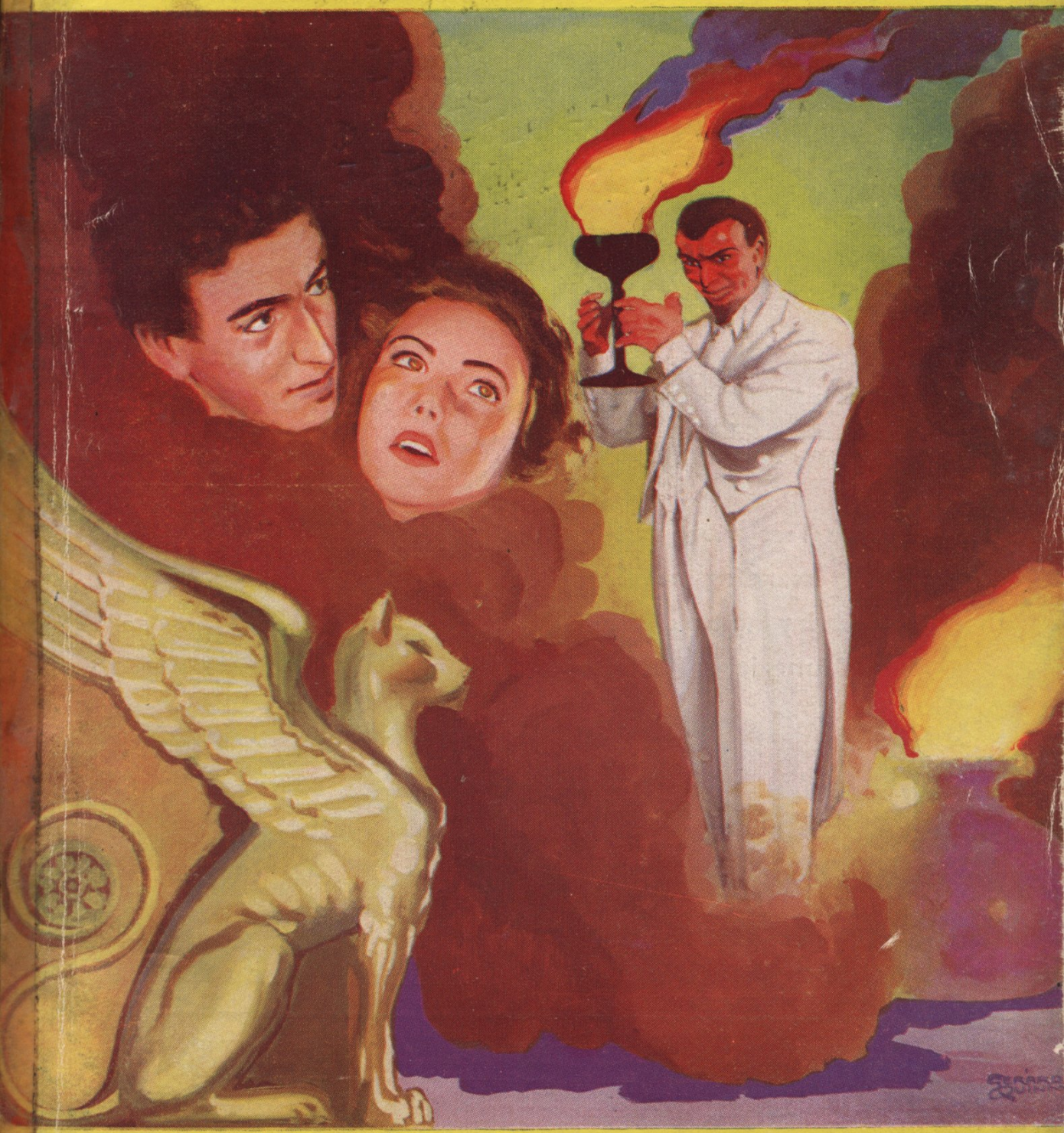
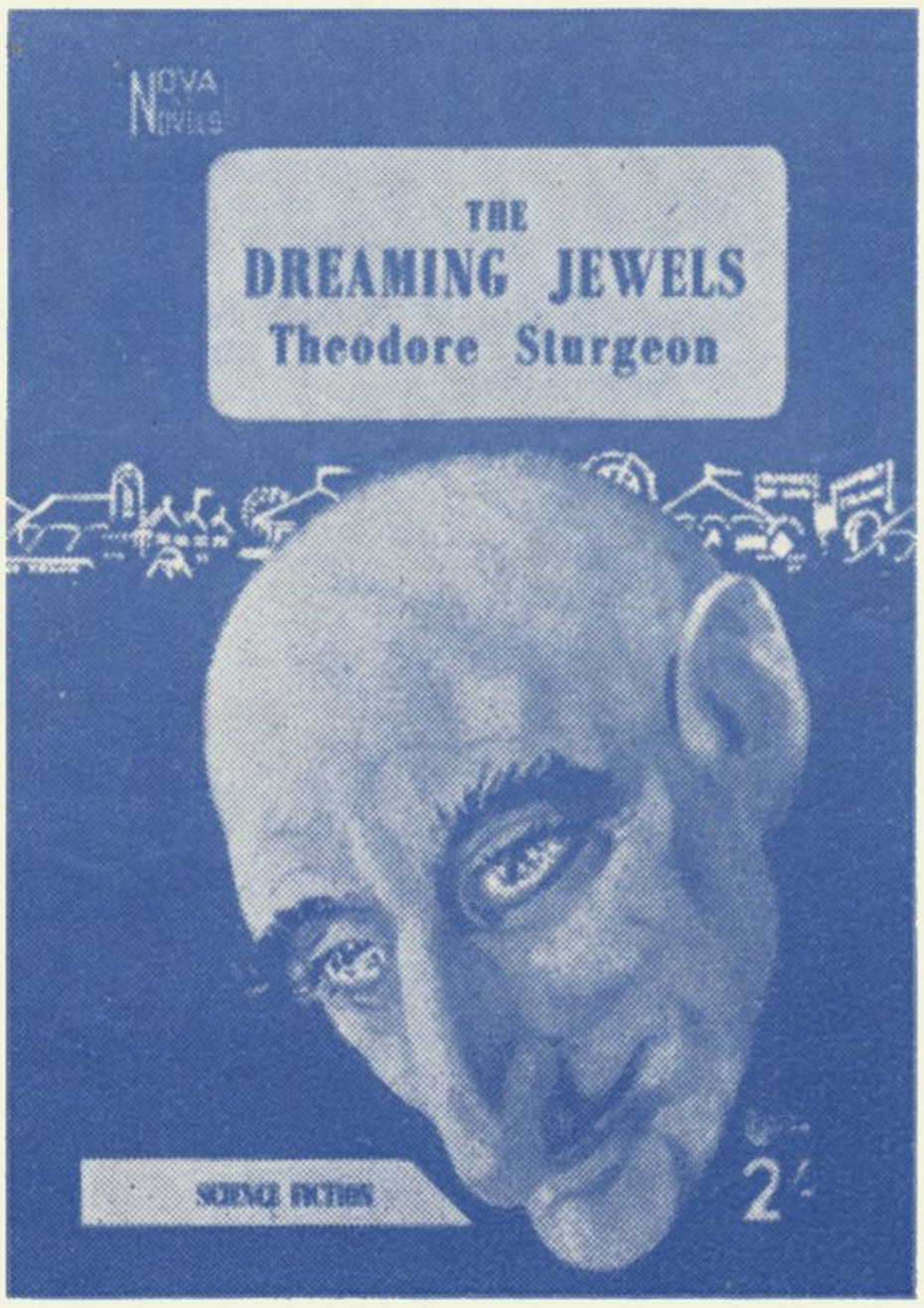
Science Fantasy

No. 21
VOLUME 7
2/-



BRUNNER ★ ALDISS ★ CHANDLER ★ KIPPAX

NOW ON SALE



The Second two NOVA NOVELS

★

The DREAMING JEWELS

by Theodore Sturgeon

JACK OF EAGLES

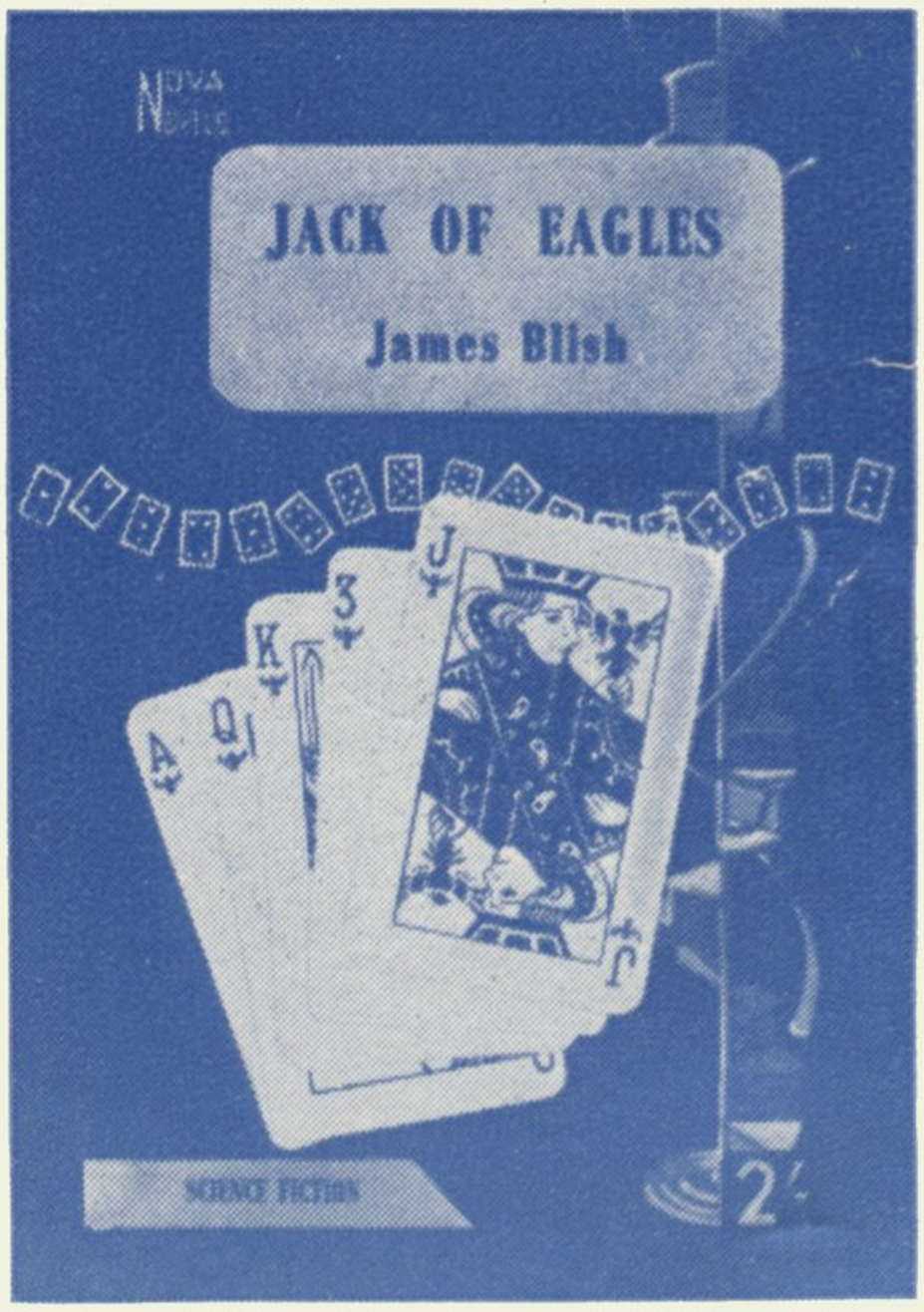
by James Blish

Two more out-standing novels by popular American Authors

2/-

EACH

Published for the first time in Britain



NOVA PUBLICATIONS

DERWENT HOUSE, 2 ARUNDEL ST., LONDON, W.C.2.

Science Fantasy

Vol. 7 No. 21

1957

CONTENTS

Editor : JOHN CARNELL Cover and Illustrations : QUINN

TWO SHILLINGS

In the United States of America 35 cents.

Subscription rates :

Great Britain and the Commonwealth, 6 issues 13/- post free

United States of America, 6 issues $2.00 post free

Published Bi-monthly by

NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD., DERWENT HOUSE, 2 ARUNDEL STREET

LONDON, W.C.2.

Telephone : COVent Garden 1811

Printed in England by Rugby Advertiser Ltd., Albert Street, Rugby 2/57


Edmond Finn

The origin of Man's intelligence is lost somewhere in the mists of time but down through the ages have come myths, legends, travellers' tales, religions, facts and fancies, all of which have helped mould the Mind of the human race. Somewhere—in the beginning—things may have been a little different.

THE KINGDOMS OF THE WORLD

By JOHN BRUNNER

Illustrated by QUINN

He was in a great place, and it was dark—not dark with blackness, but with smoke shot through with red-yellow from the fire beneath it; sometimes monstrous shadows twisted on the mobile surface. A sort of rhythmic shouting was everywhere; a smell rich and thick and somehow satisfying filled the air.

There was a good warmth in his stomach, like the after-effect of brandy when it is needed. There was a pleasant anticipation in his mind.

The rhythm of the shouting quickened, the voices grew stronger. The shadows on the lifting smoke became more numerous. The voices began to echo in the vastness of the confining walls.

And a scream stabbed like a sword through the chant as the first of the children went into the fire to meet the god.

I

Back in the bedroom, Stephanie could be heard moving ; a moment later, and her voice came sleepily through the half-open door. "Where are you, darling ? "

Maurice Howard felt the sweat cold on the backs on his hands as he drew a deep breath and counted five. He did not know even then whether he dared trust his voice, but he had to answer.

" I thought—I thought I heard Sandra crying," he said huskily, and was glad the lie did not betray itself in a quaver. " But it must have been in her sleep—she's quiet now."

He listened for Stephanie's muffled sigh of acceptance, and then paused with his hand on the light switch by the door before going back into their room. He looked for a long moment at the relaxed, chubby face of his four-year-old daughter.

And it was not all a lie. He had heard her scream—in imagination. He had heard her, Sandra, cry out ; he was certain of it.

It was one of those blank, diffuse terror-sensations found only in dreams or insanity which are incomprehensible to the waking mind and perhaps more horrible for that : the image of the wolf and the wasp and the quicksand are others that have the power to make the idea of returning to sleep horrible even when the body is so tired the mind cannot even stir a finger. Maurice knew them all well, and was grateful for the coldness of the floor under his bare feet, and the twelve paces separating him from the warmth and comfort of the bed. In that space he could waken himself.

But to be certain, he did not lie down again ; he sat back against the headboard and stared down at Stephanie's long fair hair coiled into the tidy, compact bun she made of it each night with nimble fingers. Porphyria's lover would have known that silky, honey-golden rope.

Alarmed, Maurice clenched his fists in a spasm of self-loathing. And yet there was no sense in that ; it was *non*-sense, literally.

But that idle cross-referencing thought somehow had to do with the incomprehensible nightmare picture involving Sandra screaming in terror. It had something to do with the way he had risen in his sleep and found himself looking down at his daughter's little bed.

And all of it was out of a dual past : one, his own, but the other discarded by him—a long and dark and bloody past which he had been told of and which he had renounced as without meaning for today.

His eyes strained into blackness beyond the window, wondering if there was a star to be seen, but cloud was thick overhead and the air was oppressive.

Sleep was receding ; he felt almost fully awake now, and the knowledge brought relief. His thoughts slipped idly to less frightful things; he thought for the thousandth time of the contrast between Stephanie's warm blondness, her skin that tanned so easily and beautifully, and the ascetic brunette appearance of himself. Sandra had inherited more from him, and he was glad, in a way ; she would be one of the dark exciting women he had turned away from when he decided to marry—not that he regretted it, but he had that past to load him with meaningless guilt, a legacy of words heard when he was too young to understand them which he was helpless to flee from now he did understand.

And who would he be, the man who was captured by the tantalizing eyes and the pouting lips and the sleek black hair of the woman his daughter would become ? She would not be ugly, this woman, nor dull. She would have her choice of men, without doubt. And the interweaving tangled network of human life would have another nexus . . .

Meaningless, this train of thought, except to a human being—but what of that ? What judge shall there be of human values but mankind ?

The sky split in the distance with a long streak of white lightning ; he waited for the thunder, mechanically counting. When it came, Stephanie stirred with her eyes still closed and put her arm over him.

" Was that thunder ?" she whispered. " Has it woken Sandra ?"

A second peal—louder and closer—came to them before Maurice could reply. " If it hasn't already, it will do," he said wryly.

Stephanie turned on her back and looked out at the threadlike lightning in the distance. They waited for Sandra to call out and come running to seek protection from the storm beside her mother.

" Love me, my sweet ?" he said huskily, not knowing why the lightning made him want to hear her answer.

" Of course I do, Moishe darling," came the automatic, instant response. But he had time to wonder just how automatic, how reflex before Sandra stood in the doorway asking whether there was thunder, because if there was she was frightened.

It had stopped raining before he had to go for his train, but even at half past nine, when he reached his office, the sky was a sad grey and the trees looked bent with the weight of the wetness. As he went into the building and began the meaningless string of morning greetings, he felt a sort of directionless, useless frustration. Why waste breath on this—" Good morning !" to the liftman—hollow invocation to inanimate forces—" Good morning !" to the messenger boy—when

no one with sanity could imagine that wishing someone well—" Good morning !" to Mr. Cochran—could bring about the desired effect ?

One of these days I'd like to wish everyone a bloody awful morning, he reflected wistfully. *And see one happen.*

His coat felt damp as he peeled it off, with the wrong kind of dampness : that of a stone thinly layered with algae. It *wasn't* going to be a good day, he could tell that.

He dropped into his chair, ran both hands swiftly back over his hair once, and looked up at the far door as it opened for Julia to come in. She had a brown suit on this morning, and her glasses somehow looked more severe for the similarity of colour in their rims. She had a thin sheaf of letters in her hand.

" Morning, Julia," he said, watching her place them in the tray. " Anything urgent ?"

She turned her perpetually surprised eyes on him and took him literally. " Only the man waiting to see you," she said with half a smile. " His name's Bell, and he wouldn't tell me what he wants."

Maurice answered with his eyes on the letters. " Give me half a minute to check this lot and send him in."

The thirty seconds went, and when he glanced over to the door again, there was this person standing in the opening—

Some people feel this was about cats.

Mr. Bell was of medium height, plump, dressed in a smart dark suit. His hair was receding, but it was glossy and as black as Maurice's own. He had fat hands, with exceptionally well-tended nails—shiny and oval—and his lips were just slightly shiny with wet, as if he had passed his tongue over their plump soft surface the instant before Maurice looked at him.

After a small eternity, Maurice rose and put out his hand. " What can I do for you, Mr. Bell ?" he said, not intending to sound rude and yet succeeding in making it appear that if it was the last thing he didn't do, he would do nothing for the visitor.

Mr. Bell left the question unanswered for as long as it took him to grasp Maurice's hand with a touch like soft feather pillows, let go, and step back a pace, running his gaze over the other from head to foot.

Then he half-chuckled in a fruity manner and spoke in a warm tenor voice. "So despite the fact that you think it meaningless, you won't wish me good morning. I suppose, in one sense, you're very wise."

There was a short discontinuity ; Maurice's conscious mind, having refused to accept the possibility that Bell could have known his most intimate thoughts of only a few minutes previous, took refuge in fugue. When he was again fully aware of what was going on, he was seated

behind the desk and holding out the cigarette box which Bell had just taken a cigarette from.

Relieved, Maurice saw that the visitor showed no sign of noticing something strange ; the delusion—the impossible remark—had not disturbed him.

He took a cigarette himself and bent his head to accept Bell's light ; before he was properly seated again, the other was speaking.

" To answer the question you put to me, Mr. Howard. I came here to make you an offer—or, more precisely, to let you make a demand. What do you want ? "

Maurice blinked. " I beg your pardon ?" Hairs bristled on his nape.

Bell gestured sweepingly with the smoke of his cigarette. " What do you want ?" he repeated patiently.

Maurice leaned forward, shaking his head dazedly. " I don't understand," he insisted. " Are you offering me a new job ?" He felt tired and bemused. Bell smiled.

" In a sense."

The peculiar inflection of the phrase conjured up the vision of last night again : the vast place resounding to a shouted chant. For an instant Maurice knew an associated pleasure—the joy a child knows on being disobedient in revenge for imagined wrong—but the pleasure lasted no longer than the scream.

" What firm do you represent ?" he said, swallowing.

" The old firm," Bell said pensively, and then chuckled as at an original joke. " Yes, the old firm ! Ancient and unrespected."

Maurice's temper had been teetering on the edge of imbalance ; this was enough to tip it over. He drew a deep breath.

" I've got better things to do with my time than sit here and listen to nonsense," he stated. " I suppose you think it funny. But either say what you have to say, or leave."

The door of the outer office opened and shut, and Godfrey Kellner's cheerful young voice was heard. Bell blinked stupidly across the desk.

" But I can't do that, Mr. Howard," he said, as if it was a self-evident truth. " I can never do that."

Kellner put his head round the door. " Morning, Mr. Howard," he began, and abruptly started to withdraw again, apologizing. Maurice stopped him.

" It's all right, Godfrey," he said. " This gentleman is just going."

II

The letters seemed to jump and dance before his eyes. *Sell* became *Bell* ; *ball* became *Bell* ; *belt* became *Bell.* He wanted to fasten his teeth on his lower lip and give himself the reality of pain to control this shifting of probability. *Out of sight, out of my mind—*

The third letter was an effort ; the fourth was an ordeal. The fifth was impossible ; he stopped after the second sentence and wondered if he was sickening for a fever. Considering the evidence carefully, he decided against it ; his pulse was reasonably slow, he wasn't shivering —but he had somehow to run away without running from a vision of a place filled with chanting.

Abruptly, he realised he was not talking about installing conveyor belts.

His eyes shifted uneasily over the top of the desk, and rested on the dictation pad. Julia's hands were still, but poised waiting.

At least it was Julia ; if it had been Mrs. Kepman, he did not think he could ever have faced her again. Dry-mouthed, he said, " Read back—what I was just saying."

" I didn't take it down, Mr. Howard," said Julia gravely.

" Of course not." He moved something on the desk, distractedly. " Was it—was it bad ?"

" Bad ?" The word was a whole encyclopaedia. " I've heard such things in other places, from other people ; I've said them myself."

" How ? Where ?" Maurice knew a mixture of relief and annoyance ; *he* had never heard such things—hardly even thought them . . .

" Three-guinea hotels and seven-and-sixpenny boarding houses, if you must know. And a psychiatrist's consulting room. And more than one mental hospital." Julia spoke with a patient weariness, as if all this was supremely unimportant.

" You'd better do the letters I've given you. I'll record the others while you're getting on with them." Maurice stared at her with complete attention for what he thought must be the first time since he had met her. " What a hell of a lot of things people don't know about each other !" he said savagely. " Thank you, Julia. It won't happen twice."

She rose and went out, closing the door with no more and no less noise than usual ; somehow it helped Maurice back towards his self-control, but almost half an hour passed while he sat with fists clenched, trying to clench his mind likewise and grasp the thing within it.

