousand pounds—no, guineas. Then, as he was putting his jacket on, a fresh thought struck him : where had de la Follette been ? Certainly he was not in the bedroom when the others woke him up, and it was unthinkable that they should have come without him.

Shivering a little, Lugan went down into the garden, which Lamorne had curtly designated a ' yard.' The cold air met him dankly, and he stopped so that his eyes might become accustomed to the gloom. The head of the guillotine showed against the paling stars, its great blade dark and menacing. Lugan felt a sudden sympathy for Frankenstein, who also had created a monster. Ah, but Frankenstein could control his monster, whereas Piotr Lugan . . . With a start he abandoned the comparison, and took a few steps forward to where the group stood waiting. Then he barked his shins upon something long and

wooden which lay in his path. He stooped to examine it, felt along its shape . . . he stood erect, and shuddered. A figure approached him. It was Bolsan.

"Come Mr. Lugan," he said, "Your final duty awaits you."

Lugan felt that he might go out of his mind.

"But does this coffin mean that—?"

"Of course it does!" snapped a distant, very testy voice. "Use your brains man: what do you think we are here for?"

That was de la Follette!

A dreadful fear took violent possession of Lugan: he suddenly thought he knew where de la Follette was. He moved forward, and saw that he was right. His client was kneeling on the platform, his hands secured behind him, his head through the neckpiece: he was, in fact, all ready for the executioner. Strength seemed to leave Lugan's limbs.

"You want *ME* to—"

"Certainly!" cried Lamorne: "His great ambition: a wonderful sensation! Didn't you understand?"

"Don't wait!" cried Bolsan.

"Take the cord Mr. Lugan!" urged Hecate.

"No! No! NO!" he gasped.

Hands made grabs at him as de la Follette shouted "Your bargain! I insist!"—and then as he stepped back he fell over the coffin: he fell heavily, and his head hit the paving of the garden.

Kras awoke him by his usual method of squeezing his fingers: a cup of coffee was held under his nose. Numbly, he took the cup, tried to sip it while Kras drew the curtains. His head ached abominably.

"What's the time Kras?"

"A quarter to nine, sir. And there is a gentleman to see you."

"Oh, for heaven's sake! Tell him to go to my town office! I cannot have streams of people calling here."

"He is very insistent sir." Kras turned to straighten the curtain and remarked, "I see that you have got rid of the structure which you had by the pond, sir."

"What?" Things, disturbing, unreal, shuddering things came back to Lugan with a rush. He leaped from the bed and went to Kras' side. The guillotine—and everything—was missing, and a shower of rain had washed down the paving, if it had needed washing. Lugan put his hands on the sill and stood tense and wondering. Kras moved away.

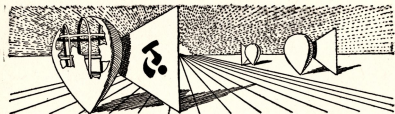
"I will get your breakfast, sir. Your visitor—shall I offer him coffee?"

With his mind deeply on other things, Lugan nodded. He turned as Kras left the room, and he saw, at the foot of his bed, a fair-sized sack. He kicked it : it chinked. Then he opened it, and he found himself wondering how he would explain the possession of a thousand or so new late eighteenth century guineas. He pitched the coins back into the bag, and swore. No, *no* ! It could still have been an elaborate joke : why, why ?

Still puzzling, he tidied his hair, put on a dressing gown, and went through into the lounge. Sitting in a chair was a broad man, a compelling figure with an ivory complexion and great dark shadows under the eyes. When he saw Lugan he rose and offered his hand.

"Good morning, Mr. Lugan," said he : "A friend of mine recommended you. Perhaps you remember the late Mr. de la Follette ? . . ."

—John Kippax



*Once again we have pleasure in presenting a new author to our pages with quite a fascinating approach to fantasy. In particular, we cannot remember having read such an intriguing idea about singing plants before, although there have been stories that have referred to such a possibility.*

# PRIMA BELLADONNA

By J. G. BALLARD

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I first met Jane Ciracylides during the Recess, that world slump of boredom, lethargy and high summer which carried us all so blissfully through ten unforgettable years, and I suppose that may have had a lot to do with what went on between us. Certainly I can't believe I could make myself as ridiculous now, but then again, it might have been just Jane herself.

Whatever else they said about her, everyone had to agree she was a beautiful girl, even if her genetic background was a little mixed. The gossips at Vermillion Sands soon decided there was a good deal of mutant in her, because she had a rich patina-golden skin and what looked like insects for eyes, but that didn't bother either myself or any of my friends, one or two of whom, like Tony Miles and Harry Devine, have never since been quite the same to their wives.



We spent most of our time in those days on the wide cool balcony of my apartment off Beach Drive, drinking beer—we always kept a useful supply stacked in the refrigerator of my music shop on the street level—yarning in a desultory way and playing i-Go, a sort of decelerated chess which was popular then. None of the others ever did any work; Harry was an architect and Tony Miles sometimes sold a few ceramics to the tourists, but I usually put a couple of hours in at the shop each morning, getting off the foreign orders and turning the beer.

One particularly hot lazy day I'd just finished wrapping up a delicate soprano mimosa wanted by the Hamburg Oratorio Society when Harry phoned down from the balcony.

"Parker's Choro-Flora?" he said. "You're guilty of over-production. Come on up here. Tony and I have something beautiful to show you."

When I went up I found them grinning happily like two dogs who had just discovered an interesting tree.

"Well?" I asked. "Where is it?"

Tony tilted his head slightly. "Over there," he indicated.

I looked up and down the street, and across the face of the apartment house opposite.

"Careful," he warned me. "Don't gape at her."

I slid into one of the wicker chairs and craned my head round cautiously.

"Fourth floor," Harry elaborated slowly, out of the side of his mouth.

"One left from the balcony opposite. Happy now?"

"Dreaming," I told him, taking a long slow focus on her. "I wonder what else she can do?"

Harry and Tony sighed thankfully. "Well?" Tony asked.

"She's out of my league," I said. "But you two shouldn't have any trouble. Go over and tell her how much she needs you."

Harry groaned. "Don't you realize, this one is poetic, emergent, something straight out of the primal apocalyptic sea. She's probably divine."

The woman was strolling around the lounge, re-arranging the furniture, wearing almost nothing except a large abstract metallic hat. Even in shadow the long sinuous lines of her thighs and shoulders gleamed gold and burning. She was a walking galaxy of light. Ver-million Sands had never seen anything like her. ,

"The approach has got to be equivocal," Harry continued, gazing into his beer. "Shy, almost mystical. Nothing urgent or grabbing."

The woman stooped down to unpack a suitcase and the metal vanes of her hat fluttered over her face. I didn't bother to remind Harry that Betty, his wife and a girl of considerable spirit, would have firmly restrained him from anything that wasn't mystical.

"She must use up about a kilo-watt," I calculated. "What do you think her chemistry is?"

"Who cares," Harry said. "It doesn't matter to me if it's siliconic."

"In this heat?" I said. "She'd ignite."

The woman walked out onto the balcony, saw us staring at her, looked around for a moment and then went in again.

We sat back and looked thoughtfully at each other, like three triumvirs deciding how to divide an empire, not saying too much, and one eye watching for any chance of a double-deal.

Five minutes later the singing started.

At first I thought it was one of the azalea trios in trouble with an alkaline pH, but the frequencies were too high. They were almost out of the audible range, a thin tremulo quaver which came out of nowhere and rose up the back of the skull.

Harry and Tony frowned at me.

"Your livestock's unhappy about something," Tony told me. "Can you quieten it down?"

"It's not the plants," I told him. "Can't be."

The sound mounted in intensity, scraping the edge off my occipital bones. I was about to go down to the shop when Harry and Tony leapt out of their chairs and dived back against the wall.

"For chrissake, Steve, look out!" Tony yelled at me. He pointed wildly at the table I was leaning on, picked up a chair and smashed it down on the glass top.

I stood up and brushed the fragments out of my hair.

"What the hell's the matter?" I asked them.

Tony was looking down at the tangle of wickerwork tied round the metal struts of the table. Harry came forward and took my arm gingerly.

"That was close. You all right?"

"It's gone," Tony said flatly. He looked carefully over the balcony floor and down over the rail into the street.

"What was it?" I asked.

Harry peered at me closely. "Didn't you see it? It was about three inches from you. Emperor Scorpion, big as a lobster." He sat down weakly on a beer crate. "Must have been a sonic one. The noise has gone now."

After they'd left I cleared up the mess and had a quiet beer to myself. I could have sworn nothing had got onto the table.

On the balcony opposite, wearing a gown of shimmering ionized fibre, the golden woman was watching me.

I found out who she was the next morning. Tony and Harry were down at the beach with their wives, probably enlarging on the scorpion, and I was in the shop tuning up a Khan-Arachnid orchid with the UV lamp. It was a difficult bloom, with a normal full range of twenty-four octaves, but like all the tetracot  $K_3 + 25 C_5 A_9$  chorotropes, unless it got a lot of exercise it tended to relapse into neurotic minor key transpositions which were the devil to break. And as the senior bloom in the shop it naturally affected all the others. Invariably when I opened the shop in the mornings it sounded like a madhouse, but as soon as I'd fed the Arachnid and straightened out one of two pH gradients the rest promptly took their cues from it and dimmed down quietly in their control tanks, two-time, three-four, the multi-tones, all in perfect harmony.

There were only about a dozen true Arachnids in captivity; most of the others were either mutes or grafts from dicot stems, and I was lucky to have mine at all. I'd bought the place five years earlier from an old half-deaf man called Sayers, and the day before he left he moved a lot of rogue stock out to the garbage disposal scoop behind the apartment block. Reclaiming some of the tanks I'd come across the Arachnid, thriving on a diet of algae and perished rubber tubing.

Why Sayers had wanted to throw it away I'd never discovered. Before he came to Vermillion Sands he'd been a curator at the old Kew Conservatoire where the first choroflora had been bred, and had worked under the Director, Dr. Mandel, who as a young botanist of twenty-five had discovered the prime Arachnid in the Guiana forest. The orchid took its name from the Khan-Arachnid spider which pollinated the flower, simultaneously laying its own eggs in the fleshy ovule, guided, or as Mandel always insisted, actually mesmerised to it by the vibrations which the orchid's calyx emitted at pollination-time. The first Arachnid orchids beamed out only a few random frequencies, but by cross-breeding and maintaining them artificially at the pollination stage Mandel had produced a strain that spanned a maximum of twenty-four octaves.

Not that he's ever been able to hear them. At the climax of his life's work Mandel, like Beethoven, was stone deaf, but apparently by merely looking at a blossom he could listen to its music. Strangely though, after he went deaf he never looked at an Arachnid.

That morning I could almost understand why. The orchid was in a vicious mood. First it refused to feed, and I had to coax it along in a floualdehyde flush, and then it started going ultra-sonic, which

meant complaints from all the dog owners in the area. Finally it tried to fracture the tank by resonating.

The whole place was in uproar, and I was almost resigned to shutting them down and waking them all by hand individually—a back-breaking job with eighty tanks in the shop—when everything suddenly died away to a murmur.

I looked round and saw the golden-skinned woman walk in.

“Good morning,” I said. “They must like you.”

She laughed pleasantly. “Hello. Weren’t they behaving?”

Under the black beach robe her skin was a softer more mellow gold, and it was her eyes that held me. I could just see them under the wide-brimmed hat. Insect legs wavered delicately round two points of purple light.

She walked over to a bank of mixed ferns and stood looking at them, her ample hips cocked to one side.

The ferns reached out towards her and trebled eagerly in their liquid fluted voices.

“Aren’t they sweet?” she said, stroking the fronds gently. “They need so much affection.”

Her voice was low in the register, a breath of cool sand pouring, with a lilt that gave it music.

“I’ve just come to Vermillion Sands,” she said, “and my apartment seems awfully quiet. Perhaps if I had a flower, one would be enough, I shouldn’t feel so lonely.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

“Yes,” I agreed, brisk and business-like. “What about something colourful? This Sumatra Samphire, say? It’s a pedigree mezzo-soprano from the same follicle as the Bayreuth Festival Prima Belladonna.”

“No,” she said. “It looks rather cruel.”

“Or this Louisiana Lute Lily? If you thin out its SO<sub>2</sub> it’ll play some beautiful madrigals. I’ll show you how to do it.”

She wasn’t listening to me. Slowly, her hands raised in front of her breasts so that she almost seemed to be praying, she moved towards the display counter on which the Arachnid stood.

“How beautiful it is,” she said, gazing at the rich yellow and purple leaves hanging from the scarlet-ribbed vibro-calyx.

I followed her across the floor and switched on the Arachnid’s audio so that she could hear it. Immediately the plant came to life. The leaves stiffened and filled with colour and the calyx inflated, its ribs sprung tautly. A few sharp disconnected notes spat out.

“Beautiful, but evil,” I said.

"Evil?" she repeated. "No, proud." She stepped closer to the orchid and looked down into its huge malevolent head. The Arachnid quivered and the spines on its stem arched and flexed menacingly.

"Careful," I warned her. "It's sensitive to the faintest respiratory sounds."

"Quiet," she said, waving me back. "I think it wants to sing."

"Those are only key fragments," I told her. "It doesn't perform. I use it as a frequency—"

"Listen!" She held my arm and squeezed it tightly.

A low rhythmic fusion of melody had been coming from the plants around the shop, and mounting above them I heard a single stronger voice calling out, at first a thin high-pitched reed of sound that began to pulse and deepen and finally swelled into full baritone, raising the other plants in chorus about itself.

I'd never heard the Arachnid sing before and I was listening to it open-eared when I felt a glow of heat burn against my arm. I turned round and saw the woman staring intently at the plant, her skin aflame, the insects in her eyes writhing insanely. The Arachnid stretched out towards her, calyx erect, leaves like blood-red sabres.

I stepped round her quickly and switched off the argon feed. The Arachnid sank to a whimper, and around us there was a nightmarish babel of broken notes and voices toppling from high C's and L's into discord. Then only a faint whispering of leaves moved over the silence.

The woman gripped the edge of the tank and gathered herself. Her skin dimmed and the insects in her eyes slowed to a delicate wavering.

"Why did you turn it off?" she asked heavily.

"I'm sorry," I said. "But I've got ten thousand dollars worth of stock here and that sort of twelve tone emotional storm can blow a lot of valves. Most of these plants aren't equipped for grand opera."

She watched the Arachnid as the gas drained out of its calyx, and one by one its leaves buckled and lost their colour.

"How much is it?" she asked me, opening her bag.

"It's not for sale," I said. "Frankly I've no idea how it picked up those bars—"

"Will a thousand dollars be enough?" she asked, her eyes fixed on me steadily.

"I can't," I told her. "I'd never be able to tune the others without it. Anyway," I added, trying to smile. "That Arachnid would be dead in ten minutes if you took it out of its vivarium. All these cylinders and leads would look a little odd inside your lounge."

"Yes, of course," she agreed, suddenly smiling back at me. "I was stupid." She gave the orchid a last backward glance and strolled away across the floor to the long Tchaikovsky section popular with the tourists.



"'Pathetique,'" she read off a label at random. "I'll take this."

I wrapped up the scabia and slipped the instructional booklet into the crate, keeping my eye on her all the time.

"Don't look so alarmed," she said with amusement. "I've never heard anything like that before."

I wasn't alarmed. It was just that thirty years at Vermillion Sands had narrowed my horizons.

"How long are you staying at Vermillion Sands?" I asked her.

"I open at the Casino tonight," she said. She told me her name was Jane Ciracylides and that she was a speciality singer.

"Why don't you look in?" she asked, her eyes fluttering mischievously. "I come on at eleven. You may find it interesting."

I did. The next morning Vermillion Sands hummed. Jane created a sensation. After her performance 300 people swore they'd never seen everything from a choir of angels taking the vocal in the music of the spheres to Alexander's Ragtime Band. As for myself, perhaps I'd listened to too many flowers, but at least I knew where the scorpion on the balcony had come from.

Tony Miles had heard Sophie Tucker singing the St. Louis Blues, and Harry the elder Bach conducting the B Minor Mass.

They came round to the shop and argued over their respective performances while I wrestled with the flowers.

"Amazing," Tony exclaimed. "How does she do it? Tell me."

"The Heidelberg score," Harry ecstasied. "Sublime, absolute." He looked irritably at the flowers. "Can't you keep these things quiet? They're making one hell of a row."

They were, and I had a shrewd idea why. The Arachnid was completely out of control, and by the time I'd clamped it down in a weak saline it had blown out over \$300 worth of shrubs.

"The performance at the Casino last night was nothing on the one she gave here yesterday," I told them. "The Ring of the Niebelungs played by Stan Kenton. That Arachnid went insane. I'm sure it wanted to kill her."

Harry watched the plant convulsing its leaves in rigid spasmic movements.

"If you ask me it's in an advanced state of rut. Why should it want to kill her?"

"Not literally. Her voice must have overtones that irritate its calyx. None of the other plants minded. They cooed like turtle doves when she touched them."

Tony shivered happily.

Light dazzled in the street outside.

I handed Tony the broom. "Here, lover, brace yourself on that. Miss Ciracylides is dying to meet you."

Jane came into the shop, wearing a flame yellow cocktail skirt and another of her hats.

I introduced her to Harry and Tony.

"The flowers seem very quiet this morning," she said. "What's the matter with them?"

"I'm cleaning out the tanks," I told her. "By the way, we all want to congratulate you on last night. How does it feel to be able to name your fiftieth city?"

She smiled shyly and sauntered away round the shop. As I knew she would, she stopped by the Arachnid and levelled her eyes at it.

I wanted to see what she'd say, but Harry and Tony were all around her, and soon got her up to my apartment, where they had an hilarious morning playing the fool and raiding my scotch.

"What about coming out with us after the show tonight?" Tony asked her. "We can go dancing at the Flamingo."

"But you're both married," Jane protested coyly. "Aren't you worried about your reputations?"

"Oh, we'll bring the girls," Harry said airily. "And Steve here can come along and hold your coat."

We played i-Go together. Jane said she'd never played the game before, but she had no difficulty picking up the rules, and when she started sweeping the board with us I knew she was cheating. Admittedly it isn't every day that you get a chance to play i-Go with a golden-skinned woman with insects for eyes, but nevertheless I was annoyed. Harry and Tony, of course, didn't mind.

"She's charming," Harry said, after she'd left. "Who cares? It's a stupid game anyway."

"I care," I said. "She cheats."

The next three or four days at the shop were an audio-vegetative armageddon. Jane came in every morning to look at the Arachnid, and her presence was more than the flower could bear. Unfortunately I couldn't starve the plants down below their thresholds. They needed exercise and they had to have the Arachnid to lead them. But instead of running through its harmonic scales the orchid only screeched and whined. It wasn't the noise, which only a couple of dozen people complained about, but the damage being done to their vibratory chords that worried me. Those in the 17th Century catalogues stood up well to the strain, and the moderns were immune, but the Romantics

burst their calyxes by the score. By the third day after Jane's arrival I'd lost \$200 worth of Beethoven and more Mendelsohn and Schubert than I could bear to think about.

Jane seemed oblivious to the trouble she was causing me.

"What's wrong with them all?" she asked, surveying the chaos of gas cylinders and drip feeds spread across the floor.

"I don't think they like you," I told her. "At least the Arachnid doesn't. Your voice may move men to strange and wonderful visions, but it throws that orchid into acute melancholia."

"Nonsense," she said, laughing at me. "Give it to me and I'll show you how to look after it."

"Are Tony and Harry keeping you happy?" I asked her. I was annoyed I couldn't go down to the beach with them and instead had to spend my time draining tanks and titrating up norm solutions, none of which ever worked.

"They're very amusing," she said. "We play i-Go and I sing for them. But I wish you could come out more often."

After another two weeks I had to give up. I decided to close the plants down until Jane had left Vermillion Sands. I knew it would take me three months to rescore the stock, but I had no alternative.

The next day I received a large order for mixed coloratura herbaceous from the Santiago Garden Choir. They wanted delivery in three weeks.

"I'm sorry," Jane said, when she heard I wouldn't be able to fill the order. "You must wish that I'd never come to Vermillion Sands."

She stared thoughtfully into one of the darkened tanks.

"Couldn't I score them for you?" she suggested.

"No thanks," I said, laughing, "I've had enough of that already."

"Don't be silly, of course I could."

I shook my head.

Tony and Harry told me I was crazy.

"Her voice has a wide enough range," Tony said. "You admit it yourself."

"What have you got against her?" Harry asked. "She cheats at i-Go?"

"It's nothing to do with that," I said. "But her voice has a wider range than you think."

We played i-Go at Jane's apartment. Jane won ten dollars from each of us.

"I am lucky," she said, very pleased with herself. "I never seem to lose." She counted up the bills and put them away carefully in her bag, her golden skin glowing.

Then Santiago sent me a repeat query.

I found Jane down among the cafes, holding off a siege of admirers. "Have you given in yet?" she asked me, smiling at the young men. "I don't know what you're doing to me," I said, "but anything is worth trying."

Back at the shop I raised a bank of perennials up past their thresholds. Jane helped me attach the gas and fluid lines.

"We'll try these first," I said. "Frequencies 543-785. Here's the score."

Jane took off her hat and began to ascend the scale, her voice clear and pure. At first the Columbine hesitated and Jane went down again and drew them along with her. They went up a couple of octaves together and then the plants stumbled and went off at a tangent of stepped chords.

"Try K sharp," I said. I fed a little chlorous acid into the tank and the Columbine followed her up eagerly, the infra-calyx warbling delicate variations on the treble cleft.

"Perfect," I said.

It took us only four hours to fill the order.

"You're better than the Arachnid," I congratulated her. "How would you like a job? I'll fit you out with a large cool tank and all the chlorine you can breathe."

"Careful," she told me. "I may say yes. Why don't we rescore a few more of them while we're about it?"

"You're tired," I said. "Let's go and have a drink."

"Let me try the Arachnid," she suggested. "That would be more of a challenge."

Her eyes never left the flower. I wondered what they'd do if I left them together. Try to sing each other to death?

"No," I said. "Tomorrow perhaps."

We sat on the balcony together, glasses at our elbows, and talked the afternoon away.

She told me little about herself, but I gathered that her father had been a mining engineer in Peru and her mother a dancer at a Lima vu-tavern. They'd wandered from deposit to deposit, the father digging his concessions, the mother signing on at the nearest bordelle to pay the rent.

"She only sang, of course," Jane added. "Until my father came." She blew bubbles into her glass. "So you think I give them what they want at the Casino. By the way, what do you see?"

"I'm afraid I'm your one failure," I said. "Nothing. Except you."

She dropped her eyes. "That sometimes happens," she said. "I'm glad this time."

A million suns pounded inside me. Until then I'd been reserving judgement on myself.

Harry and Tony were polite, if disappointed.

"I can't believe it," Harry said sadly. "I won't. How did you do it?"

"That mystical left-handed approach, of course," I told him. "All ancient seas and dark wells."

"What's she like?" Tony asked eagerly. "I mean, does she burn, or just tingle?"

Jane sang at the Casino every night from 11 to 3, but apart from that I suppose we were always together. Sometimes in the late afternoons we'd drive out along the beach to the Scented Desert and sit alone by one of the pools, watching the sun fall away behind the reefs and hills, lulling ourselves on the heavy rose-sick air. And when the wind began to blow cool across the sand we'd slip down into the water, bathe ourselves and drive back to town, filling the streets and cafe terraces with jasmine and musk-rose and helianthemum.

On other evenings we'd go down to one of the quiet bars at Lagoon West, and have supper out on the flats, and Jane would tease the waiters and sing honeybirds and angelcakes to the children who came in across the sand to watch her.

I realise now that I must have achieved a certain notoriety along the beach, but I didn't mind giving the old women—and beside Jane they all seemed to be old women—something to talk about. During the Recess no-one cared very much about anything, and for that reason I never questioned myself too closely over my affair with Jane Ciracylides. As I sat on the balcony with her looking out over the cool early evenings or felt her body glowing beside me in the darkness I allowed myself few anxieties.

Absurdly, the only disagreement I ever had with her was over her cheating.

I remember that I once taxed her with it.

"Do you know you've taken over \$500 from me, Jane? You're still doing it. Even now!"

She laughed impishly. "Do I cheat? I'll let you win one day."

"But why do you?" I insisted.

"It's more fun to cheat," she said. "Otherwise it's so boring."

"Where will you go when you leave Vermillion Sands?" I asked her.

She looked at me in surprise. "Why do you say that? I don't think I shall ever leave."



"Don't tease me, Jane. You're a child of another world than this."

"My father came from Peru," she reminded me.

"But you didn't get your voice from him," I said. "I wish I could have heard your mother sing. Had she a better voice than yours, Jane?"

"She thought so. My father couldn't stand either of us."

That was the evening I last saw Jane. We'd changed, and in the half an hour before she left for the Casino we sat on the balcony and I listened to her voice, like a spectral fountain, pour its golden luminous notes into the air. The music remained with me even after she'd gone, hanging faintly in the darkness around her chair.

I felt curiously sleepy, almost sick on the air she'd left behind, and at 11.30, when I knew she'd be appearing on stage at the Casino, I went out for a walk along the beach and a coffee.

As I left the elevator I heard music coming from the shop.

At first I thought I'd left one of the audio switches on, but I knew the voice only too well.

The windows of the shop had been shuttered, so I got in through the passage which led from the garage courtyard round at the back of the apartment house.

The lights had been turned out, but a brilliant glow filled the shop, throwing a golden fire onto the tanks along the counters. Across the ceiling liquid colours danced in reflection.

The music I had heard before, but only in overture.

The Arachnid had grown to three times its size. It towered nine feet high out of the shattered lid of the control tank, leaves tumid and inflamed, its calyx as large as a bucket, raging insanely.

Arched forward into it, her head thrown back, was Jane.

I ran over to her, my eyes filling with light, and grabbed her arm, trying to pull her away from it.

"Jane!" I shouted over the noise. "Get down!"

She flung my hand away. In her eyes, fleetingly, was a look of shame.

While I was sitting on the stairs in the entrance Tony and Harry drove up.

"Where's Jane?" Harry asked. "Has anything happened to her? We were down at the Casino." They both turned toward the music. "What the hell's going on?"

Tony peered at me suspiciously. "Steve, anything wrong?"

Harry dropped the bouquet he was carrying and started toward the rear entrance.

"Harry!" I shouted after him. "Get back!"

Tony held my shoulder. "Is Jane in there?"

I caught them as they opened the door into the shop.

I never saw Jane again. The three of us waited in my apartment. When the music died away we went down and found the shop in darkness. The Arachnid had shrunk to its normal size.

Where Jane went to I don't know. Not long afterwards the Recess ended, and the big government schemes came along and started up all the clocks and kept us too busy working off the lost time to worry about a few bruised petals. Harry told me that Jane had been seen on her way through Red Beach, and I heard recently that someone very like her was doing the nightclubs this side out of Pernambuco.

So if any of you around there keep a choro-florists and have a Khan-Arachnid orchid, look out for a golden-skinned woman with insects for eyes. Perhaps she'll play i-Go with you, and I'm sorry to have to say it, but she'll always cheat.

—J. C. Ballard

**"Gone Away—No known address"**

Subscribers are reminded to keep us informed of any change of address to ensure the safe delivery of their copies as far too many issues are returned by the Post Office marked as above. Overseas subscribers are particularly requested to let us know in good time.

*New writers often bring a fresh aspect to old themes, as this little cameo shows—the story of a rose grower who was far more interested in the development of his favourite flowers than of the scientific world about him. Which, perhaps, was a pity.*

## MISTAKEN IDENTITY

By D. W. R. HILL

---

It will never be known what would have happened had the aliens not landed in the rose garden of Evans the Bard. Like the name Achilles took when he went disguised among women, or the song the Sirens sang to lure sailors to their doom, both subjects of great academic interest, the question can only be a matter of surmise. The world would have been different, of course, that much at least it is safe to claim but how different and in what way we shall never know because the aliens didn't land on Doctor William's farm or in Fred Harrison's market garden or, for that matter, anywhere else in the whole wide world. They landed their ship in the rose garden of Evans the Bard.

It was a wise choice, of course, from their point of view. The rose garden snuggled in a tiny valley ringed by tall hills and was well away

from any of the main roads. It was a quiet district, secluded and, aside from a few sheep and, naturally, Evans himself, was devoid of life for miles around. Their ship wasn't very large and they had set it down very carefully during the night so as to be ready for an early start in the morning. So they opened the doors when the sun peeped above the hills, let down their ramp and waited for someone to arrive. They waited a long time.

That was the fault of Evans the Post. Evans the Post had delivered a new catalogue two days before and had allowed himself to be persuaded to look at the garden while the old man brewed a cup of tea. It should be explained that Evans the Bard was a rose man and any rose man will understand what that means. The old singer, a chair won at an Eisteddfod years ago having given him his title, had only one aim and object in life, his roses. He tended them with loving care, far more care than he wasted on himself, and the sight of the old man, his long, white beard fluttering in the breeze as he stood by his prize blooms was a familiar sight at any gathering of the fraternity.

The tea made he engaged Evans the Post in the subject dearest to his heart.

"You see, man," he said. "A rose is like a woman, mark you. Like a woman it has the thorns with which to prick and, like a woman, it has the sweet perfume and the softness so beautiful that it makes you weep. Indeed, man, it can't be denied."

"I'm not denying it," said Evans the Post. He was a dog man himself and bred some of the finest whippets ever to be raced in the valleys.

"There has been some talk of other blooms being as good." Evans the Bard shook his head as he might at hearing of the end of the world.

"But that is all nonsense, you see. What other flower can compare with a rose? What other flower has the scent and the beauty? I tell you, man, that the rose came straight from heaven and it is the only true flower, the rest are but weeds."

"Everything has its place in Creation," said Evans the Post sternly. He spoke at Chapel on Sundays and was prominent in the choir.

"Am I disagreeing with you?" The old man leaned forward. "But if everything has its place then the rose is at the top of the flowers. No harm in that, is there? Something's got to be at the top, look you. It just stands to reason that does."

Evans the Post sighed as he sipped his tea. Left to himself the old man would go on and on about his obsession. The fact that he himself would do the same about dogs made no difference. Dogs were dogs and a rose was just a flower. He tried to change the subject.

"Fred Wilson was telling me that his collie has got the distemper," he said moodily. "A fine thing, look you, to be telling a man with dogs of his own."