The desk phone broke the spell ; he raised the receiver and gave his name, to hear the fat voice of McNulty from the front office.

"You sound worse than when I heard you last!" McNulty declared in the subdued roar he owed to his partial deafness. "Thunder keep you awake last night?"

"Yes, I didn't get much sleep," Maurice answered.

"Hm! Don't think that's all the trouble. You're too damned respectable, Moishe! Ought to break out a bit sometimes—isn't natural for a young fellow like you, even if you are married. More to life than running that department, y'know. You responsible for a blasted idiot called Bell?"

Maurice stiffened. "Well, he was in here earlier—"

"And you told him to get the hell out?"

"Well—more or less," Maurice admitted. "He wouldn't say anything that made sense—"

"I'm not after excuses," McNulty cut in. "I've spent the last fifteen minutes rubbing the same thing into him, and before that I wasted half an hour trying to get sense out of him. Feller's crazy. How long did you give him?"

"About two minutes."

McNulty chuckled. "It's not only money the Scots and the Jews understand alike," he said. "And on that line—have you the estimates for the Upton job?"

Maurice gave figures and qualifications mechanically; he was more relieved than he had expected to hear that McNulty had treated Bell the same way. But the whole episode left a dozen unanswered questions, and a nasty taste which yet managed to imply that a liking for it might be acquired.

He put down the phone and reached for the unanswered letters to dictate the reply on the recorder. To make certain beyond doubt that he was saying what he meant, he played back the whole of the first item, not daring to guess what he expected to hear instead of it.

It ran without a hitch; sighing into relaxation, he put out his hand to stop the machine on the last sentence, but before he could depress the switch, there was a chuckle, and Bell's warm tenor spoke to him.

"You'll find my offer attractive sooner or later, Mr. Howard. I've waited so long that I can't stand waiting much longer, but I won't need to. See you later!"

The last syllable ascended into an obscene cackle; Maurice, turning round to search where the voice was coming from, knew again that prickling behind his head: the cat-presence sensation.

"How—?" he said aloud, finding that Bell was not in sight. He ran the record back, pressed the switch, and heard a fraction of a word

in that unmistakable voice. Sweating, he countermanded the movement almost before it was over.

Raising his voice, he called for Julia ; she came, moving statelily, with her shorthand pad open. " Listen to this," he told her, and played a few words more of the message. " Did you let Bell in here by himself, at all—even for a moment ?" It was ridiculous ; how could the man have known just how long the first letter dictated today would run ? Julia's quiet denial, therefore, was no shock to him.

" How could it have happened ?" he asked, not hoping for an answer.

She shrugged. " How could anything happen ?" she said. " Anything is impossible on the face of it. Nothing is more of a miracle than anything else."

" You believe that, don't you ?" he said, searching her face, and she nodded.

" You don't. You're a rationalist—unmystical."

" Of course." Maurice was vaguely surprised that he felt no reticence about explaining himself to her ; the sense of freedom it entailed was good, though, and he finished the statement. " I've seen too much of what emotion and bad intuition can do ever to trust unprovable ideas."

" That's wonderful until you want to explain the manifestly impossible," said Julia flatly, and went out again.

Godfrey Kellner had already left for lunch when Maurice glanced through the far door before going out for his ; the sound of typing indicated either Julia or Mrs. Kepman in the typists' room. There was too much work in Godfrey's tray.

But there were bigger problems than that.

It must have been Mrs. Kepman he heard still at work, for as he approached the lift shaft he saw that the car was already at his floor ; he called and ran the last few paces, to find Julia the only passenger.

The ride down was strained silence ; he wanted to speak further about the impossible—the manifestly impossible—but he had trouble casting his opening phrase, and when they reached ground level they were just in time to meet McNulty, red-faced, watched-chained, also about to leave. Maurice felt at once annoyed and glad to have been spared the problem of making that opening when the other boomed, " Come and have a drink with me before lunch, both of you !"

McNulty had been doing that sort of thing with everyone from the messengers up for years, and no one but he would have got away with it.

They walked fifty yards to a pub, not yet as crowded as it would be in a little while ; McNulty bought them their drinks, spoke caustically for twenty seconds on Bell's putative ancestry, and proceeded to tell an outrageously funny dirty story at the top of his voice. Half the customers were his audience when he finished.

Maurice wondered what Julia's reaction would be ; he did not imagine she would be embarrassed, and she wasn't. The fact pleased McNulty greatly, and he insisted on buying a second round while he told the one about the man in the furniture trade, which Maurice listened to with only half an ear, intending to laugh when the punch line arrived by way of thanks for the drinks.

Three or four places along the bar, there was someone not part of McNulty's audience, however ; he was talking into a pint of bitter and driving his points home with jabs of his right index finger in the air. He had been done down in a business deal, that was obvious ; Maurice had been attending absently for three sentences and was about to transfer his interest elsewhere, when the speaker's tone grew vehement.

" It's always the same with these goddamn Jews—they'd swindle their mothers out of—"

Shaking with rage, Maurice started to turn round and see who had spoken. At the same instant, McNulty's voice rose to maximum volume—" How did she guess what trade I was in ?"—laughter bubbled up around them, and under it he heard Julia's voice say coolly, " Mr. Howard . . ."

He controlled himself with an effort, and gave her a ghost of a smile. " Thanks—I'm used to it," he answered in an undertone, and managed to make the words run together with an appreciative remark about McNulty's story.

It was no use asking to be allowed to buy McNulty a drink—he would just insist shamelessly that he was claiming the lot as expenses anyway, and refuse to accept. They parted only a few moments later, and Maurice found himself outside again with Julia standing a few paces away, studying him. If her expression had been sympathetic, he doubted if he could have borne it, but it revealed no emotion at all.

" I nearly blew up," Maurice said harshly. " I suppose I'm not as used to it as I like to think."

" I don't expect you ever gave yourself a chance to get used to it," said Julia after a pause. " Didn't you rather run away from it ?"

" Ignoring and running away are different things," Maurice declared, looking at her challengingly. He felt again the memory of the youthful idealism with which he had finally discarded what he thought was damaging in his life—about at the end of the war when the ideas of

hatred and revenge had given place to sick pity and wan, ill-directed hope that this might somehow be the last time.

" Saying something doesn't matter doesn't make it so."

" Any more than wishing someone good morning ensures their having one, I suppose ?" Maurice tried to make it biting. He thought how ridiculous it was to be standing outside a pub arguing with a typist ten years younger than himself and not to be able to tell what was going on behind those glasses.

" Roughly," said Julia calmly. " But if someone wished you a bad morning you would probably have one from sheer force of habit—wondering why custom had been suspended. I don't think you want to have to face me across a lunch table, so I'll see you back at the office. Goodbye."

Somehow he had failed to notice how direct and perceptive Julia could be; somehow the knowledge made him wonder if he had any insight into human nature at all.

" In fact, when you made your decision, did you base it on impracticable ideals without relation to facts ?" suggested a tenor voice with a hint of a chuckle in it. Maurice slowly grew aware that the plump figure of Bell was facing him a few feet to his right.

He made a couple of steps towards him, and had to pause as an instant of dizziness came over him. Something cold and soft struck the back of his head and spattered the tips of his ears ; whirling, he saw a ragged boy with his right hand mud-coated, his left extended towards Maurice in the sign that wards off the evil eye : first and fourth fingers outstretched like horns.

What— ?

His feet shifted in soft ground, not on pavement ; the flung mud trickled into his collar with convincing coldness and wetness ; the boy's shouted insults in a half frightened, half defiant tone were the only loud noise where there should have been sounds of cars and buses.

Temporarily incapable of thinking clearly, Maurice tried only to see his surroundings. It was as if the world was astigmatic to him ; the jeering boy was clear, but the background was not, and he could not see what lay to either side of him. All he could tell was that it was not what it should have been.

Then there was a sudden beat of hoofs, and a horseman joined the boy as the only two solid, real-seeming objects in this world. The rider was tall, proud in the saddle ; his mount moved splendidly and was well cared for. Maurice started to draw aside as the horse approached ; he should have moved faster, for as he passed the rider

contemptuously drove down with his crop, and the short lash stung across both of Maurice's cheeks.

At once the right noise and the right place came back ; traffic growled and roared in the roadway, people walked and dawdled and hurried past, grey sky brooded over the grey and brown walls. But the pain of the lash and the wet of the mud were still so real that when he put his hand up to feel his head and brought it away with neither blood nor filth on it, he stared at it for minutes before he could believe what his eyes told him.

III

He let himself into the house very quietly, hoping that Stephanie might perhaps not hear him, but she called out, asking if it was he or Sandra who had moved.

He grunted something in answer and went through into his study. The door had barely shut behind him when his resistance failed suddenly, and he had to cling to the back of a chair, gasping like a swimmer rescued from deep, cold water. Stephanie would be wondering why he hadn't come into the kitchen to see her, but he couldn't explain. Or he could, but he wouldn't : he wouldn't say that he was terrified he had suddenly become insane.

Almost not daring to believe the evidence of his senses he walked once around the room, touching the comforting solidity of the furniture and noting that everything was as and where it ought to be.

After that, things were a little better ; he took a cigarette and looked at himself in the shiny lid of the case. He seemed ten years older than he had been when he awoke today.

The cigarette helped a bit more ; when he had finished it, he took a firm grasp on his mind and went out into the kitchen to kiss Stephanie. He was glad when she hardly gave him a glance, but went on with the meal she was preparing. It was elaborate ; it looked delicious, though, and he asked why they were having something special without expecting more than a shrug and a smile.

But Stephanie turned her head in amazement. " Because of this man who's coming," she answered. " I had to get something that—"

" What man ?" interrupted Maurice harshly, and Stephanie stiffened.

" Look, Moishe, darling, it's less than three hours since you rang me up to expect him. I thought you'd be bringing him with you."

" I didn't ring you this afternoon," said Maurice, keeping his composure with an effort. " And I didn't invite anyone to dinner."

The corners of Stephanie's mouth tightened a little, but before she spoke, the bell of the front door rang, and Maurice clenched his hands. She looked at him.

"You oughtn't to say things like that even in fun," she told him reproachfully. "Go and let him in while I tidy myself up a bit, there's a dear."

He didn't look at her. "I—I think you'd better go."

"Why—? What on earth for? Can't you even spare that much time—? Oh, for goodness sake!" She put down the fork she had in her hand, and it clattered on the stove. Taking her apron off with quick, angry movements, she went out of the room.

Belatedly, he started after her to apologise and explain, but before he caught up with her she had reached the door and opened it. Her face all sweetness again, she stepped back.

"Good evening, Mr. Bell. Do come in."

There was a nutcracker starting to close on the walnut of Maurice's brain; he threw up his hands to his forehead, and a spasm of anguish blinded him. When it passed, he found himself extending his hand quite normally and taking Bell's plump feather-pillow fingers while he said something about great pleasure and come and have a drink.

The evening was torture. Maurice had never been to an Irish wake, but he knew what he would feel like if he was among people celebrating the fact that a man lay dead—he would suffer the same way as he suffered at the dinner table, listening to Stephanie's quick, light conversation and Bell's acidly clever rejoinders. Stephanie kept hinting things to him with her eyebrows, and treading on his toe when she got the chance, but he refused resolutely to try and redeem the situation.

Bell, in fact, was the only one who enjoyed himself; he seemed completely oblivious of the tenseness between his host and hostess, praising the food and the cheap emergency dinner wine extravagantly. It was not until the meal was almost over that Maurice noticed something disturbing.

The wine was superb.

He turned the fact over in his mind, debating the chance of an error in bottling, until Stephanie rose at the end of the meal to bring coffee, and he was left to escort Bell into the other room.

He raised his eyes slowly, and found the man's gaze on him, steadily; it was like being examined by two cold aquamarine pebbles set in something at once as insubstantial as a balloon and as stolid as dough.

"Your wife is an excellent woman," said Bell, and giggled. "You're a lucky man, Howard."

"Lucky?" Maurice gave a short, dry laugh. "You seem to know most of what goes on in my mind—do you think I'm lucky?" He got to his feet, leaving Bell to follow or not as he would, and continued talking over his shoulder, deliberately turning his back.

" What the hell was the idea of ringing up my wife and inviting yourself to dinner in my name ?"

Bell giggled again ; it was upsetting to hear that fatly infantile sound from a grown man. " Are you asking for excuses, Howard ? I should have thought you had more sense."

Coming into the drawing-room, Maurice turned and faced the other squarely, trying not to let his temper run riot. " Aren't you content with behaving like an idiot without insulting me ? If it wasn't for Stephanie, I'd have slammed the door in your face when I saw who it was !"

Bell reached in a pocket of his jacket and took out a long and expensive cigar ; he pierced the end and stripped the band as he went on speaking.

" Think it out logically, Howard. I have acted in a way you find unusual. I am not a madman—that you may doubt, but I assure you you would have trouble proving I was—so, *a priori*, I have good reasons for this behaviour. A little analysis should show you the solution. And now forgive me while I—uh—" his teeth showed whitely in a deprecatory smile, "—go and make room for the no doubt excellent coffee your wife will be bringing us. There's no need to show me the way."

Stephanie came in with the tray a moment later ; the artificial smile she wore fell from her face as soon as she saw that they were alone, and she snapped furiously at Maurice.

" If you meant to act like a boor all evening, why for heaven's sake did you ask the man here ? Moishe, have you gone crazy ?"

The question struck too close to home ; he winced and answered equally angrily. " Completely ! I never saw Bell in my life before this morning. I had to tell him to get out of the office ; McNulty did the same when the idiot showed up in the downstairs department. If anyone invited him, he invited himself."

Stephanie checked the hot retort before it reached her lips ; she was gazing at him with horrified suspicion, her face slowly whitening, when Bell came ostentatiously back into the room.

" A small tribute to the excellence of the food and wine, Mrs. Howard," he beamed, and offered a half bottle of brandy.

The rest of the evening passed in the same way as before : Bell quite unaware, apparently, of what was in the air ; Maurice struggling with the problems of why he hadn't slammed the door in Bell's face and also whether the incredible message on the dictaphone and the vision in the street had been real, or only appeared to have been so

now ; Stephanie alternating between frantic attempts to keep up a pretence of normality, and frightened study of her husband.

And yet Bell was not the idiot he had seemed this morning. He talked, effectively ; his range of subjects was wide and varied and still had an underlying continuity. Maurice took brandy and listened in spite of himself, in spite of his preoccupation. The spilling of a drop of the spirit gave an excuse for mentioning libations to the gods ; from that to religious ritual, superstition, abnormal psychology and reasonable adjustment to the real world. There was a tantalising unity to it—a pattern, which Maurice strained his mind to grasp. Of course, the dictaphone message had a place in it, too ; so did the vision of the mud-throwing boy and the cruel rider, and the dream of last night.

He still felt that slight stir of illicit delight when he thought about it. Watching Bell, he thought he noticed the other eyeing him covertly, as if to see whether his meaning was going over : not even making the error of looking away hastily when he was caught in the act, but not wanting to be too inconspicuous about it. Maurice had some more brandy and wondered if he had been in the wrong that morning.

So a cloud drifted up across his mind. The chair he was sitting in was very comfortable ; Bell's voice, if one did not follow his words, had a droning, soporific effect. A couple of times Maurice found himself slipping, and jerked himself back. The third time, he couldn't quite manage it.

IV

The wine was incredibly good ; it couldn't have been so good. He held out his glass for more, and found that Bell was pouring it for him, obsequiously. This wasn't his home, though ; it was a hall whose walls were mantled in shifting coloured mists stabbed at intervals by shafts of light in deep, rich hues: purple and crimson and sea-green.

He savoured the slow trickle of the wine around his tongue. There was a soporific quality about it, even though part of him was aware in a vague way that he was not really tasting it even now—to Stephanie, should she come back, he would appear to be asleep.

He did not question how he knew that Stephanie was no longer in the room.

The couch on which he reclined was plumply soft, like Bell's handshake—and Bell was offering him something in a bowl, which he took and ate. The first bite made his mouth twist in repulsion at the overripe sweetness, like a rotting fig. In a moment, he was used to it, and he reached for more.

And there was Bell again. He seemed to be everywhere.

Next Maurice found himself pulling on something which did not feel like a cigarette between his lips, but which filled his lungs with pleasant smoke. On his breathing out, he seemed to exhale his soul from his body, and stared down wonderingly at himself. He could still feel his body about him, and yet he was poised in the air gazing down on it.

A shuddering, pulsing music began to creep into his mind, growing very gradually louder until it forced itself to his attention. There was dancing, and yet he could not tell how he was experiencing the movment ; he himself was not the dancer, and he could not see anyone dancing. But all his senses were aware of dancing as a fact.

A fine scent was soaking into his pores—not the delicate artificial perfume that he normally meant when he thought of scent, but a more obsessive, somehow more *real* odour, like that of roasting meat and burning leaves and grass drying in sunlight. It was good. The world was right, comforting, meant for him . . .

He did not understand much of what happened after that.

When, after what seemed to him like a thousand years, he was absorbed into his body again and found that he had eyelids and could open them, he knew a sensation of deep disappointment and anti-climax that the vision should not have lasted for eternity. He struggled to recapture details of it in his mind, but it was like recollecting a dream: no matter how clear and sharp the images might be, to his waking self they were incomprehensible, and the lack of relationship between them made them impossible to grasp.

The room was unchanged since what he was forced to think of as his departure ; neither Stephanie nor Bell were with him, and the brandy glasses stood empty. A cigarette was just smouldering its last in an ashtray.

Shaking a little, for the depth of the experience had disturbed his already unstable self-control still further, he got to his feet and went to stand by the fire. He did not worry any more about Bell's astonishing actions of the early part of the day ; the meaning of what he had just been through seemed to be more important than such trivialities.

He lit a cigarette with automatic motions, while the clarity of the memory dwindled. At length it had drained sufficiently for his ordinary self to re-assert its claims, and he started to think of ordinary things. Shrugging his creased jacket more comfortably over his shoulders, he went out of the room and down the short passage to the kitchen.

The door stood ajar, and through it, as soon as he drew level, he saw Bell and Stephanie lost in a passionate kiss.

For seconds he stood almost between step and step, the shock immobilized him so thoroughly. But he had uttered a wordless

sound of amazement and rage before either of them noticed him standing there.

They drew apart, but only a little—not with a start of guilt. Stephanie did not look at him ; she kept her eyes on Bell's face.

" You—you devil !" said Maurice huskily. And Bell did a most extraordinary thing ; he took a sharp pace backwards and gave Maurice a stare of something akin to respect.

" Not quite, Howard," he said in an interested tone. " But a pretty close shot. Congratulations."

After that, he fled : not in disgust, or shock, or mere confusion, but in blind terror. Nothing broke in on his bemused mind until he found that he was very cold ; his jacket stuck damply between his shoulder blades, and the breeze chilled him through it. He thought at first it must have been drizzling rain when he came out, but then he found that the shine of his shoes was undulled. He must have been sweating a river. His teeth chattered a little.

Pausing, he tried to take stock of his surroundings. He found he had walked at least two miles from home, but since he did not know what way he had come, he could not tell how long he had been going.

Thinking of returning home, he shuddered. He could picture the front door of the house and behind it he could—not see, but *sense*—the thing that claimed not to be a devil, but was sufficiently like one to be startled at the accusation.

And that is the way hell must be, Maurice told himself. *Horns and hooves and furnaces are only frightening—not diabolical.*

After that he remembered something else : how Satan was once asked what he had been doing, and answered that he had been going to and fro in the earth—he could not be sure that he had the words right, and it annoyed him for a moment.

He was suddenly trembling all over.

When he could control his movements again, he started down the hill towards the railway station. The booking clerk, who knew him well, gave him a startled glance as he walked past, but did not speak ; the foreman on duty on the platform made to say good evening to him and changed his mind at the last moment, pretending he had been going by anyway. Maurice was past caring how ghastly he looked.

There was a train in a few moments, snaking up out of the darkness like a green python with its eyes oddly misplaced on its head. He fell, rather than sat, on the neither hard nor soft cushions of an empty compartment, and closed his eyes.

The sensation of cold increased until it was suddenly intolerable ; his eyelids flicked up like blinds released, and he stared out at the snow-covered landscape, which was not moving.

For a while he was occupied in trying to *think* warmth into his numb extremities by sheer force of will. Facts only slowly made their way into his gelid consciousness.

The first to register was that he was not alone. Someone stirred and moaned a little way from him ; other people grumbled and complained. There was no light except what was reflected from the banked snow outside, so he could not make out who they were, except that they were wretched. They hunched and crowded together, seeking

to save their little remaining warmth from seeping away through the holes in their few clothes.

He waited until a comprehensible voice—baritone, with sullen anger under it—came to him.

"This is the second night! Have they just forgotten us? Are they going to leave us here until the warm weather makes our bodies stink?"

"Better to be forgotten than to be remembered by these devils," said a woman's voice harshly, and there was an answering undertow of agreement.

His eyes were becoming more accustomed to the dim light; Maurice, looking about him wonderingly, found that he could see a few details.

He felt them, too; his limbs were almost dead enough to have stopped aching, but they held the memory of stiffness and cold borne for too long. Either side of him, bodies pressed against him unfeelingly; the air was cold but unpleasant, as if there was a stench too powerful for the clean cold winter wind to overcome it.

His back was against hard, unplaned wood; there was square, barred apertures in the walls, unglazed, from which only a narrow angle of view could be obtained. Someone—the possessor of the baritone voice, Maurice judged from his location—was straining to see out of the opposite side of the—truck, he supposed it must be. The details of his surroundings did not yet fit together well enough for him to tell what was happening to him.

From behind him, he heard indistinct singing, in hoarse voices; the melody was lively and defiant, but it lasted only a few moments before dying into silence.

"Soldiers coming," said the man looking out. "Four of them."

"Wonder if they will bring food," said a hopeless voice from close to Maurice, and the baritone rounded on the speaker.

"Shut your mouth, gipsy!" he said sharply. "I said not to talk about such things, understand? Now come on, you! Pick up that song—the soldiers are almost outside."

He started to echo the faint whisper of the tune which still drifted from the next truck; in this one, too, a few people struck it up bravely and then found that they were too cold and weak to carry it any more. Wanting beyond all else to know what this was, Maurice struggled up from between his neighbours and half-fell towards the opposite wall of the truck. Looking out, he understood everything. There could be no mistaking the stark outline of these men against the snow: the shape of the helmets fitted close to their heads, their boots, their arrogant walk—

Even without the swastika, he could tell.

He sank back into his place, finding that even in those few seconds what warmth there had been imbued in the wood had vanished. Shouting went up ; the soldiers were calling to someone that all was well. A shudder made the truck creak, and it was rolling.

Beside Maurice, the man who had been called a gipsy looked up with an expression close to cunning. " While there is hope, you can insult me and I will try to live," he said—to the air, more than to Maurice, whom he was facing. " But when there is no hope, you will thank me for having a knife to open your veins." He chuckled.

Somehow, the words struck cold deeper into Maurice's heart than all the sub-zero wind and frozen snow.

V

" Come with me," said a familiar but unidentifiable voice through the mist that covered his mind. He obeyed without question, and found the blankness beginning to lift.

The first thing he could see clearly that belonged to the real world was Julia's face opposite him, and he passed a hand across his eyes in case he was distorting the image. She regarded him steadily.

" You're in a bad way, Maurice," she said. It was the first time she had called him that. He tried to nod, feeling absurdly grateful that someone recognised his trouble, and started to work out his location like a puzzle.

The place was warm, and therefore wonderful ; it had red walls and the light was soft and diffuse. He sat on a long bench with his legs half under a table. A coffee bar, he identified it, and felt pleased with himself.

They were sitting in isolation in a corner. Across the room, a knot of people surrounded a bearded man with a piano accordion, pumping out a Neapolitan street ballad. It all seemed much less actual, much further away, than the truck in the snow with its cargo of suffering—

He brought himself back determinedly and looked at Julia, who almost dropped her gaze before him.

" What happened to you ?" she said wonderingly. " I found you almost staggering along the road—you were drunk, I thought, but you aren't, I can see now."

Maurice found a harsh, rasping voice which had taken the place of his own. " What do you think is wrong with me ?"

Julia hesitated. Then she answered in a slow, measured manner as if challenging him to deny her diagnosis. " I think you look like a haunted man."

With deliberate and joyous malice, he echoed Bell's last words to him. " Not quite, Julia. But a pretty close shot. Congratulations."

It startled her for a moment ; the disturbance came and went like a trout taking a fly on a still pool. A slender and attractive waitress paused beside her and gave her a chance to pretend that even that flicker had never really existed while she ordered something. Then she turned back to him.

The man with the accordion started on *Santa Lucia.*

" What *has* happened, anyway ?" Julia demanded. Maurice shook his head dazedly.

" I can't explain ! It doesn't make sense, any of it. It's just impossible."

" Don't try to explain it, then." Julia dismissed the idea as lightly as if it was ridiculous. " But you can remember it ?"

Maurice nodded dumbly. " In snatches . . . "

She waited for him to go on, and after a little, he had to. Telling the story at least brought an illusion of order to it, but it was like running a fingernail down the scab of a freshly healed cut—the blood gathered and began to trickle anew.

At the end he cried out, causing the people listening to the accordion to turn in surprise ; then he recovered, and spoke in a more normal tone, though still heavy with anger and uncomprehending disappointment.

" But how could Stephanie do such a thing ? How can a man be as *evil* as Bell ?"

" Don't talk nonsense," said Julia sharply, and that was a shock to him ; he thought the nonsense had come earlier, when he spoke of being ridden down by a horseman on a London street in broad daylight, of being deported from Nazi Germany aboard an ordinary prosaic electric train of today and here. He blinked.

" Nonsense ? "

" Evil, you said. Define it. Gc ahead and try. You can't. There isn't such a thing."

Maurice felt the words come at him like a wave breaking ; if he breathed, he would fill his lungs and drown. His sensory data were muddled, and he was not sure what was fact, what fancy. Or fantasy.

Seeing his bewilderment, Julia spoke patiently. " There are no such things as good or evil. There is only the way the universe works."

Essaying feebly to answer, Maurice countered, " From you that sounds—"

" Out of place ? Because I'm the mystical sort who thinks the universe runs on miracles ? No, you misunderstand. It's your kind,

the efficient logical person, who seeks to categorize neatly into good and bad, black and white. No one thing that happens is more amazing than any other; learning to control their happening cures that."

Maurice gave up trying to follow her reasoning and returned to his own plight. "But he says he's a devil—or something of the sort. And he can do impossible things; he seems to read my mind—"

And he can take Stephanie. That, most of all, was unbelievable.

"You get further by not bothering to try and explain things—just trying to control them." Julia spoke patiently, as to a backward child. "If you know anything about atomic physics, for example, you'll see that the whole progress of science is in that direction. Nowadays scientists don't worry about why such a thing is so—they're satisfied to know how it works, and leave the reasons to the muddy minds of metaphysicians." The last phrase sounded rehearsed.

"People kept finding that standard concepts were meaningless—trajectory, location, speed—when you tried to handle either the very small or the very large. So they tossed out those images in favour of others which were still meaningless, but at least were so by design. A hole inside a hole through a hole—a network of probability waves—we can't define them by common sense principles, but we can make them work."

Maurice felt unaccountably inferior to the girl before him; he wanted to assert himself and show that he could rise above illusion—*It has to be illusion*!

"But you can't apply the laws of physics to human beings," he protested weakly, and Julia shook her head.

"Of course you can. You can use the same statistical tools to handle the behaviour of atoms and the behaviour of human groups. It's just that people haven't got used to the notion that you have to throw out preconception before you get results. Take your case. Have you any idea *why* what's happened to you, did happen?"

Maurice moved his head once in hopeless negation. She went on, "Suppose you did know why. Say—oh, say it was because you're called Maurice Howard. Where would it get you?"

The accordionist thundered into a tarantella, and a dark girl in jeans got up and began to dance to it. Julia gave a disgusted look and stood up.

"We can't talk here," she said. "You've got to *think* about this, not just talk, either. Come with me."

The room was what he had expected, roughly: small, almost cramped occupied mostly by a divan bed, washbasin, gas ring, armchair, table, wardrobe, bookshelf. The contents of the last were sufficiently un-

ordinary to penetrate his dulled mind as he sat down in the armchair and waited for Julia to speak.

She had opened the wardrobe and reached in for something when she did so ; her voice echoed a little. " Whisky ?" was the unexpected opening word. He nodded, realised belatedly that she could not see the gesture, and accepted aloud. She put a glass into his hand and poured half an inch of spirit into the bottom.

" Make the most of it," she said, dropping the empty bottle into a waste basket before letting herself bounce on the side of the bed and sitting upright. Maurice did so ; a switch seemed to close in his mind, and he was aware of the things which made this room different.

There were cards set out on the table near him ; he had mistaken them at first for playing cards, but he noticed now that the one which lay turned up bore a pattern of waves. Rhine cards, then. Over one end of the table hung a cardboard crescent wound with copper wire in a peculiar pattern. Carelessly propped against the wall was a trefoil-shaped piece of plywood with a castor in the centre of each of its lobes, and a pencil projecting through the middle.

Julia watched him taking them in, one by one. At last he looked up at her. " Tools to control the universe ?" he said slowly.

She shrugged. " Could be—at any rate, they appear to work, and that's about all we can sensibly demand. Scientists have set up a pattern according to which the universe is supposed to work. Some of the time it doesn't. The new pattern has got to include ESP and PK and ouija boards and the rest of it."

" Where's your crystal ball ?" Maurice said sarcastically.

" In its box—I don't want the surface scratched," was the prosaic answer. She turned on the electric fire, got up and hung her coat in the wardrobe, and sat down again, wriggling her glasses more firmly into place on her nose by moving her ears. Maurice found the action oddly out of place ; the concept ' move-ears ' seemed so purely animal in its associations.

He looked down towards the floor. " What have you done to me ?" he said with clinical interest.

" Done ?" Julia leaned forward. " What do you mean ?"

" I can't possibly be sitting here arguing philosophy after what I've been through—"

" But you are," said Julia calmly. " Start by accepting that as a fact, and maybe you'll get somewhere. You feel you oughtn't to be discussing philosophy right now. Bunkum. Why shouldn't you be trying the one likely route out of your difficulties ?"

" What *are* my difficulties ?" Maurice spoke sharply. " If I do the stupid to explain the impossible—"

" Explain ! Explain ! Why must you always insist on this narrow anthropocentric petty-minded compartmentalisation of the real world ? What a hell of a language English is, anyway, for getting positive truths over !" She spoke as angrily as though she was personally insulted.

" Now let's look at this thing carefully," she went on, relaxing. " What was the first of the series of events that really bothered you?"

Maurice hesitated ; he hadn't mentioned last night's vision of the dark place, not knowing whether it belonged in the sequence or not. He couldn't see how it might. " The lunatic way Bell behaved this morning," he answered slowly. " He made me almost uncertain of myself—he was in control of his actions, though I couldn't understand them."

" Perhaps." Julia frowned. " I wouldn't have noticed, of course —all I saw of him was while he was sitting in the outer room waiting for you. What did he say to you ?"

Maurice remembered almost in surprise. " He asked me what I wanted. He seemed to think that, whatever I said, he could give it to me."

" So— ? "

" So I said I wasn't going to waste time on the ravings of an idiot, or something like that, and told him to go."

" Unable to fit him into your prejudice pattern, you tried to deny his existence. Can't be done." Julia spoke with a hint of superiority annoying to him. " After that, you had these visions—do you see *any* kind of a pattern about them ? Assume the pattern is there, if you can't see it at once, and try to act with it."

Maurice saw a tail-end of logic and clutched at it. " I see they're alternating—the visions, I mean. The first was pleasant and the second —no, I mean the first was awful and the second pleasurable and the third—"

" You can't stall that way. What was the first one ?"

He shuddered and remained silent. The little whisky he had taken could hardly have done this to him, he thought—and then recalled Bell's brandy and the unexpectedly good wine at dinner. The realisation seemed to make him drunk of its own accord.

" All right," Julia agreed, recognising stubbornness when she met it. " There's the beginning of a pattern there. It wouldn't have occurred to you, I suppose, to take Bell at his word ?"

" How d'you mean ?" Maurice asked muzzily.

" Maybe he meant what he said. Why didn't you ask him what he wanted you to do ? He wouldn't give something for nothing, probably, but since you wouldn't take his word and make a trade, he's starting to constrain you—"

" He could make me see things like—like— ? "

" He could put a message to you on a dictaphone without being allowed near it," said Julia. " Maybe that isn't all he can do. You've just let him run you off your feet up to now. Next time you see him, call the bluff. Challenge him to make his claim good—"

" Next time I see him," said Maurice, cold rage suddenly coming with memory into his mind, " I shan't stop to speak. I shall break the bastard's neck !" he finished in a near-shout, slamming his fist down on the arm of the chair ; a sob struggled to follow the words. " How could Stephanie *do* that to me ?" He gazed pleadingly at Julia, as if asking her to solve the problem with a word.

" Yes," Julia murmured thoughtfully. " Yes, she's a silly little bitch, isn't she ?" She put up her hand and took off her glasses ; the act made Maurice catch his breath, for she seemed instantly more naked than if she had stripped. Her eyes glowed at him.

" To do that to you," Julia continued thoughtfully, putting her hand on the light switch and pressing it down. Wet, warm lips were suddenly worrying his ear, finishing the sentence—

" When she could have been doing this !"

VI

Partly, he did it in a spirit of revenge ; the fitful spasms which his conscience gave, like a reptile dying on the floor of his mind, he could beat down with the flail of ' an eye for an eye.'

Somehow that had a significance greater than the superficial : he turned it over thoughtfully for a while, and then more pressing things claimed his attention. Obtrusively, however, the concept re-phrased itself :

" Fair's fair ! "

" What goes up— ! "

" Be done by as you did ! "

That was Charles Kingsley. Water Babies. He remembered the ugly umbrella-wielding old woman who went by that name in the illustrated volume of his childhood. *Crime and Punishment*, the idle sequence ticked on in his mind ; *it is the sentence of this court . . .*

He looked at Julia's face, calm in the cool grey light of dawn, and she yawned. " Give me a cigarette," she said.

He found one for each of them ; along with the first smoke from hers, Julia said cryptically, " Balance—that's it."

" You're completely amoral, aren't you ?" said Maurice thoughtfully. " I've met people that way before, and yet—I don't know—the kind you have is contagious. I think I'm crazy—"

" Probably Stephanie does too, by this time," said Julia, shrugging smooth bare shoulders. " That makes two of you. Could you go home now and start laying into her for what she did ? "

" I couldn't bring myself to go home," said Maurice soberly. " You're right, of course. I—this is a hell of a place and time to be talking about her ! —I ought to have realised Stephanie wouldn't— Well, not of her own accord," he finished lamely, and Julia half chuckled, half coughed.

" You think she was under a spell of Bell's ?" she asked. Maurice shook his head blankly.

" I don't know what to believe ! But hell ! Either I accept that Bell is what he claims to be—that he's somehow got power over me and other people—or I assume I'm crazy. And I can't do that."

" No, you aren't crazy," said Julia in a carefully considered way. A brief pause ; she giggled and went on, " They thought I was, you know. For a long time."

" How ? Who did ? " Maurice raised himself on one elbow.

" Everyone." Julia spoke as if it was too far in the past to matter any more. " I just happen to live by different principles from most people's—but they work, they work, and I don't ask more. I suppose for a while I thought I *was* mad, because so many other people said so. Then I figured out that they might perhaps be wrong, and since then I've become certain. Fifty million Frenchmen— Anyway, I shall have more out of life than a lot of people."

She stubbed out her cigarette with an angry motion. " And some people would say *that* was crazy, too—to say that I was right and everyone else wrong. Would you ?" . .

Maurice shook his head with slow bitterness. " Was the man who risked arrest by the Gestapo in Nazi Germany for aiding a Jew any less right because the majority of his compatriots knuckled under and learned to like it ?"

" There are probably people in this country who would have been glad to see the same thing happen," Julia said with deliberate emphasis, and Maurice winced.

" Tell me," said Julia with an abrupt change of tone, " have you enjoyed tonight ? Despite everything ?"

Taken aback, Maurice sought refuge in equivocation. " Do *you* think I did ?"

" You goddamn well ought to have done," said Julia with disconcerting candour. " Excuse me—I have to go to the bathroom." She slipped into a robe that hung across an arm of the armchair, and was gone from the room in silence.

Maurice turned on his other side and looked through the top of the window at the limb of the sun as it cleared the morning clouds. Abruptly, the clouds were gone, and the sun was blinding and scorching.

There was aching thirst in his throat ; he put his hand down dizzily and found it sink into powdery, hot dust. A diffuse pain crowded between his eyes and his consciousness. Somehow he knew that there was nothing to dim this blazing light for him.

There were people around him, grouped together ; he knew by their moans even before he looked that there was despair in the air. His eyes were hard to focus, but he turned his head slowly, seeing that they were bent in the traditional act and attitude of mourning ; their heads were streaked with ashes, pale grey against their black hair.

Over against a wall of plastered mud shining whitely in the pitiless glare, a man crouched beside a stall of food : dried grapes, blackened olives, meal and grain. His clothing was a robe of heavy, coarse cloth, dyed a patchy red-brown, and a long cloth draped down his neck like a modern Arab.

The presence of fear was numbing to him.

Sickly, he felt the underlying unity of what had happened struggle to take shape in his mind ; he fought against it, because he knew it was something he had tried to discard, tried to run away from—out of idealism, out of impracticable idealism without relation to the real world.

Am I to suffer it all in my own mind? He felt the past closing down on him like a deadening mist ; it took the heat and glare of the sun away, at least—but when he could no longer see, he was lost.

And then, for the second time, there was something to cling to, someone to lead him out of his bewilderment, and again it was Julia. Shuddering, he came back to find himself where he had been before.

" You've been away again ?" Julia whispered, holding his head in the crook of her arm. He licked his lips and whispered a thin affirmative.

" Do you see it now ?" she insisted urgently. " Do you see a pattern—a balance, symmetry, whatever you like ?"

" But *why me* ?" The demand was wrung from him. Slowly she nodded.

" Yes, you see. But as for *why you*, you're asking reasons again. They don't mean anything. There is only the way the universe works, and it works over all space and all time towards perfect balance. Action and reaction is universally a constant ; there has been much action, and somehow the reaction will be—canalized, you might say—through you."

"And if I—won't?"

"You can't quarrel with the universe, Maurice. But you may still be able to control it."

"I—I'd better be going," Maurice said at random after a pause. His voice was unlike his own. Julia nodded, and as if the movement was an order, he got up blindly and put on his clothes. Fumbling, he gathered things that had fallen from his pockets and stuffed them back anyhow. At last, half staggering, he made his way to the door and then through it and eventually out into dawn London.

The past was everywhere—inside him and out.

It was Friday, at least, and tomorrow he would not have to face this senseless chattering idiocy.

He caught his racing thoughts abruptly and chilled as he glanced at McNulty and Godfrey Kellner. Mac had come up to ask about some details of costing and had somehow decided to stay and chat. His solid bulk fitted the chair kept for visitors as if they were designed for each other. Behind but to the right of him, Godfrey lounged against a filing cabinet, laughing at some remark of McNulty's which Maurice had missed.

His eyes fell on the telephone, and he considered calling Stephanie again—but what was the use? She had listened to nothing he had to say; it had been hard to believe it was his wife talking to him when he heard that shrill-voiced shrew upbraiding him in language life a fishwife's for not coming home. Not for a second had she hinted that there was any fault on her side.

And Bell—Bell—where was Bell? *Who* was Bell? How was he going to start controlling the—man—if he couldn't trace him? He didn't think Bell would want to be traced by Maurice if he was sensible—and yet his actions weren't in line with ordinary people's. Moreover, if he had really been responsible for what was happening, would he leave Maurice alone just when his actions were having results?

Bell— He might even be there, with Stephanie—

If she had only been less angry when I called—

He felt like a cork bobbing in an Atlantic gale. The voice of McNulty tossed him up and down; he was well away on a disquisition of his own, and the subject interested young Godfrey. Maurice pulled out a handkerchief to wipe sweat from his forehead, wondering why the turmoil in his brain wasn't frightening them.

In the folds of the cloth he felt something stiff—a piece of paper. Glancing down, he saw it was of an unfamiliar weave—brown rough-

surfaced—and the handwriting on it was one he did not recognise. Startled, he turned it so that an address became visible on the head of it, printed in neat red capitals. A hospital—

He felt suddenly embarrassed as he saw the name at the end also ; Alfred Quick was not quite well enough known for everyone to place him at once, but everyone who did know the name recognised it as that of an eminent psychiatrist. He would have to get this back to Julia somehow, without her knowing. Obviously he must have taken it off her table by mistake, in half-darkness.

And after a little hesitation, he sneaked a covert look at the other two and began to read the letter behind his hand.

It was the sound of the door opening which made him break off again in case it should be Julia coming in, but he saw Godfrey had left, and McNulty was staring at him.

" You're a bit under the weather, aren't you ? "

Maurice folded the letter into quarters, and nodded. McNulty leaned back further in his chair.

" You take life awfu' seriously," he said with a chuckle. A hint of broad Scots crept into his voice. " Now look at me ! When did ye ever see me worry myself silly over anything—even losing money ? Eh ? And ye know well that there's a many men losing sleep and hair and getting ulcers without doing so well as I've done."

He settled himself more comfortably. " Did ye ever stop to think how silly the things which bother us just now will seem in a hundred years time ? Och, all the hooha and felderal there's been ! They burned one of my something-great-grandmothers for a witch—did I tell ye ? An' I think all she did was discover penicillin afore its time. What is it, Moishe ? Trouble with Stephanie ?"

Caught short by the abrupt shift of subject, Maurice had begun a nod before he could control himself. " But a lot of other things more important," he hastened to add.

" If ye have to worry," said McNulty flatly, " let it be Stephanie first. *That* ought to be most important to you."

" I suppose so," said Maurice wearily. " But that all comes from something else."

" Then clear up what's at the root of it," said McNulty. " Ye should have figured that out for yourself. What it boils down to is this : most of the time people let themselves get pushed around not by real difficulties, but by how difficult a problem appears. If you don't let anything knock you off balance, you can handle anything.',

He seemed momentarily almost embarrassed by his own sincerity, and Maurice kept his eyes on the folded letter. At length McNulty got up, saying that he'd kept Maurice from his work long enough.

After he had gone, Maurice waited in silence until he could make up his mind. Then he reached for the phone and called the number printed on the head of the letter in his hand. To the woman who answered he said, " I want to speak to Dr. Alfred Quick."

" Who is calling, please ?"

Maurice hesitated. " It's in connection with a former patient of his—a Miss Julia Reese." He glanced through the letter. " She was with you about—a year ago, I believe."

" Can you give me a little more information ?"

" I'm her—uh—present employer. There are some things I should like to consult the doctor about—"

" You understand that the doctor cannot discuss the affairs of his patients without their permission ?" The woman sounded rather tired, as if she had said the same thing a thousand times.

" Of course. He won't be violating any—professional confidences." Maurice was surprised to find how fast his mind could still work. " It might perhaps be best for me to see him personally, in fact. At any time convenient—"

He arranged the appointment and rang off with a certain feeling of self-satisfaction. Whether the deed was productive or not, he was starting to do something, at any rate—starting to understand.

McNulty was quite right, of course ; he had been barnstormed into panic by the appearance of impossibility and fantasy in events. Julia was right, too ; he had to assume there was a pattern underlying all—and that it was part of the way the universe worked. Looking down at the letter, he felt a stir of pity for what it implied about her.

Balance, she had said. Action and reaction. There had been enough action ; now was the time for him to do something to counter it.

So when the wrong door of the office—the outer one leading straight into the corridor, on which was written PLEASE USE NEXT DOOR —swung wide, he did not need to look up to feel the prickling sensation on his nape. He remembered that he had wondered what a man felt like when he met Satan walking up and down in the earth, and a ridiculous idea suggested itself to him, so he uttered it with complete confidence.

" Come in, Mr. Ba'al," he said.

VII

"You couldn't break my neck by any means at your disposal just now," said Bell, as if continuing a previous conversation, and Maurice nodded.

"I suppose not. What effect would it have on you if I asked the power to break it in return for whatever you want me to do?"

Bell dropped into the visitor's chair and giggled in his fat, incongruous manner. "You should be able to think of something better than that. Now to break the neck of all the men who have kissed your wife since she married you—"

Startled, Maurice felt his lips tremble.

"—you would have to include yourself," continued Bell imperturbably, "and exclude me, because I no longer class myself as a man in the ordinary sense. Let me put it like this: once there was an animal which—because it had extremities capable of grasping—had developed the habit of wielding stones and branches. Nonetheless, it was still an animal. Then it acquired the ability to prepare its tools, to chip the stone and harden the wood in a fire, and it was no longer an animal. It was a man. It had seen a certain rather fundamental difference between future effort and present effort for future gain—to wit, that present effort can often be less demanding and is usually less direct."

"And what has this to do with me?"

"Oh, one day this hypothetical newly-manlike creature taught another of its kind to do the same." Bell grinned at him, and Maurice had to clench his hands to stop them shaking.

"Was I right to call you Ba'al?" he said harshly. "I believe I was."

"Even if you were, you understand something different from reality by the term."

Again Maurice felt the threat of loss of control; he was still overawed by Bell's ability to appear perfectly rational despite his apparent lack of logic. Seizing his opportunity to regain superiority, he said, "All right, forget that for a moment. You asked me a question when you came here before. You said what did I want? Before I answer, I want to know what *you* want in return, and also how you can promise to fulfil my demands."

"I'll handle the second part first," said Bell. "It's simpler to understand. I can promise it because I'm like the creature who has learnt to chip stones; all its pupil wanted, or could conceive of wanting, was bounded by its experience of needing food and warmth and sex. The ability to plan ahead was enough to satisfy those desires. I can satisfy yours, likewise."

"And supposing I have no desires—?" began Maurice, but Bell gave a sound of disgust.

"You think I'm crude, don't you? Your imagination is bounded by the same limits as that first man's! Do you think I would be so stupid as to offer you a million pounds, or a harem of Hollywood stars, of the chairmanship of this firm? Faugh!" He looked actively nauseated. Disturbed, Maurice stared at him.