"Roses are afflicted with troubles the same as dogs," said Evans the Bard. "There is leaf rot, and other things, yes, indeed. I tell you it turns my heart to think of it. One time I well remember . . ."

Evans the Post groaned and tried to stop his ears. He couldn't leave before he had drunk the tea and he didn't want to hurt the old man, but what with trying to remain silent and burning his mouth he was almost ready to burst by the time he managed to escape on his bicycle. Evans the Bard watched him go bumping down the track leading to the road, shook his head at the ignorance of government servants and returned to a study of the catalogue the postman had brought.

Much of what was contained in the glossy pages failed to interest him but one item brought him rigid in his chair. It was a picture of an insect eating a rose and the sacrilege made him break out into a cold perspiration. He relaxed a little when he discovered that the illustration was merely appended to an advertisement for a new pest killer but he read it through every word.

The insect killer advertised claimed utter destruction to all insect pests with special reference to the Japanese Beetle. Evans the Bard had never seen a Japanese Beetle but what he read of their depredations made him doubt Evans the Post's statement that everything had a place in Creation. He didn't sleep that night for worry and rose at dawn to examine his precious roses. There were no traces of the voracious destroyer but the old man wasn't satisfied. The roses were safe now, they might not be later and so, all through the day, he repeated his examination. It did no good, in imagination he saw his precious roses fall to the hungry jaws of the invader and, worse, he was without any immediate means of defence. Obviously there was only one thing to do. Midnight found him humped and cold in a corner seat on the night train to Cardiff.

Once in the city and his errand accomplished he had, naturally, gone to the Castle grounds to inspect the roses. His disparaging remarks so inflamed the gardeners that he escaped personal injury only because of his age and his fluent Welsh which won the sympathy of the bystanders. Even so the altercation had caused him to miss his train, forcing him to go by road if he hoped to return home before dark.

At the time the aliens were waiting for someone to come and greet them the owner of the garden in which they had landed was jolting along the valleys with his precious insect killer on his lap and a short pipe clenched between his teeth.



Time dragged as much for the aliens as for anyone else. They had travelled a long way, how far we can only guess, and their reception, or lack of it, proved irksome. To one alien, at least, the sight of the sun-drenched garden beyond the open door and lowered ramp became almost irresistible.

"Can't we go outside?" Smith, we may as well call him that, didn't speak as we speak but that is what he said.

"You know the orders." Jones wasn't exactly the Captain but near enough to it. "We are to land, extend the ramp and then wait for a representative of this planet to come and greet us."

"They're taking their time," said Brown, the third alien. He peered out of the open door. "We have waited for almost a half-revolution of this planet as it is. The sun has passed the zenith."

"We must be patient," said Jones.

"I'm tired of being patient." Smith edged towards the door. "Can't we go outside?"

"Let's go for a short walk," suggested Brown. "We've been cooped up too long and it will do us good to stretch our legs." He headed purposefully towards the door. "Coming?"

Jones hesitated, knowing that he should forbid it but then Smith, always impatient, moved forward and down the ramp, Brown trailing after him. Jones wasn't human so he couldn't shrug but he gave the nearest possible gesture and then joined the procession.

"Not bad." Smith blinked and stretched himself in the sunshine. "The tests showed that we can stand this planet so we're quite safe."

"I hope so." Jones sat down on the metal of the ramp. "I wonder what the ruling life-form is like?"

"Same as us, I suppose." Brown, more daring than the others, had jumped from the ramp and was investigating the area around the ship. "Wonder when they'll turn up?"

"They'll be along." Smith raised himself and stared towards the small house at one end of the garden. "I expect that is one of their habitations. Shall we explore?"

"No," Jones was very definite. "You know the standard procedure for contacting new races as well as I do. If we violate their privacy they will be perfectly entitled to destroy us."

"You're quoting from the manual," accused Brown. He came to the side of the ramp and leaned on the edge. "Friendship cannot be forced," he quoted in turn. "Either the new race is going to like us or it isn't. Either the two races are going to get along with each other or they aren't." He made a sound very much like a snort.

"The procedures have all been worked out from previous experience," said Jones sternly. "The routine is the same for every explora-

tion ship. We land, we wait to be contacted and then we determine whether the natives want to co-operate with us or not. If they do then we exchange gifts and scientific knowledge and leave with the promise to return."

"Then we go back into space, send home the information and then try our luck on another world." Smith blew through his nose. "World after world after world. Sometimes I get tired of it."

"You're an explorer," reminded Brown. Even he was a little shocked at Smith's outburst. Admittedly every time they landed they took a gamble but it wasn't really such a big gamble as all that. Any intelligent life-form, and they had met several, would recognise intelligence when they saw it and, after the first few minutes, they usually managed to get along together.

In fact they usually managed to get along very well indeed. Most of the other races they had contacted were scientifically backward and only too pleased to accept gifts and information. He said so and Jones agreed with him. Smith, disgruntled as usual, said nothing but leaving the ramp wandered off into the garden.

"Hey," he called after a while. "Look what I've found."

"Trouble?" Jones hurried to join him.

"Food." Smith pointed towards a rose. It was a young bud, the petals just bursting from their outer covering and, even to Jones, it looked temptingly succulent.

"Are you sure?" Brown was cautious. "It might be poisonous."

"Not a chance." The sight of fresh food had made Smith hungry. "The tests showed that this planet could support us and that goes for the food too." He reached towards the rose. "I'll test it personally just to make sure."

"No you won't." Jones reached towards him. "The natives might not like it."

"Why not?" Smith was genuinely astonished. "If they are intelligent at all they won't begrudge us a little food and if they aren't then it doesn't matter anyway." He bit at the rose. "Wonderful!"

"Are you sure?" Jones was tempted. It had been a long time since he had tasted fresh food.

"Sure I'm sure." Smith concentrated on what he was doing. "What are you waiting for?"

It was all the invitation they needed and Jones and Brown joined Smith in his repast. The food, as he had said, was wonderful and occupied all their attention. So greatly were they enjoying themselves that neither of them even heard the distant roaring of the bus carrying Evans the Bard back home.

It had been a long, uncomfortable trip and the old man was tired. Slowly he climbed up from the road, pausing often to rest himself and changing the precious tin of insect killer from one arm to the other. Reaching the house he put down his burden, removed his coat and put on the kettle for tea. He almost fell asleep while it boiled but the hot, sweet brew revived him and he girded his loins for what he knew must be done.

Almost he changed his mind but the printed label on the tin with its ghastly spectacle of mangled roses gave him strength. The precious roses might be all right today but Evans the Bard knew that he wouldn't be able to rest until he had used the very last scrap of scientific knowledge to protect them. Carefully he sorted out a spray gun, washed it clean and put it on the table. Opening the tin he read the instructions and made quite certain that the compound was harmless to vegetable life. Reassured he mixed a strong potion, hesitated, then doubled the amount of the powder. Vaguely he had the notion that if a little was good then more would be better and, anyway, it could do no harm.

The spray loaded he stepped into the rose garden and headed to where the three aliens were busy enjoying their meal.

Historians have argued and will argue that what happened then was deliberate but, as we know from reliable sources, it was due to a sheer case of mistaken identity for which Evans the Bard was not to blame.

The reliable source was the post office and the Museum of Natural History which, in due course, received a small, flat cardboard box containing the remains of what a brief note inside claimed to be Japanese Beetles. The old man had sent them in due to some confusion with the Colorado Beetle, any specimens of which must be sent to the appropriate authority. The museum was not the appropriate authority but that didn't matter because the contents of the box were not Colorado Beetles. They weren't Japanese Beetles either and, in fact, no one to this day knows quite what they are aside from the fact that they are totally alien to this planet.

It took a long time for the museum to realize just what had been sent to them and it is known for a fact that, at one time, the contents of the box were regarded as rather an elaborate hoax. Beetles, Terrestrial beetles, just don't grow to a length of six inches. But then they don't have sharply defined brains either and it was this discovery which sent investigators flying to the rose garden of Evans the Bard.

Of course they arrived far too late. The old man was pleased to see them and talked of his roses for as long as he was permitted. Then,

when the subject of their visit was impressed on him, his praises switched from his roses to the insect killer he had bought in Cardiff.

"Knocked them over at once it did," he said. "Great ugly things they were too, man. The fright they gave me, look you, was something not to be wished. Indeed yes."

And that was about all. Well, almost all. The beetles were alien and had arrived in a ship from space. The investigators even found the ship but it did them no good. It wasn't very large, only a few feet across and it had been damaged and seared by internal heat. Evans the Bard had discovered it, filled it full of his insect killer and then tried to crush it. He hadn't succeeded but something had broken inside for he claimed that it had grown red hot and hummed like a top.

But you couldn't blame him for that, he had thought it was a nest and, anyway, what man can really be expected to remain cool when he sees his roses being eaten before his very eyes?

—D. W. R. Hill.

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## WITH ESMOND IN MIND

By BRIAN W. ALDISS

---

The autofly sank deeper and deeper into the layers of buildings—its motor humming at steady pitch. Uneasily, Laurie Roberts trimmed his muon screen to avoid an upcoming fly. The traffic in these buildings was getting worse.

With London's population now close on seventy million, that was hardly surprising. Year by year, more strata of houses were added to the existing layers. Everybody said it couldn't go on any longer, yet it did. London, centre of world trade, blessed with its sunny climate, attracted population irresistibly from all over the Seven Systems.

Laurie glanced at his dials. He was just sinking through Stratum 17A, Square 80. It might be the Grand Bank of Neptune, it might be some pretty girl's bedroom. Laurie wished he could materialise

and see, but lowering the muon screen would instantly pulverise him; besides, he hadn't far to go now, and he was really in a hurry.

He could not recall a time when he had not been in a hurry. Everyone in the seventeenth A-century was in a hurry: that was the inevitable result of a competitive way of living. Laurie's one man illusion-repair outfit was a pretty hand-to-mouth job, allowing no time for relaxation.

He scythed forward now, cutting through Stratum 20. There was romance for you! Stratum 20 had been the old pre-muon age London, when people had had to build on the ground. Then intrapenetrability had been discovered, and progress had really gone ahead. The old existing thoroughfares (built for their quaint old automobiles and railways) had been filled in with new buildings; nothing and nobody could get anywhere without a muon screen—but power was reasonably cheap and everyone had them. After that the erection of new layers above and below the city began. London expanded like a self-fertilizing bun. The result was a capital worthy of a galactic race.

Not that that concerned Laurie particularly at present. He was too intent on finding his way down to Strata 29, where a client, Granville Esmond, awaited his services. An autobeam stopped him at 28—that would be more upcoming traffic—and then he filtered the fly down and sent it clicking along to the appropriate square in which Mr. Esmond lived.

As soon as he arrived, Laurie dialled Esmond's number. It came up, interlocked, and the muon screen was safely released. Laurie climbed out, glancing at once over his little vehicle with its proud sign: '*Roberts' Radiopsi Repairs. I'll Mend Your Illusions.*' The new paint had been slightly scratched, presumably by a proton shower which had sneaked through his screen; the port projector needed retuning, and Laurie made a mental note to attend to it in the morning.

Mr. Esmond's materialising hall was as small as the statues of the realm would allow. The tiny autofly filled it. Which was all you could expect if you knew this end of Strata 29; it was decidedly a shabby-genteel neighbourhood.

Mr. Esmond himself stood at the inner, muon-proof door. Although he was a complete stranger to Laurie, his type was familiar.

He wore green flannel shorts, a trylon sneaking-jacket and leather shirt with twill plugging pieces. His boots were aluminium retreads equipped with the standard speakers, leakers and signature keys. His hair, greying now, was worn in a snood. It was, in fact, a thoroughly old-fashioned outfit.



"Please come in, Mr. Roberts," Esmond said in a sad voice. "Although I'm afraid you'll find the flat rather untidy. I've had to manage by myself ever since my wife died."

Laurie surveyed the old man's face with interest. He hardly looked the type who would marry; the lines of his mouth were prim and ascetic; his face was the face of a self-denier.

There was a green fleck to his withered flesh which Laurie could not account for until he saw the rest of the house. Then he had Esmond placed: he was a retired Venusian civil servant. About him and his home was the air, at once conservative and eccentric, of one who has travelled far and got nowhere.

In the middle of a light years wide sphere of civilization, incorrigible Venus lay, a frontier planet after sixteen centuries of more or less continuous occupation. The transformation of planetary atmosphere had never been a success and the hardy natives—who survived in any atmosphere—were difficult to rule. Venusian jurisdiction could point to thousands of men like Granville Esmond, who spent the greater part of their lives keeping order in remote provinces, far from their own kind.

The walls of Esmond's poor little living room were covered with framed stereos, the cheap, motionless kind: views of the desolate land, the subterranean villages, groups of local Earthmen in sports kit, a close up of Mrs. Esmond in a sixties hat, looking strangely like her husband. And there were other mementos, a smogwood carving, a chunk of venustone, a native weave rug on the floor.

"I spent twenty-nine years on our sister planet," Esmond said proudly, seeing Laurie's glance.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry."

"Oh, don't apologise, it's nice to have someone to see my—ah, trophies. I'm very much alone." The words seemed wrenched out of him; he immediately covered the confession by adding, "My illusion room's through here, if you'd come, please."

He gestured to a door and then said hurriedly, "I'm afraid it's rather worn . . . The upkeep's very expensive, you know. But I couldn't bear to be without it: it helps remind me of happier times."

He stood there as if barring the door, smiling in a weak, apologetic way.

"I'll put it right if I can," Laurie said, and pushed gently past him into the room.

The sky was a tawny overcast, moving slowly like curdled milk. A line of smogtress, part of an afforestation scheme, stretched from the horizon until the boughs of the nearest ones waved overhead. A large

cabin dwelling with ' *District Commissioner* ' over the door stood close beside a series of monolithic slabs. Laurie recognised the slabs as entrances to the warrenlike villages of the Venusians.

On the verandah of the cabin a middle-aged man sat smoking his pipe. He was lean and alert, his face tanned green by the perpetual breezes. It was Commissioner Esmond.

Through him, through the trees, through the sky, through the bleak land, the shadowy walls of the illusion room were visible. The recording was indeed worn.

"As I explained to you on the pscreen," the present Esmond said, coming up from behind a tree, "the illusions keep changing without my switching them over. I've only got three illusions, but they keep changing . . ."

"It happens sometimes on old circuits," Laurie said, hefting his repair kit. "I'll soon fix it. The activator keys probably need re-grinding."

"They've been flickering a lot lately. It's very disconcerting. But it probably won't happen now you're here."

But even as Esmond spoke, there was a rush of ghostly figures into the Venusian clearing. The monoliths and trees faded and the two men were standing in a crowded club room. There were trophies on the wall, and flags, and bright flowers in vases, and somewhere a piano was being autoplaved.

People moved to and fro, talking, men and women in gay clothes. To one end of the room there was dancing. The hostess, glorious in yards of white extanza, was followed by a retinue of young men; one of the eager faces was twenty-year-old Granville Esmond.

"The year is 1629 A-C," said old Esmond in a tremulous voice. "What a summer that was! Everything still before me . . . Do you see I was just growing my very first moustache? To be so very young . . . You'll see my wife-to-be in a moment; she comes in that green door at the end, and I don't notice her for some time. Shall we go and stand there and wait for her?"