"All right," he said as levelly as he could. "What else do you mean? Maybe my imagination *is* limited; I still can't think of what you're referring to."

"Possibly because you don't know you want it. In that case"—Bell shrugged as if it was the lightest thing in the world—"all I have to do is make you want it."

He crossed his feet and leaned back while Maurice took that astonishing assertion in ; before he could counter it, Bell went on. " I knew already, before I came this morning, what you would have to want before you would listen to me. You're capable of contentment, and I despise you for it. You're prepared to take what the world allows you and gape open-mouthed at how wonderful it all is. You're as contemptible as anyone else like you—*but* you have possibilities."

" Now we're coming to it," said Maurice coldly. " What do you want from me ?"

" You can't say that I *want*, in the same sense that you do ; wanting belongs to the man stage of development and I regard things more in the light of processes in operation. I can't make it clearer to you than by saying that if I give you what you want the act itself is advantageous to me."

" I can save you the trouble of making flint knives for yourself !" said Maurice, stung.

" Using a newly acquired power is joy, not drudgery."

Maurice looked at the wet pink lips. He thought of Julia, and of the dark place full of chanting. They were rooted in a common ground, and he had to find what it was or go under. He said, shooting blindly, " Is this the equivalent of demanding my soul ?"

" I told you I am not a devil. There is no such thing. Of course, the type of which I am a member may have appeared as diabolical to uncomprehending past ages ; now we meet with rather less opposition. The mass of humanity is approaching acceptance of the fundamental facts we represent."

Maurice remembered what McNulty had said about his witch-ancestress, and Bell seemed to read the thought from his eyes, for he laughed and said, " Exactly !"

" There is neither good nor evil—only the way the universe works," whispered Maurice. Bell nodded.

" It's neatly put like that," he said. " You're beginning to understand."

" How human are you ?" Maurice asked slowly.

" A doctor examining my body would find no difference." Bell giggled. " But then, the wolf who lunched off the first man to chip a flint noticed no difference in taste—merely, I imagine, found him rather older and tougher than usual. That was the result of more efficient weapons, though—a longer and more respected life."

" Why do you want me ?"

Bell seemed on the verge of rebuking his use of ' want ' again, but chose to answer him. " I don't—not especially. You *are* the one. And that's all. Man has imposed his prejudices on the universe for

a long time, and that's why he understands it so badly. By the way, it might help you to accept if you realise that you have unsuccessfully tried not to want what you do want—and if you think a while it will come to you." Bell rose. "The doors of this room both lead the same way," he finished obliquely. "You can't avoid it. Goodbye for now."

The closing of the door seemed to cut Maurice off from everything. Stephanie had reviled him ; he was cheating Julia ; Bell was trying to control him—no one else had any interest in him as a person and the realisation was shocking.

He wrote on the blotter, "There is neither good nor evil ; there is only the way the universe works."

After a while, he scratched out the first 'o' in 'good' and wrote in a 'd' before 'evil.' Then he sat and stared at it until the sentence swam before his eyes.

She waited until he was in his study ; then she followed him, closed the door and stood with her back against it, looking at him. "Well ?" she said in a voice that shook a little with restrained anger.

The accusation he had prepared to level at her suddenly went away from the tip of his tongue; he was aware that he had blame on his side, too, and that all there was left was for them to forgive. But—surely Stephanie knew there was blame on her also ? Yet one would not think it, watching her tap her foot and wait for his answer.

"Why did you do it ?" he said finally, emptily. She stood bolt upright and brought her hands down to her sides, clenched into white-knuckled fists.

"You have the *gall* to stand there and ask why *I* did something !" she half screamed. "You walk out and leave me and drive me half out of my mind, and then when you phone me you insult me and now you come home and accuse *me*—"

"Well, what did you expect me to do ?" he shouted furiously. "Stand around and watch that filthy Bell pawing you, and like it ?"

"God, but you have a foul mind," she said evenly. "Because he was good enough to help me do the dishes while you snored in a drunken stupor you jump to—"

"I *saw* you, blast it !"

"If you believe that you'll believe anything. Your dirty little imagination supplied the details for some dream or other, I suppose, and on the strength of that—Ugh, you make me sick. I wonder why I ever married you. I must have been crazy like everyone in the family said I was."

The door closed on the last words as her tone mounted towards hysterical, and Maurice put his hands out wildly to steady himself ; the room seemed to be turning about him. More of this, and Bell was going to be proved right, he knew ; the thing he must be made to want was growing clearer momently in his mind.

How long had Stephanie been waiting to spill this poison ? How long had she regretted listening to his pleading instead of the sound, orthodox advice of her parents—parents who now never came to visit their daughter and son-in-law—only to see their grandchild Sandra ; the social indiscretions of the fathers, at least, shall not be visited on the children—how long had she been hiding it from him ?

And if it had taken only this to strip away the pretence, why had he not realised it earlier ? Because he had deluded himself ?

He looked at his face in the window-pane, reflected against the evening darkness. It was late, then ; he had spent more time than he thought trying to pluck up courage to go home. Sandra should be asleep by now, he realised, and saw that she wasn't as soon as the door swung ajar.

Her face twisted in momentary disappointment. " It's you," she said. " I hoped it was nice mister Bell."

Maurice stiffened ; Sandra continued blithely in her high light voice. " He was nice to mummy when you went away last night. Mummy cried terribly. I did, too." She found the tassel of her dressing gown interesting for a moment, and twirled it on the end of the cord as she spoke. " And you won't even say sorry like you always tell me to. I think you're horrible !" she finished, with a burst of passion, and turned to run from the room. Maurice caught her only a few steps into the hall and picked her up, struggling to calm his mind.

" Darling, you mustn't say things like that !" he exclaimed. Her dark eyes looked back at him steadily, though her cheeks seemed to be a little wet.

" You ran away," she said with contempt. " You ran away. Let me go."

He hesitated a moment ; then he kissed her, feeling her try to flinch away from him, and set her down barefoot on the floor. At once she ran towards the kitchen, calling her mother to take her up the stairs.

Maurice turned away, remembering the thoughts he had had—when ? Only the night before last ?

You ran away.

He had attempted to decree something out of existence ; he had sought to think away something he found displeasing. But the universe doesn't work that way.

Why me ?

Ask an atom of uranium why it, and not it's neighbour, undergoes spontaneous decay. Ask this tree in the pinewood why it, and not its neighbour, is struck by lightning and starts the fire which ruins a thousand acres. Ask the lovers, blind in ecstasy to all but their beloved, why out of millions they found each other.

He had looked into Sandra's eyes, and found behind them what he had turned away from to marry Stephanie.

But why had he need to make that decision, consciously ? Was it only in the hope of escaping from the past—the past he had been granted glimpses of these past two days ? It was ridiculous to hope to get away from that, when a chance remark by an angry man in a pub could bring it back.

Perhaps it was responsibility he had run from. The idea struck a chord in his mind, and he felt oddly certain he had chanced on a correct approach. He followed it through.

A man is part of his heritage as it is a part of him. If he had run, it was neither far nor fast enough to lose that. But he had been trampled down till now. He could continue to be trampled down ; the universe was patient. Inevitably, though, the balance would be found, the reaction would take place. And he could make it happen—now.

Abruptly, everything fell into place in a pattern. If his wife despised him and his daughter reviled him and no one else gave a damn, it was part of a chain of events run—far back into history. If he had to suffer, he wanted compensation—and he was suffering.

He felt like the bar of a scale. In one pan there were subjugation and persecution and revilement ; in the other nothing but insubstantial hopes, nonetheless, the bar still wavered equally to either side.

Suppose he went back to what he had tried to deny ; at least he would gain the thanks of a people—his people. *Let me strike out an eye for an eye struck out—*

Something that caught the light brightly was swinging before his gaze, like the scale wavering in his brain. He struggled for a long time before he made out what it was. Then he saw it was a key ; he recognised it for the key of his own front door, dangling on a length of shiny chain. A feather could tip the balance.

The feather could be the words of an angry man. Or a private quarrel. Or perhaps it was the memory of the laughter of a child on hearing how King John tore out the teeth of the money lenders . . .

"You know what you want," said Bell. He tossed up the key and caught it in the palm of his hand. Maurice raised his bent head and nodded. His throat was dry.

"Yes, I know what I want."

"And that is— ?"

"Revenge," said Maurice huskily. "I want three thousand years' worth of revenge."

VIII

To his old self, the clarity of vision and the sense of ineluctable purpose which the decision brought would have been frightening— but his old self could never have achieved it. It was as if history became like a map spread out before him; he could look down on it and be within it, part of it, at the same time.

He was no longer only Maurice Howard. He was that and more, and also a member of something bigger. Around him he was aware of two other presences, similar and complementary to him, but he could not describe them in human terms.

This happened not because men willed it, but because it must : the reiterated theme pounded at his mind, and he nodded without needing to use his head for the gesture to be understood. *And this will happen likewise, for the same and no other reason* : that too he accepted.

He watched, and analysed, and agreed. The system of human events no longer baffled him, but was crystal-clear ; shorn of the dichotomical confusion of good and evil, which he could now see bore no relation to the real world, the underlying unity of that world became apparent.

And there was strain in his mind, and the moment of vision had passed. Shuddering as if he had been rescued from a close brush with death, Maurice looked round at familiar surroundings and found that Bell had gone.

It left one question burning in his mind : *who are we ? Why can we see this ?* Now that he was alone in his mind again, he was vaguely surprised to realise that ' we ' included not only himself and Bell, but someone else also. He frowned and then discarded the problem as un-urgent.

The first thing that would have to be attended to was the matter of Stephanie ; if she had poisoned Sandra's mind against him, she needed a lesson. He went purposefully in search of her, and proceeded to tell her where he was going and for what purpose, making spitefully

sure that she understood he was doing it in revenge for what she had done with Bell. He did not question why he no longer felt angry at Bell.

He left her white-faced and frozen in a state beyond crying, and satisfaction filled his mind warmly as he left the house.

Certain that she would be waiting, he went straight to Julia's flat, and she was. He found a chance to replace the letter he had taken unknowingly, and reminded himself that he intended to see the psychiatrist tomorrow about her. One thing struck him as puzzling about the room tonight, but he was otherwise occupied and gave it little thought. It was not until he left the following morning that he put his finger on it, and then it startled him into halting abruptly in the middle of the pavement he was walking along.

There was no sign of the ESP equipment or the ouija board now.

The pattern in his mind wavered and fell apart because the lack was not part of it. It was *wrong*. Without the pattern, he was suddenly lost and helpless again, so deeply did its presence affect his thinking.

But if the pattern failed, that meant it was in error—an approximation, to be discarded in favour of a better one. Shaken, he turned into an early restaurant and sat down at a table while he tried to fit the chaotic facts together anew.

Postulate that it was deliberate and planned ; if so, it was clumsy, intended to distract his mind from the subjects connected with the equipment. Why remove it when he had already seen it and passed what comment he had to make ? Unless it had been there specially for the previous night only.

" Tools to control the universe ?" he had said—he remembered the biting sarcasm he had put into the words. And Julia had said that they worked—

They worked.

He had failed to take her up on the statement ; it had gone down into his mind quickly and taken root ; when it was needed, its effect was there, spreading. He accepted. His mind was directed. When it was no longer needed, the focal object was removed.

Therefore he had been required to permit something to be done to him. The pattern now emerging was different, and ugly ; the logic of it was twisted.

" I said don't you want anything ?" a shrill voice broke into his consciousness, and he looked up and saw a tousle-haired woman with a greasy apron round her sagging body standing over him. He was

hungry, he knew, though it has not disturbed him, and he ordered food absently. Then he returned to the hunt for logic in chaos.

What connection had ESP and the related psi subjects with this affair, anyway ? He wished he had more than a stumbling layman's knowledge of the field, and an unexpected hindrance to his newly clear vision became obvious : one cannot fit knowledge one does not possess into a pattern.

As a start, though : Bell had appeared to be able to read his thoughts from the first moment they met. Why ? The talent was not part of what had come to him since his decision.

Extra-temporal perception was supposed to be another part of it. How real, then, were his visions of other places and times ? Had he ' been ' there ? Had he witnessed *actual* past events ? How ? Under what influence ? They had belonged to something he had known of vividly since childhood—a theme which inevitably coloured his life. Had that fact forced a too-ready acceptance on him ?

The questions pounded at his bemused brain, and he felt vague wonder that one barely noticed fact should so destroy the beautiful vision he had possessed—like a stick stirring up mud from the bottom of a translucent pool.

It was no use. He needed data he did not have to complete his comprehension. Where he could get them, he did not know, but he had one source for more information, at least, though it did not seem directly connected with his problem : Dr. Alfred Quick.

Rising, he left his plate half full and dropped more than enough money on the table to cover the cost. He could not wait now ; this was too important.

It was a long trip from where he was ; he fumed impotently at the slowness of the journey and tried not to think of Stephanie and Sandra. Instead, he remembered something old McNulty had once said to him in his perpetually joking way : " What you and we have in common, Moishe, is a hatred of being made fools of—and that goes for anything, not just business."

If there was deception in this, Maurice knew he would stop at nothing to repair it.

" Oh, no," said Maurice smoothly. " Miss Reese is an excellent worker—very capable, in fact. But she did tell me, you see, about her time here with you, and since she seems to be disturbed a little, even now, I thought it might be helpful to her if I understood her trouble better."

Dr. Quick rubbed his long chin with the back of his right hand ; his face was set in a slight frown. " It's not usual, you know, for me to discuss my former patients, and indeed professional ethics forbid—"

Maurice sat back and crossed his legs ; he made a mental effort to cross his fingers also. The chance, nonetheless, was worth taking if it would lead to comprehension.

" Perhaps, then, I should tell you what Miss Reese has already said to me about herself, and you'll see that she can oviously have no objection to the matter being discussed.

" Her original trouble was—I'm not familiar with the technical terms, but I believe this is right—paranoid. She had a sort of conviction that the world owed her a living—that she *ran* it, almost. This was characterized by contempt of the people she came in touch with, and especially of their ideas of the functioning of the universe. Her objection to all religious, ethical and philosophical systems bordered on the hysterical."

He held his breath, but Dr. Quick no more than inclined his head in the start of a nod. Maurice felt unutterably relieved, and started to extrapolate a little more boldly.

" From her description of her experiences, I suppose she was sufficiently ill to have to undergo restrictive therapy. Maybe she gave evidence of being sadistic—that's nothing she told me," he added hastily. " Just an educated guess."

Quick had clearly relaxed. " I'm sorry I was tempted to disbelieve you for a while, Mr. Howard," he said. " Yes, your information from Miss Reese is quite correct. Might I know what the special fact was which prompted you to inquire of me— ?" He left the rest delicately hanging in the air.

" It's a question of adjustment," said Maurice carefully. " Though, as I say, she's a very capable worker, the air of conscious superiority with which she treats the other people around her doesn't make for good adjustment. She's all the time living deliberately, as though she were having to think long and deeply about everything she does. What I'd like to know is whether there would be any way of—well, anything I could do, which would smooth this out. I feel rather sorry for her, because I always think it's a pity to see someone so young having nervous trouble of this kind which depends a lot on the people around—"

He was beginning to flounder ; Quick, fortunately, did not seem to notice it owing to some preoccupation. Not looking at Maurice, he rapped one of his rather prominent front teeth with the eraser on top of a bright yellow pencil.

" Since you knew of my treatment of Miss Reese," he said slowly, " I take it you knew I have kept in touch with her since she left here ? Yes ?" Maurice nodded. " But I haven't actually seen her. I'd like to know whether she's given any evidence of a rather odd talent which may have started the whole thing—" He laughed. " ' May ' have ! It's peculiar for me to say that about a supposedly successful treatment."

Maurice leaned forward, a great light breaking in on his mind. " Mind if I say what I think you mean before you tell me ? Is it a —a trick of guessing what people are thinking, almost to the very word ? "

Quick gave him a sharp glance. " Yes," he said after a pause. " I take it that she still can do it ? "

Maurice answered something ; he was not thinking of what he was saying. It was much more important that he had found what was missing in his concept ' we '—the group who could understand the working of the universe.

The doctor went on thoughtfully, " It was almost uncanny when I first met her. She maintained—perhaps she still does, you would know—that she could integrate all the factors contributing to any person's thoughts, that people's minds were deterministic and she could follow their working. It was the mainspring of her paranoid assumption of superiority— "

He was talking, Maurice realised, as if his listener was another doctor discussing the peculiarities of an anonymous case with him ; his detachment was clinical.

" You—you put her on to ESP experiments as an alternative ?" he hazarded, and Quick nodded.

" Unorthodox therapy, and myself I think the so-called psi powers are balderdash ; nonetheless, it seemed to work, and certainly it removed the major symptom if it did not eliminate the root of the trouble." He sighed gustily ; with a helpless spread of his hands, he finished, " That's about all we can expect of our methods—that they should work tolerably well."

" *They work* . . ." Julia spoke in Maurice's memory.

" Doctor," he said rather awkwardly, " you've said more than you intended to, I suspect. Please let me assure you that everything you've told me will be kept confidential, and of course that I'll do all I can to make sure Miss Reese benefits as a result."

Quick raised one shoulder half an inch. " Sometimes one takes a chance like that, Mr. Howard. I'm glad to have your assurance, nonetheless. Thank you."

And that, Maurice thought as he took his leave, *is something I like about human beings* . . .

IX

He found them together for the first time when he arrived at Julia's flat. They knew as soon as they saw him, of course, that they had failed, though perhaps owing to some association of their talent with vision they seemed startled to find him at the door. Their astonishment gave only a moment's delay, at most ; in that time Maurice prepared himself for what was coming.

This time, it was very bad indeed. This time, it was not merely threats or warnings or ascetically devised proofs that he required vengeance. This was punishment, tainted with angry disappointment and perhaps thousands of years of frustration and failure.

In his mind he found and tapped unsuspected reservoirs of endurance ; he discovered too that if he kept his eyes wide open the illusion could not be completed, but was always overlaid with a picture of the real room in which he stood. That gave him something to cling to, a wall against which to brace his back—but he dared not so much as blink, and his eyes felt hot and the rims of their lids stung bitterly.

In that time—but whether during it or around it he could not tell —he was an ant trodden on by a boot, a heretic consigned to the flames, a prisoner whipped at the cart's tail, a captive among people who spoke blasphemy which shook his mind at its roots, a refugee hiding in year-long darkness while persecutors stamped around ; all at once, it seemed, and then in some such order as that successively, with the suffering growing momently away from the physical and towards the mental.

How it could be, he did not attempt to guess ; he knew only that his mind was bending, leaning aside like the trunk of a slender tree in a gale ; his ability to divide the real from the false grew steadily weaker, and yet the knowledge that if he broke under the strain he would be useless to his conquerors anyway sustained him.

They had failed, and this was their last surge of effort.

I should never have taken them on both together ! The thought crossed his mind in the wake of a blast of agonizing pain, and instantly he knew that the idea was stupid ; they were two without being separate. If a worm is cut in half, how much and which of the original worm's memories go to each part ? Biologically, the worm is successful ; its two halves live. Split a man down the middle ; both parts die. And yet—if the worm offended man—the enormous, complicated, fragile creature could say : *cease to be* ! and the small, inconspicuous, resilient one would be doomed.

But these beings had offended man—long ago and many times—and though they were not worms, man had gathered his forces and decreed them unwanted.

Maybe it wasn't done consciously, or deliberately, or in full knowledge of the facts. But he remembered what Bell had said : perhaps he had been wise not to wish him a good morning the first time they met. Wise from the point of view of mankind, at least ; in essence, what these beings were striving for was to be wished good morning —to be accorded the same tolerant, casual, unthinking acceptance as members of the same species—that would suffice them.

But it could never be that way. And they knew it. If it had not been in their natures to struggle for survival like all other species, they would not have lasted even this long, but they had made one fatal mistake which their most frantic efforts would now never succeed in rectifying.

And if I hadn't been the one to stand against them and defy them, the thought came comfortingly, *someone else, inevitably, would have seen through their tricks and delusions.*

The ache in his eyes was intolerable ; a sense of loneliness beyond bearing, of rejection and disgust, filled his mind, making him ask himself whether anything was worth this agony, which would never earn him even the thanks of his fellow men, since none of them would ever know about it.

Detachedly, as if his whole personality had been slowed down, he grew aware that he was starting to blink. His eyelids were drifting slowly down between his brain and the view from the window on which he was concentrating. Desperately, he strove to counteract the movement, but although his eyes seemed to be closing so slowly, the channels of his nerves were clogged and the order did not pass.

The lids met ; immediately, panickily, he was opening them again, not knowing what he would see now, knowing only that if the illusion were to become complete, he would go mad.

And then, very slowly, he could relax. He was on hands and knees one step inside the door ; his body was locked rigidly at all the joints, and his clenched hands were numb, his lower legs tingling painfully. There was sweat pouring down his neck ; his clothes felt as if they were dripping. Wetness smeared his chin, but when he stiffly moved his jaw it was not the salt of sweat he tasted ; it was the disgusting sickly sweetness of blood. After that he grew aware of the soreness where he had bitten into his lower lip.

As if he were moving an inanimate object, he pushed his body sacklike back on his heels by sheer strength of arm, and turned in one piece from the waist because of the way his neck was locked solid to see what had happened to the others.

When he saw, he forgot the pain and discomfort in a vast surge of pure joy. Spitting blood, he spoke huskily and with delight.

"I beat you! *By God, I beat you!*"

Then he collapsed.

No more than ten or fifteen minutes had passed when, aching in every limb, he struggled to get his back up against the wall and regain his self-control. Automatically, he got out his cigarettes and lit one. Dark, drying blood stained the tip when he took it from his mouth.

He rested for as long as it took him to smoke the cigarette to half its length; then he got to his feet, waited with his eyes closed while his heart caught up with the strain of lifting blood to his brain again, and crossed the room to where the beings lay slumped side by side on the bed. They were quite helpless.

"It couldn't be any other way," he said after a while, trying to keep pride out of his voice. The one called Julia scowled and struck at him, but the mind behind the blow was exhausted and had no more effect than the slash of a kitten's claw. After that it began to drool a little; it was still thinking, but it had no energy to spare for its body.

Nonetheless, he hesitated a long time before he could bring himself to leave them alone even for the time it would take him to get to the telephone he had seen as he entered. He made the messages brief and urgent when he did go, and knew deep relief when on returning he found both of them still in the room.

He dragged their limbs into more relaxed positions and took the armchair where he could watch them. As much to straighten things out in his own mind as to impress his knowledge on them, he began to talk while he waited.

"I've got no way of telling whether I've figured you out right. I just have a theory, and it fits. I don't expect you to tell me if I'm right, either; I wouldn't want to give the destroyer of mankind a chance to gloat over his triumph. Still, you run on different principles; a struggle to survive is about all we have in common, and there isn't room on this one planet for two such vigorous drives.

"I suppose you understand us much better than we do you; we've been able to ignore you for a long time, while I imagine you were studying us. Not that that gave you much of an advantage—you still sized me up wrong for a long while. You thought it was going to be as simple as it once was, that bribery with the obvious things would persuade me: sensual pleasure, deliverance from restricting morality, power over others shackled by scruples . . .

"I began to follow what was happening when I wondered why Stephanie denied kissing you, Bell. I know my wife; I love her very

dearly, and I believe what she tells me. I didn't then. But it made me wonder whether I'd actually seen the things I experienced, or whether they were illusions. Of course, by then you'd found my weak spot ; if you'd been less ready to capitalize your achievement, you could have kept me on your side . . .

" Oh, what's the use of talking about *what if* ? I've won, and with that we've proved we're better than you the only way it ever can be proved—by surviving. *We work*, along with the universe. You don't.

" I thought about the message which couldn't have been on the dictaphone record—and suddenly I saw that maybe it wasn't on the record. But Julia had heard it—and Julia had a gift for reading people's thoughts which Dr. Quick remembered vividly. As for you, Bell, you could take the words right out of my mouth, couldn't you ? I didn't get any of that ability when I—came over to you, if you like. That isn't a human talent. Admitting that, I saw that if you could read thoughts, you might be able to implant them. You can't control me —if you could have, you'd have made me walk out of the window when I came here—but you tried to make me do what you want by making me want it, too. You had to make me think in terms of patterns so that you could follow my different kind of mind ; it was a mistake, because I had to come to a conclusion then.

" Neither of you was human ; both of you were hostile."

Maurice shifted and studied the faces of the beings with something like compassion—the pity one knows is misplaced if wasted on inevitable failure, and yet bestows, nonetheless.

" I don't know what you began as," he went on after a pause. " I suppose you originated on earth, not another planet, because of the mistake you made. I picture your mind—incomprehensible to me, of course—watching the rise of life and throwing in its lot with the victor of the evolutionary conflict, choosing survival as a parasite rather than independence. And that was the mistake.

" Offend your host, and your living is gone ; depend too much, and freedom will kill.

" It's probably easier for you to bear—this destruction. Men would find it impossible to stand. I wonder if you're the last of your kind," he added at a tangent, seeking the answer in the undying hatred behind their eyes. " If you really see the universe in terms of whether it works that way or not, you have no need for comfort. Maybe you're closer to reality than we are, that way.

"Even if you are, though, it doesn't matter a blind damn to me. I'm human. I'm one of your host species, whose motives you tried to govern to suit your own ends—whatever they are—and which turned out to have been a fatal choice.

"We called you gods and devils for your manifest powers ; it makes no difference whether there are such things as devils or not, because you and your kind do the things we men attribute to devils and that *makes* you devils. So we rebelled. So we denied you the patterns of life necessary to your survival ; I think we might claim to have driven you mad as a closer analogy than killing you off, because it's patterns of being you need, not food and warmth and shelter, as we do. I can say it, but it doesn't mean anything to me, of course.

"And this, in turn, wouldn't mean anything to you. But it does to me." Maurice wet his lips and spoke slowly, feeling the all-embracing certainty of the truth he had discovered. "Whether there's good or evil is unimportant ; what is good is what man says and thinks is good. You are evil, and because I am a man it behoves me to destroy you."

Not in malice, nor in revenge ; not from prejudice or fear or hatred —solely because that which is good is good to me, and that which is not, is evil because I am Man.

He said nothing more after that because there was nothing else to say, until the street bell rang and he went down the stairs very quickly, hoping the people he was expecting were arriving in the right order. His hope was fulfilled ; there stood on the doorstep a burly male nurse and Dr. Quick, but beyond the street was empty.

The doctor exclaimed in amazement at Maurice's appearance, but Maurice insisted it was nothing, and showed the two upstairs to Julia's room. At that, he was forgotten.

"How did it happen ?" Quick asked after a long and careful survey of the pair. Maurice shook his head.

"The same trouble," he muttered. "They went for me, and I suppose something snapped— If it hadn't, I'd have been dead."

"I'm not asking for an accurate psychological diagnosis," said Quick mildly. His eyes fell on Julia's slack face again, and he continued, "You may not know. But you suspect. You suspect that people like her have trouble existing in a human world, because they *aren't* entirely human. Humanity, after all, is in *here*." He put his hand on his left temple, and glanced at Maurice again.

"They lack something, though. Empathy? Compassion? I can't sum it up in one word. They refuse to believe that kindness is other than foolish; they work for profit and not for satisfaction; they drive you down and expect to be driven down, if circumstances change."

They've changed; Maurice felt a little sneaking pleasure in the thought, which countered the shock of hearing Quick suggest that these two were not human.

"They're incapable of suspending logic, too," went on the level voice of the psychologist. "They can't manage that complete reversal of position which people exemplify in turning the other cheek—refusing to seize the chance of revenge—hoping that even the wickedest man has a conscience."

Why then—Maurice felt suddenly bewildered as something utterly unexpected struck him—*why then do we, who obviously do the stupidest and most dangerous things, pass the universe's test, and not they, who work to its pattern*?

He had done those things; he had refused revenge even though tempted, and he had wanted and not wanted at the same time the other things he had been offered. He had come so dangerously close to destruction because he had almost refused to recognise what mankind calls evil, as if it could be thought out of existence.

And yet that was the one thing which could, he realised.

"What will you do with them?" he said to Quick, noticing that the other's eyes were on him musingly. The doctor shrugged.

"What we can. Phone for an ambulance, will you?" he added to the male nurse standing by the door, and the man nodded and departed. "We'll try again with Julia, and start on this other man here—what's his name?"

"Ba'al," said Maurice, and Quick gave him a startled glance.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Bell," Maurice said in a louder voice, and Quick relaxed visibly. He bent to check Julia's pulse, and Maurice let his face form into a smile, though it broke the scab on his lip and when he reached up to wipe it his finger came away freshly red.

It was worth a smile, for he had seen what made mankind pass the test of the universe. It lay in Quick's matter-of-fact statement: *we'll try again.*

We'll share our success—that was what it meant. We won't destroy you, though you almost did it to us. We'll re-form you and reform you, and we won't be beaten by you because, in the end, you will be —ourselves.

The doorbell sounded again, and Quick glanced up. In a voice which he was surprised to note trembled a little, Maurice said, "It'll be for me, I think—I'll go."

He paused before a mirror in the hallway to remove the most obvious signs of his ordeal—he did not want to be an object of pity now, of all times. Then he breathed deeply to try and slow the pounding of his heart, and went to the door.

It was Stephanie, as he had expected : her face flushed and set, her hands clasped together as if to stop them shaking.

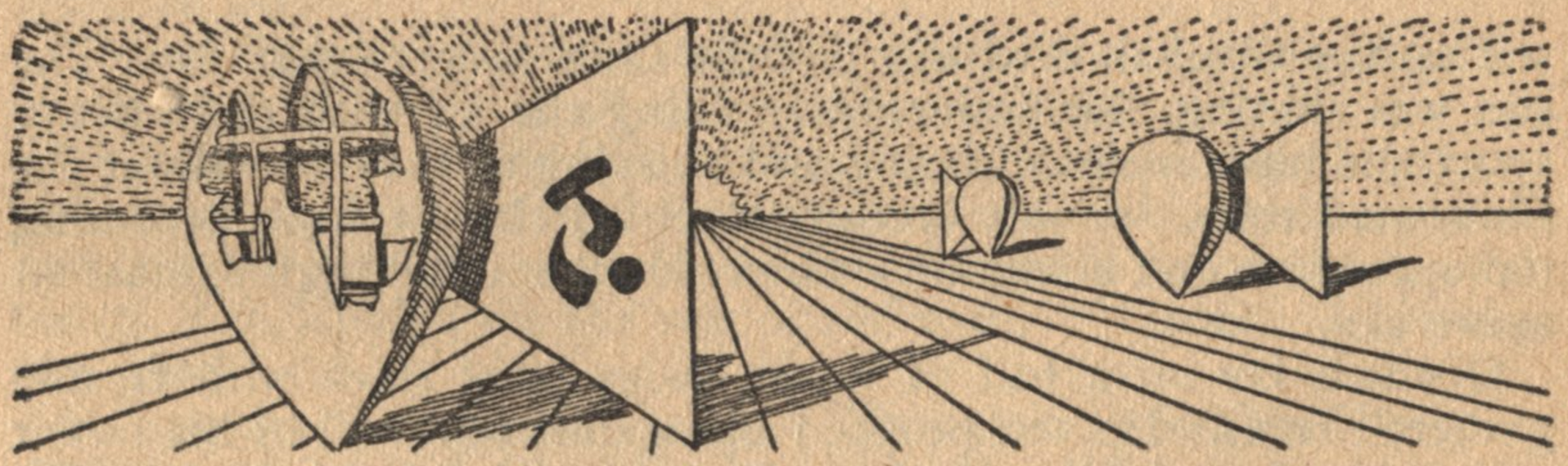
There was silence between them for a little while. Then he held out his arms diffidently. " Hello, darling," he said.

Then she was half-sobbing against his shoulder, clinging tightly to him. After a few moments, she managed to control herself enough to draw back and look him in the eyes.

" Hello, Moishe darling," she answered.

After a while, they heard the awaited ambulance draw up—they were seeing nothing but each other. They turned and started to walk together down the street.

—John Brunner



Short stories by E. C. Tubb are few and far between now that most of his time is taken up as an editor, but when he does manage some mental relaxation it is good to notice that the old 'touch' is still there. Take the inevitable matter of dying, for instance . . .

A FINE DAY FOR DYING

By E. C. TUBB

The day Obediah died was just the same as any other day. The sun was shining, the flowers were filling the air with their heavy scent, the birds were twittering and chirping as they flew about the blossomed trees. A soft breeze prevented the air from becoming too oppressive and a few, tiny white clouds sported high against an azure sky.

Obediah lay on a bed of woven twigs piled thick with freshly gathered ferns. He was propped up against one wall of his bower and the women had washed his face and combed his beard. He didn't look ill aside from a slight pallor and a blueness around the lips and it was obvious that he was enjoying himself intensely. He smiled at me as I ducked through the low doorway and held out his hands.

"John! Glad you could make it in time."

"You aren't going to die," I said. "You've been around too long."

"Too long is right," he said feelingly. "Far too long." He grunted and pressed a hand to his side. "I'm going, right enough. First time in my life that I ever felt a pain."

"What's it like?"

That was Sam, Obediah's grandson, or maybe great-great-grandson, I doubted whether the old man knew himself. A man loses count after a while and, with everyone looking much like everyone else when full-grown, it's hard to tell. He hunched forward, his eyes eager as he asked the question but before Obediah could answer Sam's mother, or maybe it was his daughter, had pulled him away from the sick-bed.

"Shame on you," she snapped. "Such a question at a time like this!"

From the way she spoke and the way he looked I guessed that she was Sam's wife after all. His second wife, that is, or maybe his third, I remembered his first. She had been the eldest daughter of my seventh wife's sister who had left Sam to take up with Fred, my fifteenth son. At least that's who I think he is but, as I said, a man loses count what with all the moving around and partner-changing. Not that it matters except at a dying. Then everyone claims relationship and tries to get in on the act.

Obediah heaved himself to a more comfortable position on the bed and smiled at Sam.

"Let the boy alone," he said to the woman. "It was a natural thing to ask."

"If you're sure you don't mind?" She was as eager as Sam for the answer, as eager as all of us in the bower.

"I don't mind." Obediah grunted again and his lips became a little more blue. I reached for a fruit, tore the skin with my teeth and handed him the succulent pulp. He took a mouthful, swallowed, then handed me the rest of the fruit. "Thank's, John, that was good."

"The pain?" reminded Sam. "What does it feel like?"

"The pain," said Obediah, and paused. I knew the old man had done it deliberately, determined to enjoy every moment of his dying. "It's bad," he said, and paused again. "I can't really tell you how it is because you've never felt anything like it." He frowned, grasping for words. "Like something sharp digging into you, but that's no good because you wouldn't know what that is either. Or a hand gripping you inside." He nodded. "That's it. A hand getting hold of something inside and squeezing."

"I've been squeezed," said one of the women. "It didn't hurt."

"Different sort of squeezing," I said. "Would it be like having a baby?"

"Never had a baby," said Obediah, and chuckled at his own wit. "I wouldn't know."

"I've had babies," said the woman who had been squeezed. "Nothing to it. Just feel a little heavy like as if you'd eaten too much fruit then it's all over." She looked thoughtful. "Would that be pain?"

No one answered her. We were all busy with our thoughts as we always were at a dying, wondering just what it was like and knowing that no matter how often it was explained we could never really understand what was meant by pain. No one felt pain until they were dying and no one who felt it ever stayed behind to feel it a second time. They didn't feel it long for the first time, either. To feel it as he did meant that old Obediah was getting ready to leave us.

"If you see my sister, Mattie," said a woman slowly, knowing the liberty she was taking. "Tell her that I'm thinking of her."

"Your sister!" Another woman snorted. "She's all right where she is. Anyway, you're hardly kinfolk and you can't expect Obediah to worry his head with all sorts of trifles where he's going. My mother, now, that's different. You tell her that her first-born, Susan, is looking forward to joining her soon, Obediah. Don't you forget now."

"And my father, Matthew, you tell him . . ."

"And, Herman, he'd like to know . . ."

"Don't forget to look up, Rachael, she . . ."

The din as ten women, eight men and half-a-dozen youngsters yelled their messages for Obediah to take and deliver was deafening. I stood it for as long as I could and then yelled for them to shut up. There was a shocked silence and then someone voiced the objection I'd been waiting for.

"He ain't kinfolk," said one of the women. They always keep track better than the men. "What's he doing here, anyway?"

"He's my friend," said Obediah. "I asked him to come here and I want him to stay here." He glared at them. "It's my dying, isn't it?"

It was and they couldn't argue. One word from him and they'd all have to wait outside, but I thought it best to be politic. I rose and stepped towards the door.

"I'm hungry," I said. "I'll go and get something to eat."

"You're coming back?" said Obediah.

"I'll be back. Maybe you'd better take the messages while I'm away." I smiled at them. "I wouldn't want to interfere in family business."

Obediah's bower was, as usual, nestled under a clump of trees. Fruit trees, naturally, there were no others. They bore both fruit and blossom at the same time so that they supplied sight, smell and sustenance. I chose a couple of big ones, tearing off the skin and eating the pulp. As it never rained the fruit-juice was the only way to quench the thirst and another fruit with a more solid interior supplied food. I'd never wondered about the diet before but, standing in the sunshine, listening to the drone of voices from the bower, it struck me that it was never endingly monotonous.

Like the sunshine, the azure sky, the scent of flowers and the trill of birds. Just the same day after day after day. I was still thinking about it when Sam came from the bower and waved to me.

"He wants to see you," he said. "Alone."

"Alone?"

"That's right." He looked abashed. "He reminded us that we'd forgotten to gather fruits for the waiting."

I stared at him then ducked inside. Obediah grinned at me from the bed and then waved at the others.

"You heard me," he said. "Go and get some fruit, lots of fruit. A fine dying this is turning out to be with hardly nothing to eat." Hurry now, or I'll send you all out for good."

They didn't much like the idea of leaving me behind but liked the idea of being ordered from the dying even less. Their main worry was that I would give Obediah some private messages to take with him, a privilege they considered should be reserved for the family alone. One of the women lingered by the door of the bower.

"You won't go until we come back, Obediah? Promise?"

"I promise." The old man grimaced as she left us alone. "Women! They make me sick."

I didn't answer that one, I didn't have to. After a while the fun dies out of marriage and, no matter how often you change partner, you can't get it back. Have enough women and, in the end, they all act and seem alike. Invariably men, women too for that matter, tended to live alone as they grew older.

"What do you think of it, John?" said the old man. "Death, I mean?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Given it much thought?"

"Some." I hesitated. "I suppose that it's like going on a journey in a way. You know, going from here to someplace else."

"I've done that," he said. "When I was young I did quite a bit of wandering around. Never found anything different about anywhere I visited though."

"Everywhere looks the same," I agreed. I'd found that out for myself too. Everyone get's restless when young and wants to look around. Not that it did any good, every place looked exactly the same as every other place and, after a while, you're content just to settle down and take what is offered.

"I remember talking to Martin at his dying," said Obediah thoughtfully. "He told me that he thought it must be a change. You know, like the blossom turns into the fruit. He said we might not even be able to remember all the messages we take with us, that we might not even recognise the ones that have gone before us." He looked anxiously at me. "You think that could be right, John?"

"I don't know. I told you that I haven't thought about it much." I misread his expression and tried to console him. "I wouldn't worry about it though."

"Worry!" He snorted. "I'm not worried."

"I thought you might be. About the change."

"Change is the thing I crave for," he said. "I don't care what sort or how much, just as long as it's a change."

He sighed and I sighed with him. It was hard to think of things being other than what they were, as hard, for example, as one man to hurt another, or for a woman to cry with anything but laughter, or for the fleecy white clouds to cover the sun. It was just possible to imagine these things but that was all. The reality was something so far removed from experience as to remain a dream.

Sam returned then leading the other men and the women and the youngsters. They all carried a great heap of fruit so that, what with them and the fruits, the bower was more crowded than before.

One of the women, the one who had lingered at the door, looked sharply at me then smiled at Obediah.

"Almost ready to go?"

"Almost ready." He grunted as he pressed his hand to his side. "Pain's getting worse."

"It'll soon be over." She sat beside him, peeled a fruit and pressed it in his hand. "You just eat this right up now. You don't want to die with your throat so dry that you can't speak." She looked anxious. "You haven't forgotten my message now, have you?"

"I haven't forgotten."

"Or mine?"

"Or mine?"

For a few minutes the rush of voices drowned out all other sounds as each pressed his or her claim. Privately I thought that, if Obediah was to try and deliver them all, he was due for a pretty busy time. That was if he could deliver them at all, no one had any reason to suppose that he could, still he was going the same way that others had and it was logical to assume that he would meet up with them again.

He winked at me and, when the noise had died, I leaned close to him.

"Them and their messages," he whispered. "I've forgotten them already." He chuckled and then became serious. "But for you, John, it's different. Can I carry a message for you?"

"No thanks."

"You sure?" He sounded surprised. "Nothing at all?"

"No."

"As you wish." He seemed hurt at my failure to grasp the opportunity he was giving me. Anyone else would have jumped at it, dyings were rare enough and there was no other way to send on word to old friends. I tried to soothe him down.

"If you meet anyone who would know me just remind them that I'll be seeing them soon. Will you do that?"

"I'll do it."

"Thanks."

I sat back. There was one other thing to say but the time was not ripe. I'd only been to a couple of dyings but I knew that, towards the very end, Obediah's breathing would become loud and ragged. His knees would tend to jerk and his hands to clench. Then, and only then, would be the best time to remind him of his final obligation.

Not that I had high hopes of it doing any good. As far as I knew it had never done good yet, but I hoped my friendship with the old man would prove the deciding factor. I could understand a man wanting to ignore his immediate family but friendship, that was different. So when I heard the loud breathing and saw the jerking limbs I leaned forward, pushing Sam to one side as I did so.

"Obediah!"

"Yes?" His voice shocked me. It had fallen from its usual roar to scarcely more than a whisper. One of the women started cheering him on his way then stopped as I gestured towards her.

"Listen, Obediah, there's one thing I want you to do for me. For me, John, do you understand?"

"I'm tired," he whispered. "Want to sleep."

"You're dying," I said. "Now listen. When you die I want you to come back and tell me what is on the other side. Understand? Just come back and tell me."

"Come back?" He opened his eyes and stared up into my face. "Back?"

"Yes."

"To this place?" He grinned at me. "Like . . ."

The rest of what he said was drowned out by the shouting of the others.

"Goodbye, Obediah," they called. "Don't forget to tell Rachael . . . Herman . . . Matthew . . . Mattie . . ."

There were thirty-one individual messages and the noise was awful. When it had died Obediah was dead and there was nothing else we could do but wait.

So we sat around in the bower, eating, sucking fruit-juice and waiting. Some of the younger people were cuddled together, probably arranging weddings or deciding to change partners, but there was no harm in that. They were only obeying the Prime Ethic of loving one another and, aside from eating and sleeping there was simply nothing else to do.

After a while some of them gave up and moved from the bower. With so many people crammed together it had grown uncomfortably warm and the smell of fruit was rather overpowering. The youngsters went first, laughing and playing as they ran among the roses. Then the others either singly or in couples until finally I sat alone.

I stayed for a while longer, stayed until I knew that Obediah had meant what he said and that nothing would have pursuaded him to return even for a brief while. Not that I blamed him. I only felt regret that we could not have gone together.

When I stopped outside the bower the sun was still shining as it always shone, the roses were littering the sward with their petals and the incessant noise of the nightingales echoed from the trees. High above the sportive cherubs played like tiny white clouds against the azure bowl of the sky and the soft breeze carried the sound of distant singing.

I stood and listened for a moment and then glanced back into the bower. I wasn't surprised to find that Obediah had vanished, perfection demanded the removal of his body, and I was accustomed to perfection. I didn't hate it, I couldn't hate, but I was as bored with it as a man could be.

Bored almost to death.

—E. C. Tubb

Mr. Kippax's grasp of the fundamentals necessary to make a first-class fantasy story improves with each one he submits. Take a tired and jaded leprechaun with failing powers who passes on to a mortal some of his own magic, add an eligible batchelor and some designing women and you have a high-powered story.

FINEGAN BEGIN AGAIN

By JOHN KIPPAX

Andrew Meeker stared at the creature. A few seconds before he had lifted a rock which had trapped it by the leg, where it had lain emitting thin, high pitched shrieks. He had left the car by the gate and had come in to wander among the trees of these lush North Wales woods, had wandered amid primroses and kingcups, disconsolate, scarce seeing the beauty around him. Now, having released the little being, he sat by the stream and watched it, disbelief showing on every line of his mild bespectacled face. It was brown, humanoid, about two feet high, and its little whiskered face was bright as a bird's.

"Ah!" it said: "Oh, sure, that's a relief! Though 'twas terrible to have to be rescued by a human."

"I'm sorry," said Meeker with a touch of humour. "Shall I put your leg back under the stone? I didn't realise that—"

It skipped back about three feet, indignation on its face: then it relaxed, and gave a thin chuckle.

"The devil you would! Ha, no,—it's foolin' y'are! No, me point was that one of the woodland creatures might have helped me, except that they're a bit nervous of foreigners."

It sat again and continued to rub its leg.

"You're a foreigner then?"

"Do I sound Welsh? I'll introduce meself: Finegan's the name. Nationality Irish, reason for presence, a crock of gold." Finegan took off his hat with its little feather, and made a sweeping bow. It seemed to restore a little of Meeker's self confidence: that was good: he could do with all the self confidence he could get.

"A crock of gold, eh?"

"So. Not that I'd bother ye with the details: a family matter y' understand. But ye look as though ye're a man to be trusted. Now, what can I do for ye?"

"What—do you *want* to do for me?"

Finegan seemed irritated.

"Come, come! Me rules don't allow a thing like this to be passed over. We've only survived as far into history as this by strictly observing rules and procedure. I can't give you any material thing, but I've a fair selection of powers and spells at me disposal. But you must ask for something within me range—I'm only a second class leprechaun mind—and it must be something which you know you need. Something—spiritual, shall we say."

"Spiritual." Meeker pondered. Finegan gave him a close scrutiny.

"Ye look to me as though ye were a man haunted by something." He dived his hand into his wallet, produced a small dandelion seed-head and blew. At the third puff, the head was bare.