He stepped forward to let a phantom pass and caught the look in Laurie's eyes. He dropped his own.

"I know," he said. "Your time's money, son. You'd better go and switch the illusions off and see what's gone wrong with them. I don't mind."

Feeling callow and hard-hearted, Laurie made his way to the master switch. As he bent down to it, a girl with the palest countenance hurried towards him from a shadowy green doorway; her eyes, dark

and dedicated, looked nervously through him, and for a second their lips seemed to touch : then the switch went over. The ghosts died.

"That was my wife ! 'That was Muriel !" Esmond said. He stood in the middle of a bare chamber, his gesticulating hands drawing mirages ; then he stuffed them in the pockets of his sneaking-jacket.

Pulling out a magnetic key, Laurie knelt and opened the illusion hood. This was an old model, probably acquired secondhand, and the interior looked vastly complicated to a layman, although it presented no special difficulties to Laurie. The illusion unit was bigger than a small refrigerator : current ones were the size of a small suitcase.

Laurie checked swiftly over the emanation circuits with his teller. There was considerable leakage, although not enough to be critical.

"I shall have to re-earth to be safe," he said over his shoulder to the old man.

"I'm afraid these technical terms don't convey anything to me at all," Esmond apologised. "You see, I had a classical education. It would be—oh, right back in 'nineteen—no, 'eighteen, the year the Centauri team won the Ashes, when I started at French Foundation . . ."

And as Laurie worked, the old man began to tell his life story. Laurie did not bother to listen at first. He could see the equipment was worn out, and was wondering what was the least he could charge for an adequate job. The amplification transistors in colour, feeler and solidity circuits would all have to be renewed, and they'd cost a cool two hundred each.

This model had racks for only three illusion spools ; more expensive ones had racks running into thousands. Most people preferred to record their own memories for the illusion, as Esmond had done ; ultimately, they were most satisfying. But there were professional memorisers, some of whose memory types sold by the million. Laurie unclipped Esmond's three memories from the prong that held them, and bent further into the entrails of the machine.

Gradually, he found himself absorbed in the other's account of his life. On Esmond's own showing, it had been dull, filled with a timid integrity and ended with a tiny pension. It contrasted strangely with Laurie's existence, in which mad sessions of work alternated with women and the gay dives of the higher strata.

"I hope you don't mind listening to all this !" Esmond exclaimed suddenly, interrupting himself. "You see, it's eighteen months since a real live person was in my flat. All my food and supplies are automatically delivered through the muon-chute. And I hardly ever go out into the country these days—it costs so much to get out of London now, you know."

It certainly did. All movement could only be by moon in the built-up area, and present rates for that were five and a half per cubic foot per yard.

"You ought to get around more," Laurie said, tugging at the cover of the twitch plate. "You must be lonely here."

"Lonely!" There was such a high note in the old man's voice that Laurie involuntarily turned to look at him. As he did so, his temples made contact with the twin prongs of the record rack.

Sparks flew, sparks so cool they hardly singed his skin. Current flowed, current so slight it hardly made his scalp crawl. Air crackled with a noise so slight you would never think to call it sinister or world-shattering, or any of the things it really was.

After a long pause, Laurie completed the gesture he had begun and turned to look at Esmond. The old fellow stood in the centre of the bare illusion room in an expectant attitude.

Laurie was instantly reminded of a scene long ago, when he was a boy of ten. He was in the woods of Berkshire with his sister Lena, and they had run into a clearing and discovered an old man standing in just the same position, as if listening enchanted.

"Hello," the old man said when he saw them. "Don't be frightened—I'm only standing here listening to the cuckoo."

"Pooh, they're commoner than pigeons at this time of year," thirteen year old Lena said. "If you heard them in winter, that would be something to listen to!"

"They don't have seasons in London, or cuckoos on Venus," the old man told her. "That's why they're wonderful to me—for years I've lived only in those two places."

"Then you're lucky," Lena said—she was at a very contradictory stage at present. "Daddy's going to take us to Venus when Laurie's bigger, isn't he, Laurie?"

Laurie did not answer. He was frightened; this strange man with the green flecks on his cheek reminded him of something—something too big and threatening to be grasped. He tugged urgently at Lena's hand.

She accepted his signal and burst into a run, dragging him down a bank deep in last year's leaves and this year's bluebells. Laurie looked back over his shoulder: the man had disappeared, very suddenly, very oddly.

But he couldn't just have gone like that, Laurie thought. It was against nature.

He called, "Mr. Esmond!"

No answer, only the mighty beech trees humming in their new green.

Nobody in sight.

"Funny," Laurie commented aloud, running his dusty hands down his overalls. And it was funny; it was *queer*; his head felt queer and his stomach queezy.

He was suddenly glad he had no need to linger further. The illusion machine was working beautifully: these beeches looked so solid that he hesitated to walk into them. He felt his way to the door and let himself back into Mr. Esmond's living quarters. For a moment he paused, looking back.

The woods were irresistibly real. You could not convince yourself they were mere projections. As he closed the door, he heard a distant call: 'Cuckoo.'

Something would not come clear in Laurie's mind, would not focus. He shook his head vaguely, trying to puzzle things out. For a long while he stood gazing at his little repair fly, not seeing it.

Finally, deciding he would never solve any problem if he could not think what the problem was, he climbed into the vehicle. For a second he sat in the driver's seat looking out at the minute hall, and then switched on the muon screen and cleared his engagement board.

At once his thoughts were more certain. Everything was bathed in a new lucidity, as if his I.Q. had suddenly been stepped up.

'Yes,' he said to himself, 'I must find out what's happened to old Granville Esmond. Of course I must.'

As he drifted up through the strata of buildings, he tried to remember the last time he had seen the old boy. He was not too clear on that point—possibly he had been drinking too heavily when Esmond had left. He could recall the old fellow at Betty Hulcoup's party the week before, standing looking on as always. Esmond rarely did anything but look on, yet, when you thought about it, he was a real sociable type. Why, looking back, Laurie could remember him at almost any spot of high-life you might name.

Even when Laurie had that wonderful three days with Pauline Dent, Esmond had been looking on. Odd they hadn't been offended by him at the time, when you thought about it, considering how they—

Laurie stopped with a jolt at the traffic autobeam at 12th. He was nearly home already. Thinking about old Ezzie, as they called him, made time pass quickly. Good old Ezzie!

A warm glow of pleasure ran through Laurie as he realised he had no memory of any pleasant time in which Ezzie did not also feature,

just standing by, looking on, smiling, 'taking it all in,' as the saying was.

"Good old Ezzie!" Laurie said aloud. "He must be my lucky mascot. I *must* look him up when I get back to the shop."

He shuttled along 11th until he was in his home square, dialled his number, was accepted, clicked off the muon screen and materialised.

"Hullo, boss!" a voice called, and Tom Fenwick appeared. He was a friend of Laurie's, and only put in an hour or so on the bench when business was particularly pressing, as at present.

"Hullo, Tom," Laurie said.

"Something wrong? Client engaged? You look worried."

"I was just trying to think what I was thinking of," Laurie said blankly.

"Oh, it'll come back if you stop worrying about it, as Freud said to the lady who'd lost her nervous complaint. Did you find Mr. Esmond in, I asked you."

"Oh . . . er, Mr. Esmond?" With an effort, Laurie pulled himself together. His brain almost seemed to be clicking. "Do you mean old Ezzie? I haven't seen him for some time."

"Who are you talking about?" Tom asked in puzzlement. "Are you ill?"

He placed his hand in assumed consternation on Laurie's brow and went on, "What about old Ezzie? Did you say you hadn't seen him?"

"Not since last week," Laurie said.

"I went out with the Baer boys last night and we saw him then," Tom said.

Laurie sat on a stool. "Good," he said vaguely.

"Are you sure you're well?" Tom asked.

"Yes, fine, kid, fine. You run along."

"I will if you don't mind, Laurie. Come to think of it, I feel rather odd myself."

For a long time after Tom Fenwick had gone, Laurie sat quietly on the stool. Life, somehow, seemed to have changed, although when he searched his mind for memory of any difference he could remember none.

At last he went over to the pscreen and rolled up his sister's number.

"Hullo!" she said as the pscreen cleared, "I'm just synthing lunch. It's two months since I saw you. What have you been up to?"

"I've been very busy, Lena," Laurie said apologetically. "Listen, I want you to try and remember a scene for me—something that happened when we were kids. It's important to get a detail right."



"Well? Don't sound so mysterious!"

"Lena, do you remember once when you were about thirteen Father let us catch a wing and go and picnic in Berkshire woods?"

"You mean the time we first met old Ezzie? Yes, I remember. What about it?"

He faltered.

"Oh, you remember old Ezzie, do you?" he said weakly.

His sister's image laughed at him. "Well he's *always* about when we're doing anything exciting, isn't he?" she exclaimed. "Laurence Roberts, I believe you're tiddley again!"

He broke the connection, vexed with himself for having asked a silly question. Now that he looked back, he could picture the familiar figure of Granville Esmond wandering about whenever Lena held a party. Good old Ezzie, always the same—why, always even dressed the same, in his sneaking-jacket and green flannel shorts.

And never looking a day older . . .

"I'm going to have a brain storm," Laurie said. He began thinking furiously. But the cogitation led nowhere, except to an inane doubt as to whether or not he *had* actually pscreened his sister. And if he had, could he remember aright what she had said? His memory felt very odd; a headache of monster dimensions was brewing.

"It's no good, I've got to get this thing straight," Laurie muttered, and as he said it he thought of who he could turn to for expert aid: H. H. Arlestein. Arlestein was a leading psychiatrist who used a fascinating diversity of illusion cubicles to probe into the recesses of his patients' minds; Laurie had spent a long session last winter installing new gadgets for Arlestein, and had grown to like the little man.

Directly the decision was made, Laurie acted on it. The temporal continuum not being uniform, there is no time like the present. He climbed back into his autofly and made for Arlestein's.

Traffic was thick all ways at this hour of day, beams held him up at most squares. Nevertheless, snugly encased in his muon screen, Laurie relaxed considerably. When this puzzling business was over, he'd go and have a drink at Joe's Cozy; Ezzie would be there, as he always was if anything was doing, and they would have a laugh over it all.

Once he had disembarked at the psychiatrist's, Laurie sobered again.

In the waiting room his mood turned to sombre, but the delay until Arlestein came in was long enough for him to marshall his thoughts properly.

Arlestein greeted him with warmth.

"I found your help invaluable," the psychiatrist said, as they shook hands. "I only hope I can be of as much use to you. Come in and talk to me. Been overworking?"

"No more than usual," Laurie said, following the neat little figure into its comfortable consulting room. "I came to you with a problem, but I believe I've solved it already in your waiting room."

"That hard bench does most of my work for me," Arlestein assented cheerfully. "However, let's hear the problem, and I'll see if I can pick holes in the solution."

"I warn you it's fantastic."

"Only the ordinary is fantastic in this room, Laurie," Arlestein said.

"All my life," Laurie began, "a man has kept me company whenever anything exciting was going on. At least, I think it's all my life; I can remember the man all my life, if that's the same thing."

"It could be a very different thing."

"That's what I hoped to hear. At some time, and I think it may even have been today, although my mind's a blank at just that point, I must have gone to the man's flat to do something to his illusion room."

"A repair job?" Arlestein asked.

"It must have been, I think. Now here's where the theory creeps in. The man must have had an old model illusion machine, one of the kind in which the actual prongs which hold the memory reels are live. Now suppose I had taken off the man's reels, and happened somehow to stick my head between those prongs—"

"You would have been electrocuted."

"Yes, if I had been fool enough to leave the power on. And if I had switched the power off, nothing would have happened—unless the old machine was short-circuiting somewhere. I do believe I said something about the set's needing re-earthing. And in *that* case, my memories would be played direct into the room, over the illusion circuits."

"I see," Arlestein said, making a note. "*All* your memories?"

"Very probably. It would depend how long I was stuck there, because from *my* point of view, temporary amnesia would be formed."

"Yes. And when you broke contact, what would be the after-effects?"

Laurie looked embarrassed.

"Well," he said. "The after-effects are that the man, having been in my memory, remains in my memory. He's got back there and dug himself in on all possible exciting occasions; when anything good's going on, the man's there."

He dreaded Arlestein's next question. There was a long silence before it inevitably came.

"And the man exists in actuality, apart from in your memory?"

"He must do," Laurie said uncertainly. "He certainly did when I went to mend his machine."

"Yet you don't really remember mending his machine?"

The question was asked so gently that Laurie grew angry; it clearly implied that Ezzie might have no objective existence.

"I'm just saying how it seems to me," Laurie said.

"That is a succinct definition of reality," Arlestein said urbanely.

"Now please tell me, what is your attitude to the man? Hatred? Love? Indifference?"

"I don't think I've got an attitude to him. I just accept him. He's—well, he's a part of me."

Arlestein sighed and leant back. He rubbed the bridge of his nose, realised the inner significance of the gesture, and hurriedly withdrew his finger. At length he said, "It is all part of the curious mechanism of confession—secrecy that we reveal the truth accidentally. When you say the man is a part of you, you unwittingly reveal the truth. He is you. For reasons we have yet to find, your ego has developed an ambivalence towards pleasure-situations which expresses itself in duality; in popular parlance, you are becoming schizophrenic."

Laurie jumped to his feet before the speech was ended.

"Don't give me that split-personality line!" he said. "You people are all alike! Given a difficult situation, you haven't imagination enough to do anything but interpret it in your own terms. You're just trying to scale it down to something you think you can handle!"

"I cannot handle it, whatever size it is, unless you sit down," Arlestein said reasonably. "You need not oppose me, because far from trying to oppose you, I want to help you."

Clasping his hands together, Laurie took a fresh grip of himself.

"I'm not the only one who needs help," he said. "If I'm right, everyone in London needs it. The man threatens us all, you included."

Discreetly, Arlestein wrote the words 'protective megalomania' on his pad and said, in a voice full of sympathy, "How does that come about?"

"Have you ever thought how London is like a great brain?" Laurie asked. "It's shaped like one, it's packed with millions upon millions of rooms, which are the cells—and drifting continually through it like thoughts are the muon screens."

"That's a very ingenious simile," said Arlestein. "I had never thought of it like that."

"It's in danger of becoming more than a simile. At present it is only *like* a brain ; soon, it may *be* one : a gigantic, reasoning entity ! All it lacked was the impulse of life ! Now I believe that has been supplied."

"By the man ?" Arlestein asked, fighting to keep the incredulity from his voice.

"Partly—and partly by me," said Laurie. "You see, just as the ordinary electric circuit in a flat can carry light or power, so it can carry the force we call muon. When I got my head between the prongs, I was linked by faulty earthing to the muon system."

"And ?" Arlestein prompted.

"And so the man, by entering my memory, would be able to enter everyone's memory. The constant flow of undetectable muon screens through us, due to passing traffic, would enable him to spread from one person to another. In a week, at the most, he will be in everyone's mind. The traffic must be stopped while an investigation is made."

Arlestein did not reply. His finger was rubbing his nose unashamedly

"It's frightening, isn't it ?" Laurie said. "Already the man's got to my sister and a friend of mine."

Now Arlestein sighed, and began to fidget.

"I can see how the idea frightens you, old man," he said. "In the circumstances, the very best thing you can do is get quite away from London—right away to, say, Glasgow, which has only four strata. Relax, find yourself a different job. Understandably, being constantly involved with other people's memories has disorientated your own natural balance temporarily. The mere idea—"

"I can't leave ! This is an emergency ! You think I'm mad, don't you ?"

"I didn't say—"

"Oh yes you did !" Laurie roared. "I warn you, Ezzie'll get you too ! You won't have a mind of your own ! You'll just be a thought in a vast super-brain run by Ezzie."

"Ezzie ?" the psychiatrist echoed.

"Yes, the man, Ezzie !"

"You—you don't mean Granville Esmond, do you ?"

Laurie felt a constriction in his throat.

"Don't tell me *you* know him ?"

"Know him !" Arlestein laughed. "Why, I've known Ezzie for years. You don't think he's mixed up with this crackpot scheme of yours, do you ?"

Laurie backed away in horror, pointing with trembling finger at the psychiatrist.

"He's got to you!" he sobbed. "He's got to you already! Or probably I brought him with me."

Arlestein stood up. His face was grave now. He touched a button on his desk.

"I'm afraid you may be dangerous, Mr. Rogers," he said. "I regret you will have to be temporarily restrained."

Before Laurie could move, two male nurses had seized him from behind.

"Lobotomy job, boys, I'm afraid," Arlestein said. "Take him away!"

"Wait! Wait!" screamed Laurie. "You've given me no chance to prove the truth. Ring someone I haven't been in contact with—someone who would be impartial—someone neither of us would know—someone who wouldn't be prejudiced against the likeliness of my story."

"Suppose we try the Dean of St. Paul's?" suggested Arlestein dryly. He stretched out a finger and began calmly to dial.

"Could I possibly speak to His Grace?" he asked when the pscreen lit and a secretary appeared.

The secretary said no.

Arlestein persuaded. He pleaded urgency, he pleaded it would take only a minute. He was eloquent with all the inherited eloquence of his race. At length the secretary flashed off.

In his place, the solemn, ascetic features of the Dean appeared.

"Forgive my bothering you, Your Grace," Arlestein said humbly. "But may I just ask you one simple question—do you happen to remember a Mr. Granville Esmond?"

The solemn features relaxed into a smile.

"Old Ezzie?" His Grace asked. "Do I remember old Ezzie? Why, ever since I could walk—"

He was still chuckling affectionately as Laurie was dragged out.

—Brian W. Aldiss

# R A N D O M

*It will be one thing to develop a new mental power, but quite another to control it. Telekinesis, for instance, could well boomerang back on the people trying to use it for their own gain.*

# P O W E R

By SYDNEY J. BOUNDS

---

Mildred Clark watched the clock. At five minutes to six, she placed the cover over her typewriter, used powder and lipstick, put on her coat and hat. At a minute to six she left the office and hurried towards the Underground station.

She had to cross a road to reach the station and the rush-hour traffic was a continuous flow. She waited, growing impatient, tapping the pavement with her toes. The cars swirled past . . .

Irritation turned to anger in Mildred Clark. Damn cars, she thought, *wish they'd crash.*

Two cars obliged. The traffic stopped and Mildred Clark crossed the road.

Rudd and the Doctor were just behind her going down the escalator.

Rudd was powerfully built with broad shoulders ; the Doctor was dapper, excited.



"What did I tell you?" the Doctor said. "You saw that—she's a natural. She's past adolescence and still has the power. We've got to have her!"

Rudd grunted.

"I've been following her for weeks, Doctor, and if she's past adolescence we need a new definition. She sees Gregory Peck films, reads half-a-dozen women's magazines—no books—goes dancing, moves from one boyfriend to the next when the first gets too serious to handle."

"She didn't like her last job," the Doctor murmured, "so the office caught fire. One night a man scared her—he dropped dead."

They were on the train now. Rudd glanced past the edge of his evening paper. Mildred Clark was immersed in a magazine; she was not pretty, nineteen years old, with mouse-coloured hair, the ends all over the place.

She was reading a serial in which the heroine was getting absolutely nowhere with a bronzed, handsome male. She felt deeply for the heroine.

She left the train at Swiss Farm and Rudd and the Doctor went up in the lift with her. They saw her safely home.

The following morning, a young lady drove up to the house and asked for Mildred Clark. She timed it carefully; Mildred was just leaving for the office.

"I'm Janet Webb," said the young lady, smiling. She was attractive, smartly dressed, and very friendly. "I'm employed by the government and am authorized to offer you a position in Department T-One. It's a well-paid post, with good working conditions. Perhaps you'd like to meet my boss and talk it over?"

Mildred was puzzled, but Janet Webb had a carefully cultivated air of friendliness; it was a safeguard as well as an act of persuasion.

"I've nothing to lose, have I?" Mildred said, and stepped into the car.

Janet drove along Whitehall and stopped outside a massive portal with a bronze plaque: WAR OFFICE.

Mildred felt uneasy. "I don't know that I care to work here," she protested.

Janet's smile was radiant. "You've absolutely nothing to worry about. You'll be treated with the greatest respect."

Mildred followed her past the doorman, who saluted without asking for credentials. At the end of a short corridor was a door:

*Department T-One.*

Janet knocked and walked in. "Mildred Clark," she announced.

A tall man rore from behind a broad desk. He had ruddy cheeks and wavy, grey hair. His smile was warm, his hand-shake firm.

"Welcome, Miss Clark," he said smoothly. "I'm very glad you've accepted our offer and I guarantee that you won't regret it." He pulled back a chair for her. "A chocolate, Miss Clark?"

Mildred's eyes lit up at the sight of the huge box.

"Oh, yes," she said. "Please."

"All we want," purred the head of Department T-One, "is for you to be happy. Shall we say, a starting salary of twenty pounds a week?"

Mildred started in alarm.

"I'm a decent girl, I am—there won't be any funny business!"

"You needn't worry," Janet cut in. "It's your *mind* they're interested in."

The house was large and old and surrounded by acres of woodland and a high wall. It was set in an isolated part of the country. They gave Mildred a room and a maid: the room was furnished like a Hollywood film set.

There were other girls living there. Poppy refused to take off the mink they'd given her.

She whispered to Mildred: "Just say what you want and you'll get it . . . they have to keep us happy, see?"

The following morning she saw the Doctor.

"Delighted to have you with us, Miss Clark," he said. "Are you quite happy here? Is there anything you want?" He paused. "Fine, fine! Now let me explain the situation . . ."

Mildred listened carefully but didn't quite grasp what it was all about. She could not really believe that she was a secret weapon.

"The Communist countries are trying the same line, so we just have to do it," the Doctor said briskly. "You see that? You don't want *them* to win the next war?"

There was something about atomics giving a balance of world power, and the next step being telekinesis.

"You have the power, Miss Clark, but as yet no conscious control over it. Our purpose, here, is to give you that control. It is rare for the talent to last beyond adolescence—and that is why you are important."

"I don't understand," Mildred said, baffled.

The Doctor placed his fingertips together and smiled encouragingly.

"You'll get the hang of it in time . . . now, if you'll step into the laboratory, we'll make a few tests."

Mildred was mystified by the dice. PK the Doctor called it and got excited when she scored 'sevens' twelve times in succession. When she read the ESP cards and correctly called her way through the pack he rubbed his hands.

It was not long before she could exchange mental messages with the other girls. By concentrating, she 'thought' a pencil into the air, kept it suspended above the table for several minutes. The table followed . . .

They took her to the firing range and showed her a battery of artillery in the distance.

"The enemy—destroy them!"

Mildred obliged.

Her life was very pleasant. There was TV and a private cinema and magazines and chocolates and new clothes and anything else she thought of asking for. Twice a week there was a dance; the young men were specially imported and well-paid for the risk they took.

Her bank balance grew steadily.

"Are you happy, Miss Clark?"

Five grey-haired men sat in secret session.

"Intelligence reports the Communist poltergeist force is keeping pace with our own," the Minister said, frowning. "Has anyone a suggestion?"

"Strike first—I've said so all along."

The five sat in silence, imagining their poltergeist girls in action.

"Destroy an army, Miss Clark. Destroy a city . . . destroy the enemy . . . destroy . . ."

"You realize," cut in the Director of Department T-One, "that we are completely in the hands of these girls? We can do nothing against them now. They have the ultimate power—they can read our thoughts at will or divert an assassin's bullet. We are no longer the rulers of this country. Why, they could even—"

Mildred Clark began to understand what was required of her. She didn't like the idea of war. She thought it would be nice if Department T-One no longer existed.

—Sydney J. Bounds.

*Richard Wilson is beginning to appear quite frequently within the pages of both our magazines. We like his stories because they often fit into both the science fiction and the fantasy categories—like the one which appears below, published for the first time in magazine form. It originally appeared in Ballantine's Star Science Fiction Stories No. 2.*

## FRIEND OF THE FAMILY

By RICHARD WILSON

---

They had passed a law making babies illegal.

It was on account of the food shortage, the district agent had explained. Everyone had known for decades that the time would come, one year, when there simply would not be enough food to support the mushrooming population of Earth ; and now that time was here.

Thad and Annie had a farm back in the hills and hadn't been able to get to the village that day the agent had explained. The news was brought to them by a neighbour.

"It don't pertain to children that are already born," the neighbour, Lacy, told them. "They're okay. And so are kids that'll be born during the next eleven months. But after that, havin' babies has to stop."

Lacy spoke oracularly, as if he himself represented the government that had made the law. Lacy was an old bachelor who lived by hunting and trapping and trading.

"What are they going to do if people keep on having babies anyway?" Thad asked.

Lacy didn't really remember. He hadn't listened too closely because he wasn't directly concerned. Besides, he'd been doing a bit of dicker-ing for a coonskin, back at the edge of the crowd in the village square, when that point had been covered. But he spoke up without hesitation in answer to Thad's question.

"Destroy 'em, of course. Law's law."

"Oh, no," said Annie.

"Yep," Lacy said. "That's what they'll do. Just like they did with the little pigs back when they had that Blue Eagle law."

"That's pretty drastic," Thad said.

"Gotta be," Lacy said. "Otherwise nobody'd have enough to eat. The agent, he says it's because conservation didn't work out like it was supposed to. Everybody had their chance. But they didn't do their part, so now they gotta be drastic."

"No more babies *ever*?" Annie asked. "After a while they wouldn't have any more people, if they did that."

"Not 'ever,'" Lacy said. "He didn't say 'ever.' He said ten years. By that time, he said, things'd be back in balance."

Thad's shoe made marks in the dust in the clearing in front of their cabin.

"We ain't had no babies yet, Annie and me," he said. "We'd sure admire to have one before it got illegal."

Lacy leered at Annie, who was looking down at the marks her husband was making with his shoe.

"Well," Lacy said with a grin, "you'd better get crackin'."

Somehow, Thad and Annie didn't have a baby while it was still legal. Maybe they tried too hard. The eleven months passed, and then a year. A year and a half later, when it was illegal, Annie realised she was pregnant.

She didn't tell Thad, but after a while he noticed, of course.

"What are we going to do?" she asked.

"Well, we ain't going to turn ourselves in," Thad said. "That's for sure."

"But they'll take it away from us when they find out."

"Then they won't find out," he said. "That's all. We're far enough away from most folks. The ones that do come around—we just won't let them see you."

"That Lacy," she said. "He comes nosing around and everybody knows he's got a mouth as big as a barn door."

"You just leave Lacy to me," her husband said.

The baby picked a thunderstorm to be born in. Annie had a rough time, with no midwife, but after a while the baby was tucked away

in a little cradle Thad had made. Annie was asleep, finally, under a thick pile of covers, and Thad was crooning self-consciously to his mite of a son, when there was a knock at the door.

Thad jumped up, almost tipping over the cradle, and the baby woke with a cry. He soothed it, while the knocking continued, until the infant was quiet again, then pulled a screen in front of the cradle and went to the door.

"Who's there?" he said, opening it a crack and peering out into the rainy darkness.

"Me," said Lacy's voice.

"What do you want?"

"What do I want? What do you think I want? I want to come in out of the rain." He pushed against the door.

Thad held it in place.

"You shouldn't have been out in the rain in the first place." Thad wondered if Lacy had heard the baby cry.

"What kind of talk is that, Thaddie?" He pushed against the door again. "Let me in. I'm soakin' wet."

"No," said Thad. "Go away." He pushed the door shut and latched it, then put the bar across it.

He heard Lacy's voice, hollering and swearing, for a while; then there was silence.

A flash of lightning made Thad turn towards the window and he saw, silhouetted in it, the figure of a man. Then the man was running across the clearing. He was alone and from his gait Thad recognised him as Lacy. He disappeared into the woods.

Thad went back to the cradle. He stared down at the sleeping infant, clumsily tucked in a loose blanket end, and said:

"We're going to have trouble with that Lacy, son."

Thad was at the far edge of his cornfield. It was hot. He took off his hat and mopped his face and neck.

Lacy ambled out of the woods. He had a couple of skins at his belt and carried a sack over his shoulder.

"How's the corn?" he asked.

"Comin' along," said Thad.

"Purty slim pickin's for me. Glad to see somebody's prosperous."

"We get by."

"How's Annie and—"

Thad looked at him sharply.

"She's fine."

"And—?"



"And what?" Thad asked. "What are you hintin' around at, Lacy?"

Lacy smiled, not looking at Thad. He broke off an ear of corn and peeled the husk down and smelled the yellow kernels.

"Purty good corn," he said. "I'd like to have about half a dozen ears a day. And a couple o' turnips. And maybe a few tomatoes. A man needs fresh vegetables in his diet."

Thad's eyes narrowed. "That's right," he said. "I guess we could make a deal. What have you got to offer? We could use some rabbit meat, maybe."

Lacy spat and hit a beetle. "Wasn't thinkin' o' that kind of deal, where I had to give you somethin'."

"That's no kind of deal, that way."

"No?" asked Lacy. "Ain't it?"

"Talk up, man, if you got something to say."

Lacy smoothed the husk back over the kernels and put the ear in his sack. He pulled off another ear.

"Cut that out," Thad said.

"I heard some talk in town," Lacy said, taking six ears in all, "about there bein' a bounty on babies. Illegal babies."

He paused and peered around to see how Thad reacted. Thad managed to keep his face expressionless.

"I collected a bounty once, on a wolf," Lacy said. "It made a handy piece of change. Never dreamed at the time, of course, that some day there'd be a bounty on babies, too."

Thad clenched his fists at his side to keep himself from smashing them into Lacy's evil face.

"Now, about them turnips and tomatoes," Lacy said.

The Director of the Population Planning Agency was reporting to a Congressional sub-committee.

"There has been splendid co-operation in the urban centres," he said. "Progress in the rural areas has been generally satisfactory, too, with the percentage of those who have not conformed to the law no higher than we had expected. Steps are being taken to ensure an increasingly better percentage."

"What kind of steps?" asked the committee chairman. "I've heard rumours that a bounty has been offered for infants born after the grace period."

"That is false," the director said. "Absolutely incorrect. It is true that remuneration has been offered for information leading to the recovery of illegal infants, but this is in no sense a bounty."

"To many people," the chairman said, "it might be considered a distinction without a difference."

"When the infants are—uh—recovered," another congressman asked, "what becomes of them?"

The director nodded significantly in the direction of the press table. "That is a question I should prefer to answer in closed session," he said.

Thad first saw the stranger one morning as he was leading their one cow out to pasture.