"Three o'clock," he muttered. "I must be getting on. Now then, what's your worry?"

Meeker gulped.

"Women," he said.

"Hugh?" the leprechaun seemed startled: he edged a bit closer. "Ye did say 'women'?"

Meeker nodded.

"Well, Glory be! Wonders will never cease, as the man said when the pig played the fiddle. Ye mean—ye can't get 'em?"

"Oh, no!" Meeker was horrified: "I don't want them to get *me!*"

"*You!*" Finegan was baffled. "You, Casanova, Don Juan and now you! Is it de-fascinatin' ye want?" He surveyed Meeker's pursed lips and round eyes. "What the hell is it? Come on now, I'm grateful to you and I'll do me duty."

"I'm afraid that one of them will ensnare me and marry me off, and I don't *want* to be married."

"Ah, sure!" Finegan looked somewhat disgusted. "Just Finegan's luck to be stuck with you: a complicated job y'are!"

Embarrassed, Meeker said "I don't want to trouble you—"

"Now listen: I have to go. Give me a hint of what ye'd like."

"You see, if only I could be sure of escaping from the advances of these ladies—"

"Ha! Then ye'd better have some of my own spiritual negotiable travelling power." He waved a hand, and round Meeker's ears rang the sound of little bells. "There: now ye have some."

"Of what?"

"Of *this!*" hissed Finegan, and disappeared.

Meeker worked at the Morgan Research Institute, a semi-secret organisation which operated in a rich valley in North Wales. He was fond of his work, and would have been perfectly content but for the fact that he was the only young and marriageable man in a department which consisted largely of middle aged gentlemen and young, well qualified and attractive women. Scores of them. And Andrew was scared. True that they could get into the nearest town twice a week, true that they could get home at weekends: but it was the perpetual nearness that did it. His mother was right when she had warned him that every young woman was looking for a husband.

The Monday morning after his meeting with Finegan, he was in his office when a knock came at the door, and instinctively he braced himself. He said "Come in." She did. She was blonde and willowy, was this Margot Delahaye, with her dazzling smile and her waves of perfume: "Sweet Madness" was its name, so she had once told her shrinking boss.

"Good morning, sir." She came and stood very close to his desk as she laid a sheaf of reports in front of him.

"Oh, yes." His voice gave a little squeak of nervousness, and it made him feel a fool. "You may leave them please."

"Oh, sir—couldn't I wait while you okayed them? The lab is waiting to carry on."

He wriggled: this was the one who had cornered him at the staff dance, and with whom he had found himself outside on the moonlit canteen terrace before you could say beryllium telluride. Suddenly, he thought of Finegan: what had he meant? Should not Andrew be in a position to make her disappear or something? Why didn't something happen? Or perhaps things were not yet dangerous enough?

The charm was on.

"Did you have a nice weekend, sir?"

He kept his head down, pretended to study the reports and muttered "Oh, yes, a very quiet one. I took the car out."

"With whom?" she asked archly.

She moved closer: the temperature rose.

"Ah! do you remember that evening on the terrace—Andrew?"

She was very near: terror seized him. The shameless hussy knew his salary and prospects all right! Trembling he looked up, and the face with its frame of golden hair, with its deep blue eyes and luscious lips, was only six inches away: he was filled with unbearable fright: then, suddenly, all was blank and calm.

For fully a minute Andrew sat on the beach and enjoyed the sunshine, took in the sound of the waves, the cries of the gulls before he bothered to think how he had come there. He was sitting, feeling pleasantly relaxed, on a grey smooth rock, one of many which littered the seashore. He sat facing the sea: at his back were ragged cliffs, and in the distance he could see the long twist of hewn steps which led up to a village. A very pleasant spot indeed

Then cogent thought came flooding back. A moment ago he had been in his office, in mortal danger from that Delahaye woman, and now here he was, quite out of her reach! Yes! This was Finegan's gift working, though instead of Andrew being able to banish trouble, trouble banished him.

And where was he? He was on the coast: the sun told him that when he was looking out to sea, the sea was due west. He knew that the Institute was eighty miles from the sea, so presumably his place of work was now that distance east of him. Eighty miles: he was not ungrateful to Finegan, but he could not help feeling that the leprechaun had overdone it. If this was going to happen every time a girl got too close to him, then life looked like being a succession of hair-raising journeys. He scratched his head, lit a cigarette, and was about to consider the situation in more detail when a small voice made him turn.

"And how do you find ye'self this beautiful mornin'?"

Finegan was at his ease in the shade of a nearby rock, his face as wizened as ever, his eyes dancing bright. A small brown pot, the crock of gold, presumably, was in the crook of his arm.

"Having a rest I am," he said. "Me transportative power's just a bit rusty, so I'm recuperatin' for the leap back to Ireland. Wouldn't like to drop short into the sea: inconvenient." His sharp eyes appraised Meeker. "On holiday?"

Andrew gulped, collected his wits and manners, and explained. Finegan chuckled.

"He! He! It worked fine then!"

Andrew tried to explain that while in principle there was nothing to be desired, certain finer aspects of the business needed attention: he would have liked a finer control over the thing, for instance, directly in his own hands.

Finegan shrugged.

"Not being a first-class leprechaun, I can't manage it. I can't take the power away, and I can't alter it. The only thing which you yourself might—" He stopped, looking along the beach. Andrew turned to see that a man was approaching. Finegan gave a noise which sounded like "Whisht!" Suddenly, he was not there. Andrew rose to greet the fisherman and to ask him about getting back to the Institute.

His position at the Institute was sufficiently high for no disciplinary action to be taken about his absence. On the other hand, Miss Delahaye had needed the ministrations of a staff nurse for her sudden attack of hysterics. Mr. Meeker, she insisted, had vanished before her very eyes: a disbelieving doctor ordered her to rest for a few days.

The knowledge that he was protected gave Andrew quite a fillip: no longer need he fear amorous and prowling womanhood: let them make one false step and whisht!—he would be away from them. Marvellous! On the other hand, a degree of caution was still necessary, the power being what it was. But he was more content with life than he had been for a long time, until two days after the incident that had removed Miss Delahaye from duty. There was a knock at his door, and in response to his word the door opened and was closed again with noiseless care.

"Will you okay these tests sir?"

"Humph," said Andrew absently, and wagged a hand at a tray. Then he realised that the voice was not only new, but it had a certain cool attractive quality.

He looked up: the sun grew brighter, the birds sang sweeter, the hum and clatter from the labs was transformed into the pastoral symphony: his office became Arcady, nymphs peeped shyly from behind the wastepaper basket, and sitting on the lamp bracket, Pan played his pipes to the dawn chorus of nightingales He looked and he looked, and after the orchestra had finished with Beethoven and had passed on to one of the more erotic pieces of Delius, he managed to whisper "Who are you?" His head

swam at the vision with the dark hair, the oval face and the voilet eyes: he held onto his desk and waited for Aphrodite, Helen and Pompadour and Empress Josephine to answer.

"I'm Angela Summers," she answered.

"H'm?"

"Angela Summers. These reports Mr. Meeker—"

"Why," he breathed, "Why haven't I seen you before?"

Unthinking, he put out a hand to touch hers. Modestly, she withdrew it, and he saw how the long lashes swept her cheeks.

"I'm on a spectroscope," she replied: "But it's being repaired and they hadn't a spare in stores so they said I was to do a few errands like this for you—"

She stopped: she heard the music, saw the world transformed. And as for Andrew, he felt nothing but the greatest elation: here for the first time in his dull crammed hard working life, was a girl that *he* wanted to woo, to win! . . .

. . . And then he found himself on the beach again.

"This," he snapped aloud to a dyspeptic looking seagull on a rock, "This is too much!"

The seagull hunched its shoulders and continued to meditate upon matters gullish. Andrew ground his teeth: Finegan had got it wrong this time! He sat and thought, and then got up and began to trudge towards the cliff steps.

"If only," he mused savagely, "If only I had not met that leprechaun. I could have withstood the Delahaye woman, and then when I met Angela I'd have been free—" Then he remembered that if he had not been transported away that first time then Miss Delahaye would not have had hysterics and so Angela would not have been transferred to doing errands for him . . .

In the village he used the public phone and got in touch with the Institute: he asked to speak to Miss Summers. The sound of her voice gave him a thrill.

"Miss — Angela!"

"Mr. Meeker!"

"Call me Andrew: you want to, don't you?"

"But—Andrew, you disappeared! How on earth—"

"Listen," he said desperately: "Tell me one thing. The moment I saw you I fell in love with you: do you feel the same about me?"

"Oh, yes!" she cried fervently, "I do, I can't help it! But dearest, please explain—"

Andrew did so: he ran out of small change explaining, and when he finished she gave a deep sigh.

"Don't be alarmed, sweetheart: we'll find a way. In the meantime, as you're a safe distance away, why not say the words I want to hear?"

"I love you," he declared, "I love—"

But apparently the Finegan power was not satisfied that the distance was quite enough: in coming to the village, Andrew had reduced it by nearly a mile. Once again he found himself on the beach in the company of the dyspeptic looking seagull.

The wooing was a strange, wary thing. No word of love passed their lips, but their love was written down, and such was the certainty that Andrew felt about it that he did write and feared no man. They spent all their time together, he sent her gifts, was courteous and attentive, and it propressed in a weird remote manner towards the impossible situation namely, that as long as the power lasted, there could be no wedding at all.

But Angela was more than a pretty face: she was working on the business of the now unwanted protection. One night she spread out on the table a large scale map of the district. The location of the Morgan Institute and the spot on the beach where Andrew landed were both marked.

"In each case," she explained, "You have landed on that beach: that's eighty miles due west. Now I think I have a plan, but we must test it, and be sure."

"Anything you say," answered Andrew, the love-light shining in his eyes.

She rolled up the map.

"I have the car outside."

Wondering but trusting, he followed her out: they got in and drove off. Ten, twenty, thirty, fifty miles went by, and still she kept on.

"Angela, dear—"

She glanced at him warningly.

"Angela, what is the idea?"

"You'll see. If I'm right, it's a good thing that Finegan was only a second class leprechaun."

So he remained silent as the car hummed on, and eventually stopped at the top of a hill. He followed her to where a group of trees cast long shadows. She consulted the map.

"Now," said Angela, "as things are, soon after we begin to exchange endearments, you are sent away eighty miles, and due west. Now, is that the fixed distance? In order to find that out, I've brought you to a spot which is exactly eighty miles east of the Institute."

Andrew was filled with admiration.

"And the probability is that once the power moves you, there may be a time lag before it can move you again. So, when you get to the Institute, as you will in a moment or so, I want you to make love to the first female you see. If you are not transported again at once, then we can assume that I'm right, and we can make our arrangements accordingly."

"Our arrangements?"

"To be married, dearest," she said tenderly, "You do still want to marry me don't you, Andrew?"

"Of course," he said with passion, "I love you, I—"

He found himself standing on the steps of the Institute. He reeled slightly.

"Wow!" he said to himself. "She was right! Now to see if it works again at once: the first female she said—oh!"

For coming towards him was Margot Delahaye.

"Oh, hello Mr. Meeker," she said warmly, "How are you? I *was* silly to go and faint and get hysterics, wasn't I?" She came close. "I'm sorry I'm in another department now: I miss coming into your office."

Now, he thought: it is for Angela that I do this . . .

The startled Miss Delahaye found herself grabbed round the waist and drawn close. She gave a little squeal, but not too loud, the while he breathed feigned passion and real steam all over his spectacles.

"Margot," he huffled, "I'm mad about you: I love you, I love you!"

Finegan, where are you, he thought?

He remained where he was: she simpered, and the scent of orange blossom seemed to fill the air.

"Andrew, Andrew!" she made a sweet moan. Finegan, he thought. Holy smoke, Angela was right, it can't work again, not straight away: how long had it taken him to get from the beach to the phone in the village? A quarter of an hour? More?

He became aware of the beautiful and (for him) entirely undesirable female he was holding. With a yell he panicked, and Miss Delahaye landed on her dainty backside as the man who had just breathed his love for her retreated as fast as his long legs would carry him.

Angela was flushed with success.

"We know," she said, "That if you make love to me here, you will be transported to the village by the sea. So this is what we can do. We can arrange to be married at the church there. Father and I and the bridesmaids will wait for you there, while you

remain here and get ready. Then, when it's time for the ceremony to begin, you can say loving words to—to my photograph if you like, and then you'll find yourself in the village. Then you can run to the church and we can be married before the power can take effect again. And after we're married, what can the power do then? "

Andrew found it difficult to express his admiration.

"Oh!" he exclaimed: "What a wonderful girl—"

Just in time, she stopped him getting another eighty mile journey.

On the morning of his wedding, with his bride waiting for him eighty miles away, Andrew stood looking at himself in pin stripe and cutaway. He thought fondly of Angela, and what a fortunate man he was, and he paced impatiently, waiting for the time of the ceremony to draw near. At last it was one minute to eleven: he picked up her portrait and began.

"Angela!" he murmured: "My darling, my angel. There is no one but you, I love you with all my heart—"

He stopped: a cold feeling shot up and down his spine: it wasn't working! He tried again.

"Oh, my dearest love, when we are married, there will be nothing—"

A clock struck eleven. *Something* must be done! He dashed out into the corridor, along to the entrance, over the gardens to where couples were sitting over their coffee at morning break. There was a wild gleam in Andrew's eye: *any* woman would do! He skidded round a corner, demolished a small shrub, and there was a woman sitting on a bench. It was Margot Delahaye and with her was Eustace Ffolliot, a fool from administration. Andrew leaped forward and went down on one knee, while Ffolliot's eyes popped with astonishment.

"Oh, Margot! he puffed: "I adore you, I love you, you're wonderful!"

He stopped to get his breath back, while Miss Delahaye shrieked and clung to Ffolliot, who rose irately.

"Look here sir, what do you think you're doing!"

Miss Delahaye screamed and the windows rattled.

"Aaaaaah! He's doing it again! He's mad!"

"Look here, sir—"

"He did this once before! Oh, Eustace stop him—"

"Margot, my angel, my sweet, my precious!" babbled Andrew. "Be my own wife, my adored one, and marry me, marry me, marry me—"

Just as Ffolliot was wondering if he should grab Andrew first or the swooning lady, Andrew vanished in a blur. Then, a few yards up the road was the little church, and outside, cool and exquisite in white, was Angela. He panted up.

"I thought you were never coming!"

"Technical hitch," answered the dishevelled groom, "I'll explain later: are we ready?"

They went in: Andrew hardly heard the ceremony, barely noticed which of her relatives were there. Only when it was over and he was truly wedded to Angela did his heart begin to beat normally.

In the vestry, it seemed that the weeks of restraint in the display of affection to Angela had tied his tongue. But after they had signed the register, and they were alone, she put her arms round his neck, pursed her lips in the prettiest manner imaginable, and murmured "Darling."

Then she vanished as though she had never been there. Stunned, Andrew gazed glassily round the vestry: he seemed sucked dry of all feeling, ideas, emotion.

Then the vicar, a dear old chap, came fussing back.

"Ah, h'm," he said, "Your charming new wife not here?"

Dumbly, Andrew nodded.

"Ah," chattered the vicar, "I never cease to wonder at the beauty of the marriage ceremony: so simple, so *spiritual.* Think of that exquisite line 'with all my wordly goods I thee endow'—"

Andrew started.

"Eh?"

The other repeated the line. Slowly, Andrew gathered his scattered wits. From what he remembered of the local geography, Angela would probably have landed somewhere in the Wicklow Mountains: so—the Wicklow mountains it was for him. After all, in Ireland they might run across Finegan.

—John Kippax

MEETING

Sture Loennerstrand is a Swedish author and journalist who has been interested in fantasy writing since 1935 although it was not until 1942 that his first story was published. Since then he has had over 60 published and in 1954 wrote the Swedish prize-winning novel "The Spacehound" which was published by Bonnier's of Stockholm.

MR. IPUSIDO

By STURE LOENNERSTRAND

It is a wonderful evening. Streaks of brass yellow melt into the lilac rose tint of the horizon, the roofs obtain a moss-green enamel, the street is shiny wet and blue. I walk, alone and pale, a tired man, but I am happy and, as it were, through with myself. I have a feeling now that I am ready for anything that might happen. The cramps have lost their hold and there is nothing left which could disturb my peace. I have conquered desire and pride, I have examined all the nooks and crannies and drilled a hole in the bottom, so that there is a direct connection with the centre of the universe. I walk with a great deal of self-confidence, but when I catch sight of him I am still scared.

Most of us are afraid of meeting a certain person, we hardly know whom, although we ordinarily do not want to admit this.

However much we may lighten ourselves and strengthen ourselves, there is someone in the depths. Who is he? I cannot understand my feeling of fear, he looks well-groomed and quite harmless, and up to now I have only seen him from behind. Perhaps my nerves are out of order after all, perhaps I am not so well as I think. I have been working very hard, and even power like mine has limits. Who is the man? He looks extravagant, his clothes are original, he somehow seems like a foreigner. I stare at his back as if I wanted him to turn, but of course I do not want him to. His purple hat, his brownish-red suit with the long, smart jacket, his yellow shoes and gloves, his stick with its gold knob—the man is dressed in a series of shades of red, and seen at a distance he looks as if he had come out of a dim fire. The shadows are playing around him, sometimes he seems quite brawny, almost an athlete, sometimes slender as a boy and thin as a silhouette. His pace is about the same as mine, but lighter and more buoyant, his movements are so well calculated that he almost seems to be gliding along.

Now he suddenly stops and pulls out a huge gold case which glitters boastfully in the growing darkness, then he puts his stick under his arm and lights a long cigar. He keeps his gloves on, his fingers deal quickly and graciously with the cigar, and the lighter flares up at his face like a blow lamp, and I can see that it is quite waxen. He extinguishes the lighter with a decisive jerk, his hands are playfully strong. I should have turned off in some other direction, something within me is warning me and warning me again, but in vain. As if magnetized I approach him, when I get close to him my curiosity makes me slow down, his back is turned to me as if he noticed nothing. But then he suddenly turns and I want to hurry past him, to pass unnoticed. It is too late.

He raises his purple hat with a recognising smile which exposes a whole row of gold fillings. His head which is quite bald rises in a curious cone, under his bushy slanting eyebrows it is hardly possible to see the thin slits of his eyes. The man is an Oriental, this explains both his yellow skin and his gaudy clothes. He seems to possess a certain culture and is not at all unpleasant, and I fail to understand why the mere sight of him makes my nerves tingle.

"Good evening, sir," he says in a voice which is mellifluous but perhaps a trifle nasal. "Here we meet again."

"Good evening. I hardly think. . ."

"Indeed! Would you care for a marihuana cigar, while you are searching among your old friends? Best brand."

"Thanks, I don't use narcotics."

"Really not? There are many kinds of narcotics. One uses these to forget, you know." He smiles broadly showing all his gold fillings, and narrowing his eyes—he is very much amused. As a kind of demonstration he inhales deeply, the glow at the point of his cigar grows and spreads its dim light over his yellow face. He inhales masses of smoke and I am expecting him to blow it out again, but he doesn't. Somewhat surprised I wonder where the smoke disappeared.

"It's odd that you don't remember me at all," he says. "We who have so much in common, and actually have such an intimate relation. Try to think, mister."

He scrutinizes me ironically, and I have a feeling that memories so far back that they seem almost eternal appear on a misty curtain. New warnings whisper within me: he is a man you had better avoid. I could perhaps remember, but it is safer not to try. At the same time he rouses my curiosity.

"I am absolutely unaware that we have met before," I answer lightly. "It seems quite improbable."

"Improbable, indeed?" He raises his eyebrows and his eyes appear like thin black lines. "Honestly, old pal, are you ashamed of me? There is no need to be. I have done all right and I don't have anything to worry about. I allow myself the very best, the most expensive treats in women, food and liquor. I am something of a sybarite, and that is thanks to you. You planted the seeds, they budded and grew—without your attention, that is true—but I can't complain. Look here, let's give up this nonsense."

"Yes, but I don't remember you," I insist. "I don't understand a thing."

...

He raises his revolting hat once more and reveals his bald, cone-shaped head. "I am Mr. Ipusido," he says.

His name rings in my head like a danger signal, and when he has spoken it, he triumphantly blows the poisonous smoke right into my face. His words recur unceasingly, their echo rushes through a dark tunnel into my soul like a comet with a tail of smoke. I am both hot and cold. I feel unwell. My logical shell protests against my ego: a foreigner, I reflect or want to think, he is a foreigner, an Oriental, maybe a Japanese. *Ipusido*—where have I met him—*Ipusido?* Certain details in his dress, his clothes, his gold case, his cigar, his arrogant manner, all fit in with someone I met very long ago. I am pondering this, or pretending to ponder. Deep within me I know only too well.

"A little worried?" he says from far away on the other side of the smoke. "Worried, nervy, bad conscience, a little shocked—

that's right, isn't it? Why, my dear friend, you are not to be blamed that things turned out the way they did. Blackmail? No!"

"Blamed—that things turned out the way they did," I repeat with a weak voice. "You must excuse me, but I don't get you. It may be that you remind me of someone I have met earlier, certain traits, a likeness of the name, a pure coincidence, the play of chance—there is no doubt. . ."

"Bravo," he interrupts. "This is progress! Bravo! It speaks in your favour that you don't altogether deny me. I'll get you going, my friend. Now look—just why do you think I wanted to invite you to one of my good marihuana cigars?"

Chuckling, he blows more smoke into my face. I start coughing, and am unable to answer. He waits, looking rather amused, and when I breathe normally again, he continues.

"It's your own fault, mister. It was you who made me a narcotic addict, but you can't take the praise for freeing me from the vice. A Japanese—bah—you can treat him any way you like, you were thinking. Your vanity made me the son of a Sumarai, a degenerate son of a prince—not bad! You let me emigrate to America, the country of the future—and what was more natural than that I became the leader of a narcotic gang over there. You were thinking up a lot of rubbish, weren't you? Aren't you ashamed? And you call yourself an author."

I stare at him fearfully, I am not dreaming, this is reality. I can't suppress the facts, I have to admit them. Once long ago I wrote a brutal, please-the-reader story: *Meeting Mr. Ipusido.* And now Mr. Ipsuido is standing there, alive as you and me. No wonder I feel as if I had lost my mind. But my reason is struggling fiercely: there must be a natural explanation. I can't give in to a mad fantasy.

"You are bluffing," I say in my sharpest voice. "You are bluffing, sir! It couldn't be, it's unthinkable, I won't admit it. If you exist, I am mad, or else you exist and I don't, and then you are mad."

"What a nice distinction, mister! What logical acumen, what depth! You were flattering yourself into believing that I only existed in your imagination, and at the same time you generously offer your hand suggesting that you only occur in my imagination. A touching self-effacement which one is hardly used to on your part. And artistic: who wrote whom? What experienced what? When read when? One more question: couldn't both of us be mad?"

I stare at him, unable to reply, his ironic smile seems to be fixed in his face. He puffs at his cigar, enjoying my reaction. I am trying to master my fear with all the power at my command, trying to register the flow of events realistically. However this may end, it is an experience which could have been granted only to a few.

"You were not very nice to me, mister," he continues. "You turned me into a villain, a criminal who strangled his victims in order to be the better enabled to motivate my destruction. Originally I was not so bad, or was I? Do you know why you made me into a Japanese?"