Matilda, the cow, had been plodding along, swinging her tail at the flies on her flanks and chewing her cud in rhythm with her steps. The way led through a stand of young trees and leaning against one of them so it bent under his weight the stranger lolled, a twig in his mouth and a funny kind of round hat on his head.

Matilda shied as she saw him and gave a rumble of alarm.

"Morning," said the stranger to Thad.

"Morning," said Thad, surprised but polite.

The stranger was a foot under Thad's height, which made him less than a five-footer. He wore stiff new dungarees and a brand new work shirt with the creases still in them from the way they had been folded in the store. He wore high work shoes that were covered with a film of dust but were also brand new.

The round hat was the only thing that looked as if it had been worn for more than a few hours. It was a bright green and Thad couldn't tell whether it was cloth or leather or what. It might even have been metal. It fitted snug on the stranger's head, coming down almost to the ears on the sides and the eyebrows in front.

Only the stranger didn't have any eyebrows. He didn't have hair anywhere on his head, from what Thad could see.

He had a pale colour, too, as if he wasn't out in the air much, and there was something about the nose that wasn't quite right.

But Thad's manner prohibited staring. He patted Matilda on the rump to comfort her and said:

"My name's Thad Coniker. I don't believe I've seen you anyplace before."

"Probably not," the stranger said. "I just came."

"I make you welcome," Thad said. He refrained from pointing out that the stranger was trespassing on his land. "What do folks call you?"

"Green," the stranger said.

"Like your hat," said Thad.

"Like my hat, yes," Green said, smiling and nodding.

"You're not from the government." Thad made it a statement and realised consciously for the first time that he had no suspicions of the stranger.

"No."

"Do you have a place around here?"

"Not around here."

"Then you must feel free to come to ours—Annie's and mine."

"And the boy's," Green added. "Thank you."

Thad was not alarmed. If Lacy had said that, Thad would have had to clench his fists and grit his teeth against the bitter knowledge, but with Mr. Green it was all right. He didn't understand why; he just knew it was.

"Yes, it's the boy's, too," Thad said. "We'd all be proud to have you come."

"I will," Mr. Green said. "I think I will be able to help you."

"Maybe you could. But I wouldn't want you to come only on that account."

"I'll come with pleasure."

"Anytime," said Thad.

He clucked at Matilda and the cow moved on. The stranger continued to lean against the young tree. He looked after them as they went.

When they were out of sight he spat the twig out of his mouth, unfastened his nose, scratched the skin under it and began to walk back the way Thad had come. It was not until he came in sight of the cabin that he seemed to remember that he was still carrying the nose in his hand. He replaced it quickly, then went on toward the cabin.

Annie said later :

"He knocked and I said who is it and he said Mr. Green, I met your husband, Mrs. Coniker, and I don't know why but I knew it was all right and I made him welcome. He was very polite and talked about the weather a little and the crops and remarked on how well the cow looked and then he saw the baby and he made a big fuss over him."

"And you didn't feel scared?" Thad asked.

"Not even a bit. It was like he was some kind old uncle—though it's hard to guess how old he is."

"What did the baby do?"

"Gurgled like a fool and grinned. He never paid *us* the attention he paid Mr. Green. He just seemed to come all alive for the man, acting about three times as old as he rightly should at his age."

"He told me he'd help us," Thad said, "and the way he said it made me believe him. Did he say anything like that to you?"

"Yes. He said he'd be here when we needed him. He said that just before he left. He didn't say where he was going."

Lacy came around to say he wanted a dozen ears of corn a day, instead of half a dozen. He also wanted twice as many tomatoes and turnips. He'd take some milk, too, he said.

Thad told him he couldn't have them.

"I been giving you what was fair, if blackmail's fair," Thad said. "We wouldn't have enough for ourselves if I gave you any more."

"You'll give them to me," Lacy said, "because you have to. Remember about the baby bounty."

"It's more than you can eat. Why should you take away from folk that need it?"

"No law says I can't sell the extra, is there? I want it, starting to-day. And don't forget the milk. I got a gallon jug in my sack."

Thad tried to be reasonable. "Not the milk," he said. "I'll give you the other, but not the milk."

"You'll give me the milk, too," Lacy said. His voice and his face were ugly. "You'll do everything I say, if you want to keep the younger."

So Thad had to give him the milk, too.

Mr. Green, sitting that night at their table with his hat on, spread the home-churned butter carefully and thinly across the slice of home-baked bread.

"It's excellent, Mrs. Coniker," he said, chewing with pleasure. Then he said, turning to Thad, "Why don't you kill him?"

Annie looked at Thad in alarm, but her husband said:

"My boy's got enough trouble. When he's grown up a bit he can pass for older than he is and nobody need know he's illegal. It'll be bad enough having to lie to keep him alive. I don't want him to grow up with a father who's a murderer."

"It seems to me," Mr. Green said mildly, picking up a crumb from the tablecloth and popping it into his mouth, "it wouldn't be murder in Mr. Lacy's case. It'd be like killing some beast that came out of the woods to threaten your home."

"Killing an animal's just killing," Thad said. "But killing a man is murder."

"In my place," Mr. Green said, "we don't look at it that way. Would it help you out any if I killed Mr. Lacy?"

"No," said Thad before Annie could say anything, as she had seemed about to. "Lacy's my problem, not yours."

"But I said I'd help you, and that makes it my problem, too."

"That wouldn't be the way, Mr. Green, thanks all the same."

"Then I'll have to think of some other way to be useful," Mr. Green said. "I've given my word, you know."

"Have another piece of bread and butter, Mr. Green," Annie said, "since you won't eat anything else."

"No, thank you very much, Mrs. Coniker. I know how little you have, because of that miserable Mr. Lacy, and I won't deprive you further than politeness necessitates. I appreciate your kindness and unselfishness. In my place, we do the same and it makes me feel at home."

"You'll forgive me being personal, Mr. Green, but where is your place? You've never said, you know, and it sounds like it must be far off."

"No forgiveness needed, Mrs. Coniker. It is far off. Very far. On the other side of the moon, you might say."

"You mean in Europe," she said. "I've heard of Europe. It is very far."

"Farther even than Europe, I'm afraid. I would tell you exactly, but you would think I was making it up."

"Oh, no,"

"Then I will tell you. And you must believe me if you possibly can." Mr. Green scratched next to his nose and looked out the window. "You can see part of the way from right here. That star. See it? My place is close to it. About as close to it as your place is to Sol—the Sun. Can you believe that?"

He looked from one to the other, and then to the crib next to the fireplace.

"It's hard to say," Annie said. "Awful hard."

"I don't know," said Thad. "I've heard stories."

"This is a true story," said Mr. Green, smiling. The smile was a sad one. He looked out at the star again. "I wish it weren't, in a way. It's pleasant here and maybe in other circumstances I'd like to stay. But if you've got a place of your own another place is never the same. You see, I'm homesick."

"Poor Mr. Green," Annie said. She felt like patting his arm. Instead she said: "Have another piece of bread and butter. Do."

Mr. Green looked at her very kindly.

"Thank you," he said. "I will."

When he had gone away they talked about it. Thad moved their bed so they could see the star from where they lay.

"I believe him now," Thad said.

"The way he is, so kind and gentle, you've just got to believe everything he says."

"Not many people would believe him, though."

"Maybe that's why he came to us. Poor man, so far away from his own kind."

"But why?" Thad asked, as if it had just occurred to him. "He never told us why."

"That's true. He never did."

"Maybe he's run away. Maybe he done something."

"And how? He never told us how he got here, either, from his place."

"No, he didn't."

"People don't fly."

"They fly in airplanes."

"There's no air up there, between us and his star. I know that much."

"He'll tell us if we ask him," she said. "I'm sure."

"If he comes again. He didn't say he would."

"Oh, he will. I know he will."

"I guess you're right. He's sort of adopted us," Thad said. "Or the other way round, depending on how you look at it."

She was quiet for a time. Then she raised herself up on an elbow to look over toward the cradle.

"The boy's all right, isn't he?"

"He's fine."

"He ought to have a name," she said. "We can't keep on calling him Boy."

"He wants a proper name, given to him in a christening. We'll see he gets it as soon as he can."

"I know. But I can't help thinking. I was wondering."

"What?"

"Would you mind very much if we made Green part of his name?"

"No. Not especially. Not at all. He is his godfather, sort of."

"Maybe we could call him—I'm just wondering about it—maybe Thaddeus Green Coniker."

Thad raised himself up, too, and looked across at the cradle. Then he looked out the window at the star.

"I wouldn't mind," he said.



Lacy looked nervous the next time he appeared to collect his black-mail ration. His eyes flickered to Thad's and away again as he stuffed his corn, turnips, tomatoes and the gallon jug of milk into his sack.

Thad said, "Conscience bothering you, Lacy?"

"Don't get smart with me, Thaddie, 'cause I can make trouble for you. Keep that in mind all the time."

"You got your things. Now get off my land."

"Not till I get what else I came for."

"Whatever it is, you ain't going to get it."

"I think I will. I want the cow."

Thad seemed unable to believe he'd heard right.

"The cow?"

"That's what I said. I know where I can get a good price for her."

"You're crazy. You're just about the craziest man in the world if you think we'll give up our cow. You're just crowding your luck too far, Lacy."

"Either I walk off this place with the cow, or I don't. If I don't, I walk straight to the district agent and tell him you got an illegal baby. And you know what'll happen then. Remember what the Blue Eagle law did to the little pigs. Slaughtered 'em, Thad. That's what they did."

"You better go, Lacy." Thad's voice was ominous. "Better go while you're still walking, or I don't know what'll happen to you."

Lacy backed away, slowly. "I'll go to the agent. I'll tell him. Don't think I won't. Remember the little pigs . . ."

Thad aimed a kick. His heavy shoe caught Lacy on the side of the hip, as he was turning. Lacy cried out in pain and started to run.

"You shouldn't o' done that, Thaddie!" Thad walked slowly after him. "That was your mistake. Now I will go to the agent. You'll see!"

Lacy ran, limping, shouting, his sack jouncing on his back, into the woods.

Thad stopped and watched the spot where Lacy had disappeared. He wondered why he hadn't killed him. He would have, if Lacy had made any direct threat to the baby. He'd have killed him in an instant, and with pleasure. But to kill an old man, on a warm sunny day, on his own land and in sight of the cabin, in cold blood because he *might* tell the district agent, who *might* come out to get the baby, was not something he could have done. Time enough for killing when it was necessary, if it ever was.

Thad turned back toward the house. Mr. Green was coming across the clearing from the other direction. His dungarees looked just as

new and his work shirt just as fresh as when Thad had first seen him, and his green hat as much out of keeping with the rest of his clothes.

Only one thing was different. Mr. Green wasn't wearing his nose.

Thad mentioned this to him, as politely as he could, when they met at the door. Mr. Green appeared to be a trifle embarrassed.

"I lost it," he said. "I can't imagine where. It's a false nose, of course, and I only wore it so I wouldn't look so—foreign." He had two tiny nostrils in the middle of his flat face.

Mr. Green explained again to Annie when they went inside. Annie said she didn't mind. It was how a person was inside that counted, she said.

"I'm different in other ways, too," Mr. Green said. "For instance, how old do you think I am?"

"Thirty—forty, around there," Thad said.

"Thirty hundred would be closer. We live a long time, in my place. Once we thought we'd live forever and when it seemed that way we stopped having children. We didn't want to stop—it just happened, and no one could figure it out except maybe that it was nature balancing things out."

"But now you're dying out," Annie said intuitively, "and you're looking for children to carry on your line."

Thad looked at her in surprise, then at Mr. Green.

"That's exactly right, Mrs. Coniker," he said. "We've gone out all over the universe, each on his own personal mission. A child I found, if he wanted to go back with me, would be my own child, brought up in my own family. There's a Mrs. Green, too, you know. She's back home, waiting for me."

"Remember us to her," said Annie, "when you see her."

"I surely will."

"Do you mean you've been coming around here to see if our boy was the one you wanted?" Thad said. "That you were thinking you'd take him away from us?"

"Only if you wanted me to," Mr. Green said. "Only if you were going to lose him another way and I couldn't help you keep him. Only then, Mr. Coniker."

"I believe you," Thad said. "I'm not angry. I just like to know the facts."

"Naturally."

"How would you take him back with you—if we wanted you to?" asked Annie. To Thad she said: "I saw you and Lacy having that row; heard some of it, too."

"In my ship," Mr. Green said. "It's back in the mountains. I've kept it out of sight so as not to alarm anyone."

"Would he have a good life?"

"The best we could give him, in our noseless way," Mr. Green said. "He'd also have friends his own age, among children adopted by neighbours of ours. It's a good world, Mrs. Coniker."

"Better than this one, at the moment, sounds like," she said.

There was a hollering in the clearing and all of them looked out the window. The baby began to cry in his cradle.

Lacy and two other men were coming. The two men had rifles in their hands.

Thad pulled open the door.

"Get off my land!" he shouted. "Get off or I'll throw you off!"

"You ain't throwing nobody anyplace," Lacy shouted back. "These here is federal officers and they're here to see I get my bounty."

The three men crowded into the cabin.

"There he is!" Lacy said. "Annie's trying to hide him in the cupboard."

Lacy rushed at her as the other men held their rifles ready to fire. Lacy grabbed the child and, cackling crazily, ran out of the door. It happened so fast that Thad tripped as he tried to stop Lacy and fell sprawling across the doorstep.

He was scrambling to his feet to chase Lacy when Mr. Green restrained him with an iron grip on his shoulder.

"Wait," Mr. Green said.

Thad tried to break free, but could not. By now the two men with the rifles had got back the bearings they'd lost when they came into the dimness of the cabin from the bright sunshine. They had their rifles raised and were covering Thad.

"Let go of me, damn it!" Thad shouted at Mr. Green. "What are you helping *them* for?"

Lacy had stopped some distance away from the house, short of the woods, and was holding the baby by an arm and a leg, as if it were the body of a heavy animal he'd taken from a trap. The baby's blanket had fallen to the ground and it was crying. Lacy seemed undecided what to do next.

He called to the men with the rifles, "You comin'?"

"I'll kill him," said Thad, ignoring the rifles pointed at him and struggling to break out of Mr. Green's hold. "Please let me go kill him."

"Hold on, mister," one of the officers said. "We don't want to have to hurt you or your missus. It's just the baby we want. Now don't make trouble and you'll get none from us."

He and his companions started to edge away toward Lacy, still keeping Thad covered.

With a final desperate effort, Thad broke loose. He sprawled headlong on the ground, then pulled his feet under him and sprinted for Lacy.

One of the federal men swung his rifle around. He got Thad's back squarely in the sights. He fired.

Mr. Green whipped off his hat and made a gesture.

Annie's voice was cut off in mid-scream. At once, everything was silent and motionless.

Annie was standing there, her mouth open, her hands half-raised as if to pull Thad back. Thad was frozen like a stop-action photograph of an athlete streaking for the tape in the hundred-yard dash. Beyond him, Lacy was clutching the baby to him against Thad's attempt to take it from him. One officer was posed like a statue in a wax museum, leaning into his rifle. The other man was stopped in the action of bringing his rifle to his shoulder.

In the centre of the macabre tableau Annie thought she could see the sun glinting off a rifle bullet hanging in the air, but destined to bury itself in Thad's back.

The breeze had stopped, the birds were silent, the trees were picture-still. Only Mr. Green was moving.

He walked over to Thad and gently nudged him so he fell over on his face. Then Mr. Green went leisurely to Lacy and took the baby from him. He strolled back toward Annie. The top of his head, no longer covered by his green hat, was glowing strangely. The baby's arms and legs were stiff as a doll's and it wore on its frozen features an expression of terror.

Mr. Green cradled the baby in one arm, close to Annie's half-raised hands. Then he looked around, as if to satisfy himself that everything was in order, and put his hat back on.

Instantly everything came alive. There seemed to be a roar of sound, rushing into the vacuum of silence, which gradually restored itself to its separate parts—the crack of the rifle, the song of the birds, the whisper of the winds and the rustling of the leaves.

Annie's arms took the terrified child. Mr. Green pushed her into the cabin ahead of him.

Thad clawed at the ground, his arms and legs flailing.

Lacy screamed as the rifle bullet tore into his chest.

The investigators didn't know what to make of it.

Lacy, who had brought the complaint originally, was dead, killed accidentally by an officer's wild shot. The infant, if there had ever been one, was nowhere. The alleged parents, Mr. and Mrs. Coniker, maintained that there never had been a child—only an old doll the woman had kept from her childhood and which she pretended was a

baby. The officers *thought* they had seen a live baby, but Lacy had run off so fast with it they couldn't be sure.

The man without a nose? He was a funny one. They'd seen him, too, or thought they had, but he'd also disappeared.

They held an inquest and absolved the officer who'd shot Lacy. They buried the old trapper. They apologized to the Conikers. And they went away.

Thad finished trimming the wick and lit the kerosene lamp. He hung it on its hook in the low ceiling and sat down at the table. Annie was looking at the empty crib.

"He didn't say he'd be back?" Thad asked.

"No. He said it was time to go and I gave him some extra diapers and a bottle of oil. There wasn't much time. All those crazy things were happening outside."

"And then what did he do?"

"He sat down with the boy in his lap and clucked at him—and the boy laughed, the way he does—and then they both faded away."

"Just faded away?"

"Fainter and fainter," Annie said. "After a while I could see through them. Both of them were smiling and looking pleased with everything. And then they weren't there any more."

"And you think it's all right?"

"I'm sure it is," she said.

"I wish I was sure."

There was a whooshing sort of sigh from outside. Thad and Annie looked out the window but it was too dark to see anything. Then there was a knock at the door.

Mr. Green stood there. He wasn't wearing his dungarees or his work shirt or his high shoes any more. Or his nose. He had on a shimmering green cloak that reached from his shoulders to his feet. And the green hat, glowing a bit in the semi-darkness, went with it perfectly.

"I had to leave in rather a hurry," Mr. Green said.

"Where's the baby?" asked Annie.

"Out in the ship. He's fine. We're ready to go now."

"The ship," Thad said.

"Yes. I'm afraid it made a mess of your cornfield when I set it down. Careless of me."

"Can we see the baby before you go?" Annie asked.

"Of course," Mr. Green said. "He's asleep, though."

"Oh."

Annie looked down at the floor and Mr. Green was silent for a moment.

"You know, I've been thinking," he said then. "There's no reason why you can't all come along, if you want to."

"Come along?" Thad said.

"With the boy and me. There's plenty of room, both in the ship and at home. I know Mrs. Green would love to have you."

"What would we do there?"

"Be parents to your child—and any other children you might like to have. Mrs. Green and I don't necessarily have to adopt the boy. We'd be just as pleased to be his grandparents. We could adopt you two instead."

Thad looked at his wife.

"What do you think, Annie?"

"What about the cow?" she asked. "We couldn't leave her..."

"That's right," said Thad. "I almost forgot."

"Bring her, too," Mr. Green said. "Of course."

"All right," said Thad, as if that decided everything.

"I'll have to pack," said Annie.

Their friend beamed. "Everything you'll need is in the ship. Except—you might bring some of your home-baked bread. And I know Mrs. Green would be pleased if you could give her the recipe."

Annie put the last two loaves in an old flour sack. Tomorrow would have been baking day. Thad turned down the wick of the kerosene lamp and blew out the flame.

They went out to the ship.

—Richard Wilson



*It is a pleasant experience for us to present a fantasy story by a young up and coming American author who has been making quite a name for himself during the past year or so. There will be more stories by Harlan Ellison in the near future —meanwhile read on and see what a little wishful thinking can do.*

# RAIN, RAIN, GO AWAY

By HARLAN ELLISON

---

Sometimes I wish I were a duck, mused Hobert Krouse.

Standing in front of his desk, looking out the window at the amount of water the black sky had begun to let flow, his thoughts rolled in the same trough made for them years before.

"Rain, rain, go away, come again another . . ." he began, *sotto voce*.

"Krouse! Come away from that window and get back to those weather analyses, man, or you'll be out *walking* in that, instead of just looking at it!" The voice had a sandpaper edge, and it rasped across Hobert's senses in much the same way real sandpaper might. Hobert gasped involuntarily and turned. Mr. Beigen stood, florid and annoyed, framed in the big walnut timbers of the entrance to his office.

"I—I was just looking at the rain, sir. You see, my predictions *were* correct. It *is* going to be a prolonged wet spell . . ." Hobert began, obsequiously sliding back into his swivel chair.

"Balderdash, man," Mr. Beigen roared, "nothing of the sort! I've told you time and again, Krouse, leave the predictions to the men

who are paid for that sort of thing. You just tend to your checking, and leave the brainwork to men who have the equipment. Prolonged rain, indeed! All my reports say fair.

"And let's have that be the *last* time we see you at something other than your job during working hours, Krouse. Which are eight-thirty to five, six days a week," he added.

With a quick glance across the rest of the office, immobilizing every person there with its rockiness, Beigen went back into his office, the door slamming shut with finality.

Hobert thought he caught a fragment of a sentence, just as the door banged closed. It sounded like, "Idiot," but he couldn't be sure.

Hobert did not like the tone Mr. Beigen had used in saying it was the *last time* he wanted to see him away from his desk. It sounded more like a promise than a demand.

The steady pound of the rain on the window behind him made him purse his lips in annoyance. Even though his job was only checking the weather predictions sent down from the offices upstairs against the messages sent out by the teletype girls, still he had been around the offices of Havelock, Beigen and Elsesser long enough to take a crack at predicting himself.

Even though Mr. Beigen was the biggest man in the wholesale farm supply business, and Hobert was one small link in a chain employing many hundreds of people, still he didn't have to scream that way, did he? Hobert worried for a full three minutes, until he realized that the stack of invoices had been augmented by yet another pile from the Gloversville, Los Angeles and Topeka teletypes. He began furiously trying to catch up. Something which he would never quite be able to do.

Walking home in the rain, his collar turned up, his bowler pulled down tight over his ears the tips of his shoes beginning to lose their shine from the water, Hobert's thoughts began to take on a consistency much like the angry sky above him.

Eight years in the offices of Havelock, Beigen and Elsesser had done nothing for him but put sixty-eight dollars and fifty-five cents into his hand each week. The work was an idiot's chore, and though Hobert had never finished college, still it was a job far beneath his capabilities.

Hobert's section of the firm was one of those little services rendered to farmers within the reach of the company's services. A long-range weather forecast for all parts of the country, sent free each week to thousands of subscribers.

A crack of thunder split Hobert's musings, forcing him to a further awareness of the foul weather. Rain had soaked him from hat crown to shoe soles and even got in through his upturned collar, <sup>run down</sup> his back in chilly threads. He began to wish there might be <sup>some</sup> one waiting home for him with the newspaper (the one he had bought at the corner was now a sodden mass) and his slippers, but he knew there would not be.

Hobert had never married—he had just not found *the* girl he told himself must come to him. In fact, the last affair he could recall having had was five years before, when he had gone up to Bear Mountain for two weeks. She had been a Western Union telegraph operator named Alice, with very silky chestnut hair, and for a while Hobert had thought perhaps. But he had gone back to New York and she had gone back to Trenton, New Jersey, without even a formal goodbye, and Hobert despaired of ever finding *The One*.

He walked down West 52nd to Seventh Avenue, scuffing his feet in irritation at the puddles which placed themselves so he could not fail to walk through them, soaking his socks. At 50th he boarded the subway uptown and all the way sat brooding.

Who does Beigen think he is, Hobert seethed within himself. I've been in that office eight years, three months and . . . well, I've been there well over eight years, three months. Who does he think he's pushing around like that? I may be a little smaller, but I'll be (his mind fortified itself) *damned* (his mind looked around in embarrassment to see if anyone had noticed) if I'll take treatment like that. I'll—I'll *quit*, that's what I'll do. I'll quit. Then where will he be? Who'll he get to fill my job as capably as I can?

But even as he said it, he could see the ad. in the *Herald-Tribune* the night he would resign:

OFFICE Boy-clk, 18-20 exc. future \$40 no exp. nec. Havelock, Beigen & Elsesser 229 W 52.

He could see it so clearly in his mind because that had been the ad to which he had replied, eight years, three months and an undetermined number of weeks before.

The mindless roar of the train hurtling through the subway dimmed for Hobert and, as happens to everyone occasionally, everything summed up for him. The eight years summed up. His life summed up.

"I'm a failure." He said it aloud, and heads turned toward him, but he didn't notice. He said it again his his mind, clearer this time, for it was true and he knew it. I'm a failure.

I've never been to Puerto Rico or India or even to Trenton, New Jersey, he thought. The furthest away from this city I've been is

Bear Mountain, and that was only for two weeks. I've never really loved anyone—except Mother, he hastened to add; and she's been gone thirteen years now—and no one has ever really loved me.

When the line of thoughts had run itself out, Hobert looked up, misty-eyed, and saw that he had gone past his station. He got off, walked over and took the downtown train back to West 110th.

In his room, cramped by books and periodicals so that free space was nearly non-existent Hobert removed his wet hat and coat hung them near the radiator, and sat down on the bed, which served as a couch. I wish something truly unusual would happen to me, thought Hobert. I wish something so spectacular would happen that everyone would turn as I went down the street, and say, "There goes Hobert Krouse; what a *man*!" And they would have awe and wonder in their eyes. I wish it would happen to me just once. "Every man is entitled to fame at least once in his lifetime." He said it with force, for he believed it. But nothing happened, and Hobert went to bed that night with the wind howling through the space between the apartment buildings and with the rain beating against his window.

Perhaps it will wash some of that dirt off the outside, he mused, thinking of the window that had not been clean since he had moved in. But then, it was five floors up and the custodian wouldn't hire a window-washer and it was too dangerous out there for Hobert to do it.

Sleep began to press down on him, the sure feel of it washing away his worries of the day. Almost as an incantation he repeated the phrase he had remembered from his childhood, the phrase he had murmured thousands of times since. "Rain, rain, go away, come again another day." He began the phrase again, but sleep cut it off in mid-thought.

It rained all that week, and by Sunday morning, when Hobert emerged from the brownstone face of his building, the ground around the one lone tree growing slantwise on the sloping 110th sidewalk was mushy and runny. The gutters were swollen with flowing torrents Hobert looked up at the darkened sky which was angry even at eleven in the morning, with no trace of sun.

In annoyance he ran through the "Rain, rain, go away," nonsense and trudged up the hill to the corner of Broadway for breakfast.

In the little restaurant, his spread-bottom drooping over a stool too small for his pear shape, Hobert gave huge traditional leers to Florence, the redhead behind the counter, and ordered the usual: "Two up, ham steak, coffee, cream, Florence."

As he ate his eggs, Hobert returned again to his wistful dreams of a few evenings previous.

"Florence," he said, "you ever wish something spectacular would happen to you?" He pushed a mouthful of toast and ham around his tongue to get the sentence out.

Florence looked up from her duty: putting rock-hard butter squares on paper pads. "Yeah, I useta wish somethin'd happen ta me," she pushed a string of red hair back into place, "but it never did." She shrugged.

"Like what did you wish?" inquired Hobert.

"Oh, *you* know. Silly stuff, like whyn't Mahlon Brando come in here an' grab me an' like that. Or whyn't I win a millyun bucks in the Irish Sweepstakes and come back here some aftuhnoon wearin' a mink stole and flip the end of it in that stinkin' Erma Geller's kisser. *You* know." She went back to the butter.

Hobert knew. He had made equivalent wishes himself, with particulars slightly changed. It had been Gina Lollobrigida and a \$250 silk shantung suit like Mr. Beigen owned, when *he* had daydreams.

He finished the eggs and ham, wiped up the last little drippings of egg yellow, bolted his coffee, and, wiping his mouth with his paper napkin, said, "Well, see you tomorrow, Florence."

She accepted the exact change he left for the bill, noted the usual fifteen cents under the plate and said, "Ain'tcha comin' in for dinner tonight?"

Hobert assumed an air of bored detachment. "No, no, I think I shall go downtown and take in a show tonight. Or perhaps I shall dine at The Latin Quarter or Lindy's. With pheasant under glass and caviar and some of that famous Lindy's cheesecake. I shall decide when I get down there." He began to walk out, joviality in his walk.

"Oh, ya *such* a character," laughed Florence, behind him.

But the rain continued, and Hobert only went a few streets down Broadway where the storm had driven everyone off the sidewalks, with the exception of those getting the Sunday editions. "Lousy day," he muttered under his breath. Been like this all week, he observed to himself. That ought to teach that bigmouth Beigen that maybe I can predict as well as his high-priced boys upstairs. Maybe *now* he'll listen to me!

Hobert could see Mr. Beigen coming over to his desk, stammering for a moment, then, putting his arm around Hobert's shoulders—which Hobert carefully ignored—telling Hobert he was terribly sorry and he would never scream again, and would Hobert forgive him for his rudeness and here was a fifteen dollar raise and a job upstairs in the analysis department.

Hobert could see it all. Then the wetness of his socks, clinging to his ankles, made the vision fade. Oh, rain, rain !

The movie was just opening, and though Hobert despised Barbara Stanwyck, he went in to kill the time. It was lonely for a pot-bellied man of forty-six in New York without any close friends and all the current books and magazines read.

Hobert *tsk-tsked* all the way through the picture, annoyed at the simpleton plot. He kept thinking to himself that if he had one wish he would wish she never made another picture.

When he emerged, three hours later, it was afternoon and the rain whipped into the alcove behind the ticket booth drenching him even before he could get onto the street. It was a cold rain, wetter than any Hobert could remember, and thick, with no space between drops, it seemed. As though God were tossing down all the rain in the heavens at once.

Hobert began walking, humming to himself the little rain, rain ditty. His mind began trying to remember how many times he had uttered that series of words. He failed, for it stretched back to his childhood. Everytime he had seen a rainfall he had made the same appeal. And he was surprised to realise now that it had worked almost uncannily, many times.

He could recall one sunny day when he was twelve, that his family had set aside for a picnic. It had suddenly darkened and begun to come down scant minutes before they were to leave. Hobert remembered having pressed himself up flat against the front room windows, one after another, wildly repeating the phrase over and over. The windows had been cold, and his nose had felt funny, all flattened up that way. But after a few minutes it had worked. The rain had stopped, the sky had miraculously cleared, and they went to Huntington Woods for the picnic. It hadn't been a really good picnic, but that wasn't important. What *was* important was that *he* had stopped the rain with his own voice.