"No, I can't remember. Just by chance, I suppose. Perhaps I found your name in a newspaper. It is possible that I made it up myself."

"You made it up yourself." Mr. Ipusido laughs low and long. "No, that is not quite it. Your subconscious made up a plan for you which was to save you a lot of trouble. The subconscious is always helpful. The idea was that I should commit suicide, hara-kiri."

"But I assure you, I had not the faintest thought of anything like that. Anyway, if that was it, I wanted to turn you into a hero."

"Under certain circumstances I might of course have been driven to commit hara-kiri," he continues without listening to my interruption. "I had the imprint of a murderer on my forehead, the punishment hovered over my head. How otherwise could I expiate my crimes? You messed the whole thing up—on my own I would never have got out of this tangle. Without the lovely woman who cared for me like a mother I would have had a miserable end. Together we tried to mend the evil I had done, and she even succeeded in weaning me of my desire for narcotics. Thanks to her I am sure of a worthier future. She has made me into a new man with morals and ideals. Our love is the purest and most beautiful thing in the world and I am happy."

"Well, then everything is fine," I say. "I can't quite remember the end of my story, but I don't seem to have been quite as cruel to you as you have wanted to make me believe."

"Your story ended quite differently, mister." The hatred breaks through his smile, his yellow face is like a ruthless mask. "You sent me to the electric chair, my friend. You did your utmost to murder me, destroy me, you were my evil genius. Fortunately the woman I was talking about was able to bribe a jailer who helped me to escape. Her goodness put your wickedness to shame. The years went by, and my criminal career was forgotten. Now we are

going to begin a new life together. Unfortunately an obstacle must be removed on this road too. My beloved is married."

"How about divorce," I say. "Won't her husband agree to a divorce?"

He looks at me silently, the hatred vanishes from his face, he is sad and pensive. Vaguely I feel that I have been unjust to him, and I am anxious to make good again. I search for the right words, but it is hard to find them.

"You are the victim of a tragic fate," I finally manage to blurt out. "I beg you not to detest me because I have caused you suffering, it was unintentional. To me you were only a fiction, I never suspected that you might exist in reality."

"I feel sorry for you too," he says earnestly. "You see you have fallen a victim to the same tragedy as I, in you and me the common destiny of humanity is repeated. No evasions on your part can postpone the decision. Le me once more draw your attention to my name."

"Your name?" I ask. "Now I don't understand."

"The subconscious is not only a good helper but also a clever forger," he says solemnly. "It was certainly not by chance that you called me Ipusido. If you turn the letters around a little you will soon understand why. Now concentrate, and your censorship will relax. You can only arrive at one result: O-i-d-i-p-u-s.

"Oidipus," I say. "Isn't that the young prince of Thebes, who . . . . " He nods and looks sadly at me, we both fall silent. The slits of his eyes widen revealing his jet black eyeballs with stripes of blood in them. The night is eternally, icily cold, the world is full of suffering and woe. His face approaches closer and closer to mine, his strong, lithe hands glide toward my throat. Forgotten milenniums whirling in my soul. All is said, there is nothing more of any importance. All is finished.

I killed him.

—**Sture Loennerstrand**

NO GIMMICK

Brian Aldiss continually comes up with fresh approaches to both science fiction and fantasy plots. This time it is a political fantasy and one that it is designed extremely close to the hearts of readers of this type of fiction—although we shudder to think of such an event as portrayed here really happening.

By BRIAN W. ALDISS

Slurry, blurry sight. The stones of the cell drawn on a tired retina like squares scratched on a pavement. Lack of sleep did it; there was still a corner of Sladden's mind detached enough to take a scientific interest in the phenomenon. Needing sleep so desperately, he saw it as a warm fluid. It needed to flow again, to fertilise every fibre of his body. Warmth, colour, perspective had gone. He was dying. Deep inside, the little gentle doors were closing—forever.

"Sit up straight!" the guard shouted.

Humphrey Sladden pressed his shoulder blades back against the wall. He closed his eyes; the slurred lines still remained, scrawled on his nerves, scribbled on his brain.

Two lights burned in his universe. One was external, a bright, electric thing in the cell roof. It conjured the stones of the cell into existence, forcing them to realise themselves inside Sladden's head. The other light was dim, and burned within. The stones

were hostile to it, quenching. It was existence: the only significant thing, the sufferer, the triumpher.

Time passed, pyramidal second by second.

The cell door was kicked shatteringly open and rocked back against its hinges. An armed man entered.

"Stand up!" the guard bawled. Sladden stood; he marvelled that the impossible was so easy.

"Move!" the guard bawled. His English was limited to these few commands.

In a trance, the marked fog still before his eyes, Sladden moved down the corridor. Turn left at the end, second door on the left. He staggered in, the door closed behind him. As always, his Questioner was waiting for him.

The room was some twelve feet square and uncarpeted. There was a window, which had been boarded up. There were two chairs, on one of which the Questioner already sat. There was a small table, on which stood a coffee pot and two cups. There was a clock on the wall, stopped at four o'clock; that might indeed be the time—four o'clock in the morning, when the tides of human resistance are at their ebb.

"Come and sit down, Sladden," the Questioner said.

So kind was his tone that Sladden began to tremble at once. He sat shakily on the chair.

"How are you?"

Straining the muscles of his neck, Sladden raised his head and peered at the other. "I feel too weak to answer any questions," he said.

The Questioner had high cheekbones and a low brow. As always, he looked dishevelled; his air was that of a harrassed business man rather than a conqueror. He spoke English almost without accent.

"I won't ask you many questions," he said. "Why are you feeling weak?"

"I need sleep and food."

"Why did you not sleep before you came in here? Are you staying awake deliberately?"

Sladden did not reply.

"Are you staying awake deliberately?"

"You know they don't let me lie down."

The Questioner sighed.

"You are lying, Sladden," he said.

"They don't let me lie down," Sladden repeated, closing his eyes.

"Open your eyes. Look at me, Sladden. That is more honest. I will question your guard on this subject."

Silence.

"Sladden"—with infinite patience—"Would you like me to question your guard?"

The tired man in the chair muttered, "Do what you like."

"I'm doing this for your benefit," said the Questioner sharply.

"I'm sorry," Sladden said. He began to whimper. "You are on my side, aren't you?"

The Questioner made no answer. He went over to the door, opened it, shouted. Sladden's guard appeared; he and the Ques-

tioner exchanged sentences in their native tongue, after which the guard retreated. The door closed.

The Questioner came and stood behind Sladden's chair, his hands on the back of it.

"You had five hours uninterrupted horizontal sleep before coming in here," he said. His voice held only reproach. "The guard timed you, as he had been instructed to do."

"The man's lying," Sladden said. Was the man lying? Had he slept? No. No. No sleep.

"The man is not lying," said the Questioner. "You are under a delusion. You have this bad dream in your sleep, a stupid dream that you are not sleeping; it is an obsession. Why? I will tell you. Because your conscience is troubling you. You know there is something you should admit to me."

Sladden groaned. "Let's change the subject!" he said. He always said 'Let's change the subject' at this point; for this scene had been repeated almost word for word for—how long?—three months? three years?

The Questioner seemed willing to fall in with his wish. Moving away from Sladden's chair, he said, "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Keep it," Sladden said. But through his blearly eyes he watched the other pour a cup, watched the dark, warm liquid flow, liquid dark and warm as sleep itself.

"Gimme!" he said. He could not stop himself saying it, although he knew that whether or not he got it depended entirely on the calculations of the Questioner.

The Questioner smiled, lifted the filled cup, hesitated, then put it down again. When he spoke, his voice was hard.

"Why should I pamper you? You do nothing for me. Does it never occur to you how much of my time you waste? Don't you think I'm human, Sladden? Do you think I enjoy these one-sided conversations?"

Sladden said nothing. The silence grew, a dirty thing as tangible as lard.

"I don't want to make you angry," he said. He bit back a flow of words. I love you, he wanted to say, you treat me as if I were real, you are the only person who speaks to me. You are my sole connection with the surface.

The country had been over-run by the enemy for under a year when Sladden had been picked up by the military. No charges had been made, no explanations given. They had simply taken him off in a lorry and locked him in a dark room. The dark, the silence,

had lasted an age. Then this Questioner had come and spoken kindly to him.

Rough treatment, starvation and long spells of enforced standing had followed. In all that long period, he had not seen the Questioner again. Then he was moved to his present cell. The Questioner had reappeared, solicitous as ever; their nightly conversations had begun.

Their nightly conversations . . . Something about them partook of the sacramental. They were priest and neophyte. The priest, the Questioner, had all the knowledge, all the power, the power of absolution or condemnation; and behind him, quiet as dark wings folded, his agents waited—more terrible for being un-named. The neophyte, Sladden, was nothing, lost in sin and dirt; yet he was courted: in the midst of nothing, he had something, something precious enough to make the Questioner stoop to him: not his soul, for the people of the Questioner denied the soul, but—a secret. And by the strange etiquette of their relationship, Sladden was not told what the secret was.

This calculated obliquity of attack, coupled with the starvation and cruelty, had generated a peculiar state of mind in Sladden. Though he knew how carefully it had been planned, he was too weak to fight it. All his hours away from the questioning room were spent in a ghastly self-search, as he racked his mind for what they wanted of him. He was busy condemning himself.

For Sladden, these meetings took place far under-water, at intense pressure, in a drowned room. The Questioner wore—to Sladden's worn brain—a diving suit; he could breathe, he could be hauled to the surface. Sladden was chained to the ocean bed.

A cup of coffee was put into his hands. He nearly upset it, stammering his thanks.

"Never mind your thanks." The Questioner was still stern. "Did you hear what I said? You have wasted my time. I have failed to produce any results from you. This will be our last talk together; tomorrow you have a new Questioner."

"No!" Sladden said. "No! No! Not that, please not that. Tell me what you want of me and I'll say anything I can!"

He was on his knees, half the coffee upset. The Questioner avoided him and repeated a speech he had made many times before. This time Sladden listened desperately to it.

"I have tried to grow close to you and understand you. Nothing you have said or ever could say would shock me or make me despise you. You never had a friend in your life to whom you could un-

burden yourself as you can to me. You may use me as your father confessor or your dustbin, and nothing you lay bare shall go beyond these walls.

"In exchange, I want one small thing. Among all your personal secrets you have what I will call a public secret. That I need. It will help my people to govern your people more wisely. It may be a material fact—say, a knowledge of some secret dump of arms—or an insight into your national character, or a philosophical position. It does not matter what it is, provided it helps.

"I can prompt you, but I cannot reveal it for you. You must bring it out voluntarily. Then you can go free."

Sladden heard it through dejectedly and then said, as he had so often said, "Supposing I don't have such a secret?"

"Everyone has such a secret," said the Questioner. "Get up on your chair again." His tone was harsh, full of dislike, and then instantly full of solicitude as he added, "And you upset your coffee. I'll pour you some more."

Half way to the table with Sladden's cup, pausing, turning with all the timing of an actor, he said quietly, "You know, don't you, that *I* know what your secret is?"

"Tell me!" Sladden begged.

"It must come from you," the Questioner said. "Why not let it, as this is our last talk together?"

Sladden's mind tottered on the edge of temptation and fell.

"It's something to do with my being a science fiction writer, isn't it?" he said.

The corners of the Questioner's trimuphant smile seemed to stretch and stretch into a full circle, whirling away to darkness with everything else in the defeated world.

The little scratched squares, when Sladden awoke, were back in place. Something different about them nagged at his attention, but he was too pre-occupied with other aspects of the situation.

He had lost consciousness before in the Questioner's room; but the privilege of being insensible had always been withdrawn as soon as possible and he had wakened with his head in a bucket or matchsticks under his nails. This time, they had left him in a faint, left him to recover naturally.

They had left him lying down. The richness of having his tired bones horizontal on a bench was the first note of his waking.

Sladden, of course, knew what it all meant. He had betrayed himself. They were so pleased with themselves about it that they were also pleased with him. But the respite was gained not only

as a reward: it was a chance to recuperate before they started on him again. And this time they had something to work on.

His bones ached with weariness, but the weariness was nothing to the shame in him. The shame was no less because he could not find a concrete reason for it. He only knew it was better to give up a secret under torture than have it bribed out of him. Yet the secret was no secret: they had known he was a science fiction writer when they arrested him.

Their tortuous logic was beyond him. They might just as well have been aliens from another planet. In those endless interrogations, Sladden had talked of his childhood, his father's electrical company, his own joining the company—and then the sudden eye trouble which had eventually forced him to leave the city. He had told the Questioner of how he had gone to work in a stone quarry, and how his regrets had unexpectedly been lost in enjoyment of a hard, rewarding job. After three years at the quarry, his sight improved; he began to write. A dozen stories only had been published before the hail of bombs from the East.

It was an ordinary enough life story. Only the Questioner's insistence on "the public secret" hidden behind the facts gave it a sort of sinister undercurrent. He had been left to worry, during the bleak days in his cell, about what they were after in his particular case.

He had worried. He had gnawed himself into a honeycomb of worry; and when he had ruined himself, he had virtually whistled to them to set the dogs on him. They could not leave him now. Though he had no secret, they would find one before throwing him out to the offal cart.

The shakes began deep down in his body, a little generator submerged in his bowels. Its vibrations grew. Sladden was so thin he rattled on the bench, his protruding bones knuckling the wood. He thought he had known terror; now he recognised it for a newcomer.

In an effort to still himself, Sladden looked again at the grey stones opposite him, attracted by that different quality in them.

The light on them had some quality . . .then Sladden knew. Instead of being lit by the dim bulb burning eternally in his cell roof, the stones were washed by daylight. He struggled up into a sitting position, still shaking. Daylight; they had temporarily undrowned him.

A small window with a grill was set in the stone above his head. He had been moved to another cell.

For a long while, so deeply had the inertia of his confinement sunk into him, he was overwhelmed by strangeness. That other cell was his home. It had his blood on the floor, his tears soaked into its bench; it stank of him. Here was nothing of his history, only—yes—a faint smell of smoke. Then it dawned on him that if he stood on the bench he could see out of the window.

Stiffly, like a dragonfly dragging itself from its ugly lava, Sladden pulled himself up and put his face to the daylight.

His cell was high enough for him to see over a fortified wall. Beyond it was part of a row of buildings. He read a notice over a shuttered shop window which said MUSIC TROVE! CLASSICS. JAZZ. DANCE. Through the ugly gap in the row, Sladden saw other ruins, craters, piles of debris, the muck of ruined London. A hint of green showed here and there among the desolation; there was not a sign of reconstruction anywhere. Rats are happiest living in rubble.

Over the wretchedness stretched an almost cloudless sky. Just looking at that sky could break the proudest heart. It was beyond all battles: pure, indifferent.

A fraction of roof, the eaves of the building, was also visible from Sladden's cell. Tiny flames crawled almost noiselessly among peeling paintwork.

Sladden stared at them unbelievingly. Then a gust of wind fanned smoke into his eyes. He began to shout! Climbing down from his vantage point, he went to the door and hammered on it, still shouting. Growing dizzy, he rested against the thick wood, leaning on one shoulder. A scud of smoke into the room overcame his weakness, and he started shouting and banging again.

When there was no answer and he had exhausted himself, Sladden pressed his ear against the door; it was virtually soundproof, but some faint sounds of movement reached him. Trying to soothe himself by telling himself that perhaps the fire was not serious, he climbed back up to the window. The flames seemed to be gaining; from the ground he could not see came shouts in the beastly barbarian tongue, and he guessed the fire brigade had arrived.

At that moment the cell door was unlocked and pushed open.

A minute guard with a Boskonian countenance and a big gun motioned Sladden into the corridor. A little smoke hung about. Two men slowly unwound a hose, dragging it along behind them. Two other prisoners were being released from cells; one of them was a woman. Sladden caught a glimpse of her face; it was pale and streaked with dirt, but to Sladden's surprise he recognised her. She was Helen Quinnick.

Sladden only had time to notice this because the progress of him and his guard was momentarily blocked by two men with a trolley. They were wheeling this trolley, piled high with books, out of a room into which Sladden had time to glance. There, other men were piling books onto a second trolley; the room was stacked with books and magazines. Evidently it was being evacuated in case the fire spread.

So preoccupied was Sladden with having seen Helen, that he almost neglected to glance at the piles of literature on the first trolley, but as the guard thrust him past it, he did so. The trolley was loaded with science fiction magazines. On the top he saw a cover he had particularly admired, a Ken MacIntyre for *Borderland SF*, early in 1958.

Nostalgia overcame him as he was prodded on down the passage; that cover called to mind all the old normal world which had gone up in smithereens. They descended a staircase. Within another two minutes, Sladden was shut in another cell, alone.

A small bed covered by two blankets stood in this cell. Sladden sank down onto it, tired from the brief exercise. His brain spun. Helen . . . *Borderland* . . . It could mean only one thing: this place, this prison the enemy had taken over, was dedicated to investigating science fiction.

But why? Heavens above, when the fen gathered at "The Globe" they always insisted that science fiction was important. So it was. But only to them. They were just a tiny minority, misfits, dreamers, off-centre thinkers. It could all mean nothing to the enemy. *Nothing* meant anything to them except the insane ideology of expansion.

And Helen. She was charming, a power behind several thrones in the science fiction world. She knew everyone who was anyone in the genre, and a few more besides. She had ideas, although she did not write. She was an appreciator: a female catalyst in a too male world. But what were *they* doing with her *here?* If Helen was here, who else might they not have under their filthy wings? Clarke, Sam Youd, John Brunner, Wyndham, Carnell, Tubb . . .

It was twenty-four hours before Sladden spoke to anyone. In that time, surprisingly, he was fed twice. With the nourishment circulating in his veins, his head cleared considerably. He came to certain decisions. Then he was hauled up before his old Questioner.

"Come and sit down, Sladden," said the Questioner. He looked dishevelled; he even looked tired. The broken clock still pointed to four o'clock.

"How are you, Sladden?"

"Is the fire out?"

"It was only a few rafters burning."

"What started it?"

The Questioner's untidy eyebrows drew together. It made him look unreal, a silly face painted to scare kids.

"I ask the questions here," he said, then added, "A wire burnt out in a ceiling, that was all."

Sladden forced a laugh, saying nothing.

"What do you find here to amuse you?" the Questioner asked ominously.

"Nothing."

"What did you laugh at?"

"Nothing."

"No doubt you recall the trouble we had at first to get your co-operation? I hope we do not have to go through that stage again."

As if the threat drew an answer reluctantly from him, Sladden said, "I thought the fire might have been started by pyrokinesis."

The Questioner's face did not change its expression. He merely said, "Explain this method to me."

Sladden shrugged. "You are playing with me again. You must know what pyrokinesis is. It's a section of ESP—the mental ability to produce fire without physical means.

"I see. A science fiction."

The silence grew, stretching, rolling over, obscuring everything like fog. This perhaps was the Questioner's chief talent: the power to look as though he would not speak until the sun froze.

When at last he did speak, it was as though the last part of the conversation had never been.

"We have come to a new phase in our relationship," he said. "That is why you were moved to a new cell. Why did you write science fiction?"

Pause. "It seemed to express"—Suddenly Sladden thought, Good God, why am I trying to pick out the truth so carefully for this slab-cheeked, little Asian? He finished offhandedly, "It's my view of the world."

"Is this your view of the world?"

The Questioner held up a tattered magazine. It was open at a short story entitled 'It Breathed Down My Necking Session' by Humphrey Sladden.

"That was my first effort," Sladden said apologetically, dropping his head.

"Is this your view of the world?"

Now the Questioner held *New Worlds* for December 1957 open at 'Eternity Express'.

"Yes." It was the lead novel, thirty-five thousand words. He had never written better. Crispin had selected it for *Best S-F Five.*

"Explain it in detail to me," the Questioner said.

Three hours later, both of them were rolling with fatigue. For the first time, the Questioner let his prisoner see his exhaustion; getting up wearily, he punched a bell and the guard came and marched Sladden back to his cell.

The next night, the Questioner picked up the conversation without preamble exactly where they had left off. It seemed to Sladden that he had spent much of the day pouring over a tape recording of their last meeting.

"Now," said the Questioner. "The Aldebaran Spy, Bajjujit, had altered the mass coefficient of Shuttle 96 on the Eternity Express sufficiently to take him to the year 8059, where he masquerades as a Guilder. So, he escapes the Galactic police, eh?"

"That's the idea," Sladden said.

"Um . . . But then he gives himself away. The Guild catch him out because he does not know about the expenditure tax. What is an expenditure tax?"

"Well, it presupposes a community with a world-wide balance of gold reserves—or whatever standard you are using? peanuts, if you like."

"Nobody uses peanuts for money."

"They might in 8059!" Sladden said.

"It's not in the story?"

"No . . . The idea of an expenditure tax is not new. It occurred to Hobbes three hundred years ago that taxes might be adjusted to what people consume rather than what they earn."

"Hobbes is real?" asked the Questioner.

"Hobbes is real. So is John Stuart Mill; he toyed with the same idea."

"To tax, not income, but expenditure?"

"Exactly."

The Questioner sighed heavily.

"How does this fit in with your story, Sladden?"

"Well, the world before 8059 had been profligate and spendthrift. The new tax exempted savings; this was the government's method of curing the popular attitude to life. It was poetic justice—I fitted that bit in rather well—that the spy, Bajjujit, was betrayed by his ignorance of the tax, because, if you remember, right at the beginning he smuggled himself off the Eternity Express in the year 7900

and sold them the secret of orgy-life, which caused the profligacy in the first place."

"Explain orgy-life. Is it real?"

"Not actually," Sladden said. "It works on a sociological principle of release . . "

"Economics, sociology . . ." the Questioner muttered. "Well—continue!"

They continued for a long while.

When Sladden was shut back in his cell a faint light lay already over the ruined world outside. He was tired but serene. These fools were wasting their time; it seemed obvious that, with their own technology choked by adherence to party lines, they were dipping into science fiction, that melting pot of ideas, trying to find a new lead, fresh beginnings. Presumably they had heard of the prediction of atomic power by an s-f writer and were now looking for something else. What? Pyrokinesis? Perhaps some poor devils in a State clinic had already been ordered to produce a pyrokineticist—or else!

Sladden slept horizontally and woke still cheerful, to find a tolerable meal awaiting him. They could not starve him while they thought he had ideas. It was clearly his business to have a steady flow of ideas. He could go on discussing his own stories for nights; the gimmick in 'Dark Lady of the Sonics' would be especially good to explain.

So he was marched once more into the questioning room . . . but this time there was a difference: two men were awaiting him.

The Questioner was against the far wall, carefully setting the hands of the clock back on to four o'clock. When he turned and saw Sladden observing his task, he shouted angrily at the guard who had brought the prisoner in. One other significant change of detail caught Sladden's eye: there was blood on the floorboards. (Whose? McIntosh's? One of the Whites'? Russell's? Burke's?)

The irrelevant business of thec lock so nagged Sladden, the sight of the blood set up such an uneasy churning in his stomach, that some time elapsed before he could properly examine the new man. He was striking enough to attract attention in gaudier places than prison cells. He was—it was the vital thing of him—heavy. Not over-tall, nor over-plump, he managed, in his black suit, to look as impenetrable as lead. His face, which sported a dark fluff of beard along the jowl, partook of the same weight. Only the eyes survived the gravity of the rest; they were light, blue, and penetrating. He spoke.