For many years thereafter Hobert had believed that. And he had applied the rain, rain ditty as often as he could, which was quite often. Sometimes it never seemed to work, and others it did. But whenever he got around to saying it, the rain never lasted too long afterwards.

Wishes, wishes, wishes, ruminated Hobert. If I had one wish, what would I wish ? Would the wish really come true ?

Or do you have to keep repeating your wish ? Is that the secret ? Is that why some people get what they want eventually, because they make the same wish, over and over, the same way till it comes true ? Perhaps we all have the ability to make our wishes come true, but we



must persist in them, for belief and the strength of your convictions is a powerful thing. If I had one wish, what would I wish? I'd wish that . . .

It was then, just as Hobert saw the Hudson River beginning to overflow onto Riverside Drive, rising up and up over the little park along the road, that he realised.

"Oh, my goodness!" cried Hobert, starting up the hill as fast as he could.

"Rain, rain, go away, come again another day."

Hobert said it, sprayed his throat, and made one more chalk mark on the big board full of marks. He said it again, and once more marked.

It was odd. All that rain *had* gone away, only to come another day. The unfortunate part was that it *all* came back the same day. Hobert was—literally speaking—up the creek. He had been saying it since he was a child, how many times he had no idea. The postponements had been piling up for almost forty-six years, which was quite a spell of postponements. The only way he could now stop the flood of rain was to keep saying it, and say it one more time than all the times he had said it during those forty-six years. And the next time all forty-six years plus the one before plus another. And so on. And so on.

The water was lapping up around the cornice of his building, and Hobert crouched further into his rubber raft on its roof, pulling the big blackboard toward him repeating the phrase chalking, spraying occasionally.

It wasn't bad enough that he was forced to sit there repeating, repeating, repeating all day, just to stop the rain, there was another worry nagging Hobert's mind.

Though it had stopped raining now, for a while, and though he was fairly safe on the roof of his building, Hobert was worried. For when the weather became damp, he invariably caught laryngitis.

—Harlan Ellison

# HERMA

*It is a significant fact that many leading novelists have used fantasy as a background to their plots and it would appear that there is something intriguing about such possibilities when the author is not bound by any hard and fast rules. John Boland, who has had two novels published recently by Michael Joseph Ltd.—White August last year and No Refuge quite recently, now enters the short story field.*

By **JOHN BOLAND**

---

"William! H.D. tells me that you did not go to bed until five past ten last night. That's the third time you've been late this month."

"I was working on X7, my love."

Hildea Lamphrey drew her great bulk up to her most disapproving height. Her small eyes, set in a large round face, suddenly glinted with suspicion. "That's what you always say. But H.D. told me weeks ago that you'd almost finished."

William flushed, his weak eyes unhappy. "I—I am having trouble making the digestive system, my love."

Hildea snorted. "Don't be disgusting!" She hesitated, still suspicious. "You're not wasting your time on inventing gadgets for industrial use, are you? I want my house-servant first."

He blinked nervously. "The—the gadgets, as you call them, my dear, have been very profitable," he said mildly.

"Fat lot of good they've done me! I still have to slave my fingers to the bone day and night, trying to keep this mausoleum going, and looking after your comfort."

"We could get a servant—"

Mrs. Lamphrey raised a podgy hand. "Now don't start that again. There's quite enough work without having another man to feed." She paused ominously. "And as for a woman—"

Doctor Lamphrey sighed. The first fifty times he'd protested, but by now he knew that it was useless. It had all been very unfortunate, and it had not made life with Hildea any easier. Four years ago, while Mrs. Lamphrey had gone to town to do the week's shopping, a girl hiker had got lost on the moor which surrounded the house. The girl had fallen into a stream, wrenching her ankle, and she had managed to hobble her way to the house, where William had looked after her.

He had given her a bathrobe to wear while her clothes dried, and he had rendered first aid treatment to the girl's minor injuries. It was while he was rubbing some ointment on the girl's bruised leg that Mrs. Lamphrey returned for the purse she had forgotten.

The rumble of a rum-soaked bass coming from the hall broke in on Mrs. Lamphrey's comments about women. Her lips tightened in a thin line as H.D. lurched into the room.

With a skin like glazed china, H.D.'s body was egg-shaped. The body, standing on end and slightly larger than a rugby football, was held upright by four spidery legs, one sprouting from each of the cardinal points at the thickest part of the body. He had three eyes, arranged like a traffic signal, and the top of his dome housed a large, moist mouth. H.D. was dressed in a kilt, and wore a monocle in his top eye.

"What ho, shipmates, somebody hailed me? What's to do? Has the Doc bin sailing against the wind again?" H.D. had an omniverous appetite for sea fiction. He stood there, hiccuping gently and swaying as he tried to adjust the monocle with the toes of his north foot.

"No one called you, H.D."

He regarded her gravely. "Didn't they now, Captain. That's funny, because I could have sworn as I heard—" His voice trailed away as he tried again with the monocle. At last he had it settled to his satisfaction. "As I'm here, Captain, I might as well make me report." He belched. "I regret to report, Captain, that there's no entry in me Log about strange craft. No female's come aboard within this last twenty-four hours, I'll stake me Davy on it." He sighed heavily. "More's the pity. Every man needs a mate."

Mrs. Lamphrey dismissed him. "That will do, H.D. Go and finish your watch." As the sound of H.D.'s booming voice faded, Hildea shook herself in disgust. "Horrible creature! He's been drinking again. I could smell the rum on his breath from here."

"You must be mistaken, dear. You know there isn't a drop of spirits in the house."

She glared at William. "If you were a decent type of man, a man to be trusted, I could get rid of H.D. But I can't spend all my time watching you."

"There's really no need, my love—"

"William, I am going to inspect X7."

"It isn't finished."

"So you say. But I want to see for myself."

William led the way to the laboratory at the rear of the house. The laboratory, a long, low building of red brick, looked from the outside rather like an elongated garage; inside it was a glitter of white tiles, glass and chromium. Rows of glass cases and cabinets stood in orderly procession along the length of the floor. Most of the cabinets were empty, but here and there one was filled with instruments, bottles and phials of all sizes and shapes.

At the far end of the room one of the cases had its contents covered by a white sheet. William moved up to this case, lowered one of the glass sides, and reached inside. Reverently he lifted the sheet.

"This is X7, my love," he breathed.

Mrs. Lamphrey leaned over. "Well, it certainly *looks* human," she admitted grudgingly.

X7 was undoubtedly human in shape. Four feet long, with black hair almost the same length, it had dark brown skin which was deeply corrugated with wrinkles. Hildea poked its chest with a finger. The skin was warm and had a rubbery hardness. "Yes, it's certainly better than your other attempts." She stopped. "You said it was to be a man!"

The Doctor coughed apologetically. "I had intended it so, my love, but I'm afraid it hasn't quite worked out as I'd hoped. Entirely my fault that he lacks certain attributes, my dear. I miscalculated the hormone content. I over-estimated with H.D. And this time I went too far the other way."

"Hm!" Mrs. Lamphrey regarded the figure dubiously. "Well, maybe he's better the way he is. But he isn't very tall. Will he be strong enough, under the circumstances?"

"Oh, yes, my love. I guarantee that Herma will be strong enough to carry out any task in the house."

"Herma?"

"I thought it an appropriate name, my dear."

Mrs. Lamphrey regarded the wrinkled body once more. "Hm. Yes . . . Quite . . . Well, if you're sure it will be able to do the housework . . ."

"He will, I assure you. I am sorry he is so small ; actually I'd designed him to be at least a foot taller. Then there wouldn't have been any wrinkles, the skin would have filled out." He brooded over his masterpiece for a moment. "The hair grew rather longer than I expected. But of course, this is not as yet an exact science ; there is still much experimental work to be done."

"As he's smaller, it won't cost so much to feed him."

William shuffled uncomfortably. "I—I am afraid that feeding Herma will be a lengthy process, my dear. I—I told you that I haven't been able to manage a proper digestive system—"

"You mean it's going to be expensive ?"

"Oh, no, not that," the Doctor said hastily. "It's just that it will take a long time." He swallowed. "About two or three hours every evening."

Mrs. Lamphrey accepted gracefully. "Well, if you couldn't do any better, it's nothing to do with me. You'll have to be the one to feed him."

William looked down, scraping the toe of one shoe on the gleaming floor. "Very well, dear."

"And you'd better put one of your old suits on him. He isn't decent the way he is, even the way he is."

Two days later William led Herma into the sitting-room where Mrs. Lamphrey was reading in an armchair, and introduced Herma to her. Clad in one of William's old suits, with the sleeves and trouser legs turned up, and with his black hair piled in a pyramid on top of his head, Herma seemed glad to be alive, for he grinned unceasingly. From the mass of wrinkles that was his face, there stared out in startling incongruity beautiful, youthful blue eyes above a set of perfect teeth.

Eagerly the Doctor demonstrated Herma's capabilities. First he drew the curtains, then opened them. "I have just drawn the curtains," William explained slowly to Herma, "and then I opened them. I want you to do the same."

Herma bowed. "To hear is to obey, master." His voice was rather like the sound of a gramophone record being played too slowly. He moved smoothly to the window and adjusted the curtains, exactly as William had done.

"Hm." Mrs. Lamphrey struggled to her feet, wheezing with the strain, and brushed the Doctor to one side. She opened and shut the door, telling Herma what she was doing. "Now you do it," she ordered.

Bowing, Herma said : "To hear is to obey, master."

"Master!" Hildea stared in angry astonishment, first at Herma, then at William.

"I'm sorry, my love," William said quickly, "but that's all I've been able to get him to say. Er—I think you'll agree that it is an understandable error? I mean, you can understand his being a bit confused, can't you?"

Mrs. Lamphrey reluctantly accepted the explanation and carried on with the test. Herma did everything that was asked of him, once he had been given a demonstration. Peeling potatoes, making the beds, stoking the boiler, scrubbing, ironing, darning, and even cooking. Next morning Mrs. Lamphrey was woken by someone entering her bedroom. It was Herma, bringing her a cup of tea. He set down the tea, pulled the curtains, started the bath-water, and then went downstairs to prepare breakfast. For Mrs. Lamphrey the rest of the day was so pleasant that she was even polite to William for a time. Only one small irritation marred the perfection of the day: every time Herma answered her, the gravelly voice said: "To hear is to obey, master."

But after a couple of days Mrs. Lamphrey accepted the small eccentricity, for life had become the dream of comfort she had always desired. As soon as she finished breakfast she found her armchair in the sitting-room drawn up to the fire, the romantic novel of the moment on the arm of the chair, a large box of chocolates on the other arm.

Herma was an excellent cook, and everything would have been perfect but for the friction between Herma and H.D. Mrs. Lamphrey was about to insist that H.D. be locked away when she discovered that Herma could fend for himself. She came upon H.D. lurking in a dark corner of the hall, a handkerchief pressed to his middle eye, which was blackened.

"It serves you right, H.D. I've got no sympathy for you at all."

After another small upset, during which H.D. got his top and bottom eyes closed by well-aimed punches, he satisfied himself by swearing at Herma, but not loud enough for the wrinkled little man to hear.

"Neither fish, nor flesh, nor good red herring, me hearties," H.D. would mutter to himself as he watched Herma from a safe distance. But one day Herma overheard him and confronted H.D.

"What you say, huh? You make joke of me?"

H.D. smoothed his kilt, adjusted his monocle, took a deep breath, and bawled: "I said that you are neither fish, nor flesh, nor good red herring." His courage evaporated as Herma seized him and he began to scream.



Mrs. Lamphrey dropped her novel as the appalling noise vibrated through the house. As quickly as she could manage she got to the kitchen, where she was relieved to find Herma unharmed. H.D. lay trussed and gagged in a large saucepan on the stove, and Herma was just setting the egg-timer to "Very hard-boiled."

A subdued H.D., wringing water from his kilt, listened to Mrs. Lamphrey's tirade. "I shan't come to your rescue again," she threatened. "If Herma punishes you it will be no more than you deserve." She managed a nod of approval to Herma, then went back to the reality of her romantic fiction.

There was no more outward trouble, and the household settled down to a regular, quiet routine. The relationship between husband and wife was easier than it had been for many years; Hildea's manner towards her husband became quite pleasant, and, in basking in her approval, William had changed.

He was no longer timid, but had developed an air of importance, strutting about the house and making sure that Herma was carrying out all the necessary duties competently. From time to time during the day William would consult his watch and excuse himself while he went to see that such-and-such a task had been done. He would disappear for a quarter of an hour, then return, looking satisfied, Hildea merely nodding briefly as he told her what had been done.

They no longer spent much of the evenings together, for William had to feed Herma. Half an hour after dinner had been eaten William would consult his watch and rise to his feet.

"Herma will have finished the dishes by now, my love," he would say. "So I'll go and give him his evening meal." William no longer spoke apologetically; his words had the ring of mild authority. "No point in disturbing you again, my dear, so I'll say good-night."

H.D., singing a sea shanty under his breath, followed William into the laboratory. In one corner there was a large piece of apparatus consisting of glass retorts and tubes, connected by spirals of copper piping. Inside the retorts a dark brown liquid was bubbling merrily, and as the Doctor turned a tap and held a bottle to drain off some of the contents, H.D.'s eyes glittered with anticipation.

Ten minutes later the strains of "*What shall we do with the drunken sailor?*" died away in a hiccup. Cautiously, William reached into the glass case where H.D. was lying with two legs stuck straight out, and removed the empty bottle. The egg-like creature was fast asleep, all its eyes closed, a drunken, snoring hiccup coming from its open mouth.

"Completely bottled," William whispered in satisfaction. He looked across at the miniature distillery, a gentle smile on his lips. Hildea

believed that he used it to make Herma's food and he silently blessed her innocence.

He opened the door and admitted Herma, handing the little man a huge flask containing a clear liquid. Herma carried the flask to the far end of the laboratory, then, from a chest, he took out a large rug and a heap of cushions, setting the rug on the floor and placing the cushions on it in a pile.

William was bending over another chest and five minutes later, dressed in a loose-flowing silk robe, and with a turban on his head, he watched Herma drink the clear liquid. The result was immediate and extraordinary, for the moment he took the flask from his lips, Herma began to grow in all directions.

Twin hummocks began to rise underneath his waistcoat and the wrinkles on his face smoothed out as the skin became taut. He grew taller, shedding years of apparent age with every inch he gained until the face was smooth and beautiful with youth. It was as though someone with a bicycle pump had inflated Herma to the correct size.

Herma stood before William, bowing deeply. Nonchalantly, William puffed at his hookah, studying the creature in front of him. Finally he indicated a pile of seven silken scarves, each one a different colour. "Put those on and dance."

Herma bowed. "To hear is to obey, master." Even her voice had changed. It was now pitched an octave higher, and her words came more quickly. She retired behind a screen and a few moments later came from behind it, clad only in the seven coloured scarves.

Gracefully she began to dance in front of the carpet where William was sitting cross-legged, puffing at the hookah. When the dance was completed she sank into a deep obeisance, her forehead touching the floor. William, his hand trembling slightly, put down the mouthpiece of the hookah and gave another order.

Herma raised her head and smiled. "To hear is to obey, master," she said.

—John Boland

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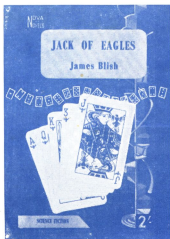
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