"You've been fooling around, Sladden. I've come to beat some straight answers out of you."

Sladden thought, incongruously, how that vibrant tone might be modulated in courting a woman.

"I've tried to answer everything I was asked," he said.

The hand caught him low on the side of his face, its knuckles grazing his lip. He stepped back; an unnoticed guard pushed him forward again.

"Don't be rude," said the heavy man, wiping his hand.

"Pyrokinesis is a lie," he said. "Isn't it?"

Sladden hesitated, watching the hand.

"It—" he began.

"Well?"

"It is a theoretical possibility."

He was struck again.

"It is a lie, isn't it?"

"Yes—at present."

The hand came up and caressed Sladden's unshaven cheek; its touch was more dreadful than a blow.

"And all the stuff in your stories is lies, isn't it, Sladden?"

He fought the fear surging just below the surface of his skin.

"Some—some is true," he said. The hand continued at his jaw, and he added, "Most is possible."

Now the hand gripped. It took the flesh beside Sladden's lip, it twisted, it slid a thumb into his mouth, digging deep between his gum and his lower lip. Cunning as a pianist's fingers, it extracted arpeggios of pain.

Sladden was on the floor, writhing, the hand still unshakably there, exploring every nodule of hurt, as the heavy man knelt over him. The heavy man was saying, "You must tell us which are lies, which are truths, mustn't you?"

He was screaming, "Yes, yes, I must?" but a silent part of him was thinking elatedly, 'Whatever they do, they still want to be told . . . If I'm on their hook, they're on mine.'

When, several hours later, two guards dragged him back and dumped him in his cell, Sladden lay on the ground moaning. He had been mauled and questioned until he was half-dead.

They had only dealt with "Eternity Express," offering the prospect of nights' more interrogation about his other stories. He had had to explain every single simple device in the story; never before had he realised how many there were. The wretched business of the Aldebaran spy's space globe had been investigated, the parts about time travel had been thoroughly gone into.

Oh, the enemy knew there was no such thing as space or time travel. They just required every drop of fact and speculation Sladden had on those topics. Sladden, of course, knew nothing of time travel; in his story he had simply supposed its existence, knowing readers would go with him. That was not good enough for the heavy man: his mind was too factual for that—or he pretended it was too factual. He pretended he could not understand someone writing a story involving the use of something the writer did not understand. His heavy hands assisted Sladden's explanation, extracting each word like a bad tooth.

Finally, Sladden pulled himself on to the bench, resting his face against the cold stone. He groaned to think of the nights of questioning ahead.

It occurred to him that these brutes had read John Christopher's *The Death of Grass,* in which—after the catastrophe—the central characters had known of a safe refuge; or Cyril Kornbluth's *Christmas Eve,* in which, after the invasion, a rocket hidden in a mountain had helped defeat the enemy. The conquerers feared some similar plot against them, and were searching for a hint of it in recent science fiction: a space ship in the Mendips, a time machine under Whitehall.

Sladden laughed through his tortured mouth. Alas, this was reality, not science fiction. There was no gimmick. There was no way of beating them now they had won.

He lay there hopelessly. A minute insect climbed up the wall; watching it took an age, until it vanished into a crevice under the window—and then ages more billowed through Sladden's mind. Time for a captive takes on all the solidity it does for a mental sufferer: massive pyramids of it, each a second long, fill the world from horizon to horizon.

And then the guards came again and he was taken back to the questioning room. The heavy man was there with the Questioner, and he again did most of the talking, and torturing. This time they had a recorder with them, playing back to him his own remarks made in previous interviews. After a short while they were joined by a tall, authoritative man who evidently spoke no English.

The proceedings went much as before. The first blow across Sladden's painfully stiff mouth was unendurable. He struck back at the heavy man and received a terrific blow on the jaw which knocked him out. When he revived, he was at the point of drowning, with a hose gushing water into his mouth. Choking and coughing, he was hauled up and forced to answer more questions.

By the time it was over, they were all exhausted.

The heavy man's final words rang in Sladden's ears as he was dragged off: "Every one of you will have your minds bled dry of knowledge before you leave here!"

Every one of you . . . Meaning, doubtless, all the science fiction writers.

Still coughing slightly, Sladden lay in the merciful dark, nursing the thought. They must have seized even the minor writers, Hawkins, Aldiss, Morgan. *They were afraid.*

He could see, the sudden knowledge cooling his pain, *why* they were afraid. Under their regime, speculation was forbidden: orthodoxy was all they knew. In this country they had conquered, they had found something new: science fiction! Science fiction was the most glorious mixture of fact and bunkum ever devised by man. The enemy knew this, but could not leave it alone. They had to investigate it all to discover the possible new lines of scientific thought their regime so badly needed.

In the dark, Sladden gave a small grunt of satisfaction. His pulpy face contorted into a smile.

If he could not understand their logic, they could not understand his stories. But they would keep on trying; that was their way. They would keep on trying, until someone they had not managed to capture invented . . . say, pyrokinesis.

The longer they talked, the surer their ultimate fate. Sladden had, after all, his gimmick: staying alive.

—Brian W. Aldiss

THE MAZE

You will doubtless remember author Chandler's story "The Unharmonious Word" in Science Fantasy *No. 19 which centred around the game of 'Scrabble.' Here is another puzzle-type story involving far greater problems but just as interesting.*

By BERTRAM CHANDLER

Illustrated by QUINN

There is just a chance, I suppose, that somebody may find this—some archaeologist or geologist or speleologist of the remote future. Not *your* future, of course (whoever you are), but mine. This is being written on the pages of our notebooks—it is indeed fortunate that I have a professional preference for the old fashioned pencil with its wooden sheathing, although it is not easy to keep a point on one with the sharp edge of an oyster shell—and will be sealed inside my plastic water flask and buried in a corner of our cave.

My name is George Balmain. I am forty years of age—or should it be a minus quantity? I am well know (Was? Will be?) as a compiler of the more esoteric type of puzzle published by the high-brow literary weeklies. My main claim to fame was, I like to think, the invention of the Three Dimensional Cryptic Crossword. A steady trickle of royalties from this source maintained me in a state of comfort

if not of luxury. My life was pleasant enough for the times in which I lived—the Cold War, with occasional flare-ups of " police activity," had been in progress for over a century, and most of us were able to keep the fear of the Hot War—which would, of course, spell the end of civilisation if not of the planet itself—well below the surface of our minds.

I was, of course, interested in Space Travel—but it was largely a professional interest. After all, new words, new expressions, new technicalities were the tools of my trade. And I was interested in the Maze. This remarkable artifact had been uncovered by one of the frequent Martian dust storms. It was, so far as could be seen from the outside, a low building, devoid of all ornamentation, circular,

about two Earth miles in diameter. It was built of closely fitting blocks of stone. Inside was a veritable warren, a labyrinth, of passages. People had gone in—armed with lights, with an ample supply of food and water and oxygen, with spools of strong thread to pay out behind them—and had never come out.

It must be, I always thought, no more than a huge puzzle—and the penalty for failure to solve it must be death. Now and again I allowed myself to hope that I might, some day, be the man to solve the puzzle. After all, the Martians were, according to the archaeologists, beings similar to ourselves. It was reasonable to suppose that their minds worked in a similar way.

But I knew that my hopes were wild. I should never be able to afford a one-way passage even to the Moon—and, in any case, Mars was out of bounds to all but those on Governmental business. Even so, the Maze was a subject for conjecture. Using what scanty data I could lay my hands upon I wrote a series of articles on it. The third of this series was returned by the Editor to whom it was submitted, accompanied by no more than a rejection slip (which was, since I was a regular contributor to his magazine and known to him personally, out of character). At the same time I noticed that no news or speculation concerning the Maze was any more published in any newspaper or periodical, and that it was never mentioned by the TV news services. All of this, naturally, intrigued me the more.

Even so, I never expected, some nine months after the rejection of my article, to find myself on Mars. I'll not go into details about the voyage—I'm a poor spaceman and my belly takes kindly to neither acceleration nor Free Fall. Suffice it to say that I was interviewed in my home by two Senior Civil Servants, offered the opportunity of solving the Martian puzzle and then, before I had a chance to consider all the implications of my acceptance, sworn into the Space Navy Reserve with the rank of Lieutenant. It was not until I arrived on Mars—and glad I was to set foot outside that tin coffin !—that I was told what it was all about.

It was the Admiral himself who told me. Not at once—when I was shown into his office I found him working with one of my Three Dimensional puzzles. He was stuck on 43 North—" I leave the corn and become mystified on Mars . . ." I told him that he, of all persons, should know *that* one. Take " I " from " maize "—and what have you got ? He cursed his stupidity, then asked me if I'd ever thought of having diagonals, and why not " Up " as well as " Down," and " South " and " West " as well as " North " and " East " ? We chatted for a while about the mechanics of Crossword

compiling, then he said, "You know, Balmain, it's my idea bringing you out here. I've always been a fan of yours. A mind like yours should be able to solve the puzzle—and without wasting too much time about it."

"And what is the urgency, sir?" I asked him.

"War," he said. "Not tomorrow, we hope, but, perhaps, the day after. Our friends on the other side of the Curtain may soon be strong enough to launch a swift, decisive blow . . ."

"But what's the Maze got to do with it?"

"That's for you to find out. But I'll put you into the picture—as much of a picture as we have at present. We've been pushing ships out as far as the Asteroids for quite some time now, although the news hasn't been made public. We've learned a lot. We've learned that the war that devastated Mars, that all but sterilised her, wasn't a war between the Martian nations but a war with—Outsiders. Outsiders from Planet Five."

"Jupiter?" I asked.

"*No.* Jupiter is Planet Five *now.* The old Planet Five was hit by something that blew it into the debris that is now the Asteroid Belt—some super fission-fusion-fission bomb, perhaps. At about the same time the Maze was built—and used. And after the Maze was completed intelligent life vanished from Mars."

"How?"

"That's for *you* to find out, Balmain. There are two theories—one is that the Martians were stricken by conscience and committed mass suicide; the Maze being or containing some sort of super weapon. The other is that the Maze offered some sort of escape from the vengeance of the warships that were in Space, and well clear, when Planet Five blew up.

"Anyhow, I'm sending you into the Maze tomorrow. I'm sorry that I can't give you time to get properly acclimatised, but, as I've told you, time is the one thing that we're liable to be short of. I'll be sending three other Lieutenants in with you—all volunteers. Hall is regular Navy. Welsh is a physicist. And Pontefract's one of our archaeologists."

"Pontefract Castle . . ." I muttered to myself. "Broken bridge . . . A castle that puts one in mind of broken bridges . . ."

The Admiral laughed.

"*She* won't put you in mind of any castles or broken bridges."

"*She*?"

"Our Lieutenant Pontefract. You don't mind working with women, I hope?"

"I don't know," I said. "I've never tried it before."

I was favourably impressed by my three fellow explorers at first sight. Hall looked like what he was—a professional spaceman, trained to react instantaneously (and correctly) in any emergency. Welsh, like myself, was an obvious civilian in uniform, in about the same age group. And Sue . . . (She's reading this over my shoulder as I write, but I'd have said what I'm saying now in any case). She was in uniform, too. No doubt it was of the correct cut—but she made it look, with her slim, dark elegance, like something straight from Paris ornamented with gold braid and buttons. She looked as much like a naval officer as she did like an archaeologist—which was not at all.

We'd barely time to get acquainted before we were hustled into the big turret-drive Spurling. The Admiral, bulky in his outdoor clothing, his face all but hidden by his respirator, came out to see us off and wish us good luck. His pale blue eyes behind the thick glass of his goggles looked worried. Oh, I know that the eyes are supposed to be incapable of showing expression, and that ascribing expression to them is a literary fiction, but his eyes looked worried. And I'm worried—absurdly—by the memory of them and just can't help wondering how things did turn out. If—*if*—this document is found in time, at the right time, and sent straight to him it may well influence history for the better. You—whoever you are—take it straight to your nearest Post Office and have it photostatted and beamed to Admiral Kingsford, U.N. Space Navy H.Q., Port McQuarrie, Mars.

That flight, from the Spaceport to the Maze, was all I ever saw of Mars. (There had been a hemisphere-wide sandstorm the day I arrived and we had dropped down through a thick, yellow dust haze). I saw the Canals and the Oases—wide, weedy ditches in the desert, straggling clumps of scrawny, tattered shrubs and trees—and the occasional ruined city with an odd, broken tower or two, survivors of atomic blast, of sandstorm, of erosion, still standing. I saw the sky that was too dark a blue, the sun that was too small and not bright enough. I saw the desert and the low, smoothly rounded hills, and the marching dust devils swirling across the arid waste.

And then I saw the Maze.

There was, at first glance, nothing spectacular about it. It was only when we were coming in for a landing that we could appreciate its size. Imagine a penny dropped on an orange tablecloth—a slightly rumpled tablecloth. That's what it was like. When we had landed on the leeward side of it I saw that this penny had a thick rim—a very thick rim, towering all of three hundred feet above our heads. The sight of all that dark brown stone, worn shiny-smooth by the wind and the sand, towering against the dark blue sky was, somehow,

frightening. I had a moment of near panic, a feeling that I had bitten off rather more than I could chew, that this was one puzzle I'd never solve.

Sue and Sam Hall were the efficient ones. Whilst Bill Welsh and I were gawping through the ports at the Maze they were hustling round inside the cabin, getting equipment together, checking off various items and, eventually, practically forcing the respirators on to the heads of the physicist and myself.

We said goodbye to the two pilots, clambered out through the little airlock on to the powdery sand. We slung equipment about ourselves until we looked like walking Christmas trees—the light gravity had its advantages—picked up other gear that we had stowed in carrier bags.

"Now, puzzle expert," said Sue, her high, clear voice muffled by her respirator, " what do we do ? "

" Where's the door, archaeologist ?" I asked her.

" There are thirty doors," she said, " evenly spaced. A door every point two one—give or take a couple of hundredths—of a mile. Do you think that has any significance ?"

" I don't think so," I said. " The fact that this building is circular indicates that the actual point of entry is of no importance. (I am assuming, of course, that the Martians thought as we do). On the other hand, it might be as well *not* to use a door used by past expeditions. We *know* that they did not come out again."

" Sound reasoning," said Sam Hall. " Number thirteen is the nearest—we numbered the doors with paint. It hasn't been used yet—some people are superstitious . . ."

" I take it that it was an absolutely arbitrary numbering system," I said. " Whoever did the marking just called the door that he started with " One " and carried on from there . . ."

" That's the way it was," said Sue.

" All right, then. We'll make it Thirteen."

Welsh and I followed Sue and Hall, who took the lead. The door—the white numericals standing out boldly on the wall above it—was lower than I had anticipated. I watched the others go down on to their hands and knees, having first removed most of their equipment, and crawl through. I stayed outside to pass the gear in to them. A screaming roar startled me. I saw that it was the Spurling. It had lifted on its jets, was slowly following us. It would land outside the door and wait there until we emerged, or until relieved: I wondered what would happen if we came out another way.

There was no more gear to pass in. I backed into the Maze, making the end of the reel of stout line I carried fast to the pole we had placed athwart the entrance. I was surprised at the spaciousness of the chamber in which I found myself. Hall and Welsh were sitting on the floor, tinkering with the radio. "There's nothing wrong with it, Sam," Welsh was saying. "It's happened with every expedition. Once inside the Maze—and the radio dies. We might as well leave it here."

"No," said Hall. "We shall need it when we get out—after all, we might come out through a different door."

I joined Sue as she walked along the wall of the chamber. We shone the beam of our torches on to the bas-reliefs.

"Human," she said. "According to the biologists it couldn't have been so, shouldn't have been so. But every picture, every sculpture we've found tells the same story. Men and women . . ."

"What about bones?"

"There aren't any. They must have cremated their dead. We're hoping that we may find something eventually—somebody who died by accident miles from a city and whose body was never found—but we haven't done so yet. Well, what do you make of all this?"

"It seems fairly obvious," I said. "Those men and women—and, as you say, they could be a crowd from any city street on Earth in fancy dress—are all depicted walking the same way. It's an indication that we should do likewise."

"We haven't much choice," she said. "The only other way out of this chamber is back outside."

The others agreed. Before we passed through the door—this one was of ordinary dimensions—into the passage beyond I examined the carvings carefully, trying to find some clue. There was none, at least not so far as I could see. They depicted a procession of men, women and children, all in long robes and with strange headgear, all marching in the direction that we were taking.

The passage we entered was narrow and we had to walk in single file. After some discussion Welsh took the lead. He had some theory that I never quite understood about radio-activity in the Maze, and was carrying a counter of his own invention and manufacture. Sam Hall followed him, and then Sue, I brought up the rear, paying out the thin, strong cord behind me.

The walls of the passage were smooth and dark, as was the floor. The only ornamentation, if ornamentation it was, was in the ceiling—a stippling of light yellow dots, grouped, apparently, at random. The same pattern was evident on the ceiling of the circular chamber we entered. Besides the doorway we had come through there were three others.

By common consent the choice was mine. I decided that the clue lay in the ceiling decoration. There were thirty ways into the Maze. We had to choose between three doorways. Over the one through which we had come was a group with exactly thirty dots. One of the others doors was marked with twenty-nine, one with twenty-eight and the other with twenty-seven. Twenty-eight and twenty-seven might be, I decided, short cuts to the centre of the Maze. Might be. After all, I hadn't yet got into the mind of the long dead compiler of this puzzle. I threw the beam of my torch into the entrance over which were the twenty-nine dots.

I said, " *This* one."

Once again Welsh, nursing his precious counter, took the lead. This tunnel was not straight, as the first one had been. The physicist rounded a bend with more enthusiasm than caution. We heard him cry out. We heard a thud like a heavy door, a heavy stone door, slamming back into place.

We found the trap—knowing that it was there. It was a flagstone, the entire breadth of the passageway, cunningly pivoted. We forced it down and open without any difficulty, revealing a polished chute that slid down, at a steep angle, into absolute blackness. Hall took a deep breath and then removed the facepiece of his respirator. He shouted. He shouted again. Apart from the booming echoes there was no answer. He unslung the radio transceiver from his shoulder, saying, " This is one piece of equipment that isn't much use." He held it over the chute, then dropped it.

We never heard the sound it made when it hit bottom.

" One of us," I said, " had better go back for help."

I hurried back into the circular chamber. Of the doorway through which we had entered it there was no sign—no sign, that is, save for the thin, white cord that seemingly vanished into a solid wall. The door, obviously, had been actuated by the pivoting flagstone.

We did all the obvious things and a few that weren't so obvious. We might just as well have tried to open that door with our fingernails. Here is my theory for what it is worth. Our party had been, somehow, weighed, enumerated. The door would stay shut until we were all accounted for.

It was then that we had the argument with Hall. I should like to make it clear, now, that I am not questioning his courage. He would never have held his rank in the Service of his choice had he not been brave beyond the average. But he didn't see things the way we—Sue and I—did.

"I'm afraid we'll have to write Bill off," he said. "There must be some indication of a pitfall that he missed . . ."

"There is," I told him. "That tiny yellow star set into the floor."

"Then that's a sign we'll have to watch for in future. Meanwhile we can jump across the pivotted slab quite easily. It's hardly more than a long step . . ."

"And leave Bill?" flared Sue.

"Yes. He made a mistake, and paid for it. The way I see the lay-out of this Maze we're supposed to profit by his mistake. Furthermore, I need hardly remind you and George that you're both commissioned officers of the U.N.S.N. You have a definite mission to perform, and it would be incorrect to jeopardise the success of this mission by risking all our lives to attempt the rescue of one man, who is probably dead."

"If that's military logic," I told him, "I'm glad that I'm a civilian But there're other kinds of logic, Sam. And I'm beginning to get faint glimmerings of the purpose of this puzzle. Only the fittest will survive to solve it."

"Fitness for *what*?" asked Hall.

"I don't know, Sam. But I'm trying to put myself into the compiler's mind. He was humanoid—or human. He had lived at a time when, no doubt, the military virtues were very much in fashion. He had seen one world wrecked by the exercise of these virtues, another one ruined. Therefore he would be inclined to think that some—*some*, mark you, not all—of the military virtues were not worth perpetuating."

"Such as?" queried Sue.

"Such as 'Orders is orders.' I think—again, I may be wrong—that loyalty to one's own kind is a virtue of far greater importance."

"All right," said Hall. "I still think that you're wrong—but I'm going down."

"I'm not wrong," I said. "If this had been a death trap there'd have been a vertical drop. All the same, I hope that our ropes reach to the bottom."

We bent them all together, but they didn't.

Then, when we had Hall dangling at the extreme end of our tether, I slipped. I make no excuse for what followed. I let go of the rope, put out my hands to steady myself. The rope was fast around my waist. I had made it fast myself. I don't think that I should ever be able to duplicate that hitch—it had *seemed* secure enough—intentionally. It didn't hold.

After a long, horrid pause we heard Hall shouting. We could hear and recognise his voice but could not distinguish his words. There was only one thing for us to do. We rearranged the equipment with which we were hung, slung the carrier bags to our sides. Carefully we lowered ourselves into the chute in such a way that we were face to face and with our backs pressing against the polished sides. We let go.

We did not have as much control over our movements as we had hoped, even so, our descent was not suicidally rapid. We were able to slow down—although it was a painful process—when we heard confused shouting below us. Then, to our intense relief, the angle at which we were falling became far less steep. When, at last, we slid out on to a horizontal, polished floor we had almost lost our momentum.

My torch had been on the whole time. I swung the beam ; it fell on Hall. He was bending over the body of Welsh.

" Thank God for a light," he said. " I'm afraid that Bill's dead."

He was right. The cause of death was obvious—the physicist must have struck the back of his head when he fell into the chute. I am sure that the designer of the Maze had not intended this, that it was just an unlucky accident. But it was irrevocable.

We left him there. We didn't like doing it, but we had no choice in the matter. We left him in that hemispherical chamber with its polished floor and walls—a tomb of which a Pharoah would have been proud. But we did not leave him—as the Pharoahs were left—with the possessions that he would need in the next world. We took his water and his compressed food tablets. We took the oxygen cylinder from his respirator, and the spare one. We took his knife and his pistol. Hall, whose own torch had been smashed succeeded in repairing it from the unbroken parts of the dead man's.

Then we had to decide, once again, which way to go. To return up the chute was out of the question. As before, we had a choice of three doors. As before, we had the same random pattern of stippling as a guide. It was obvious to me that we had taken some sort of short cut. One doorway was marked with a group of fourteen dots, one with a group of thirteen, and the other with a group of twelve.

I said that fourteen was a logical choice.

" We took the logical choice before," said Hall. " And Bill's dead because of it."

" It was accidental, his death," I said. " And if the numbers are any guide we have made more progress than we would have done had we taken the other doorways."

Sue laughed shakily. "You're the crossword puzzle expert, George. Has it occurred to you that 29 was 29 *down* ?"

"It has," I said. "And it may be that this will be 14 down. I'll take the lead—and I'll keep my eyes skinned for a little star in the floor."

I saw the star in the floor—it was, as the other had been, just at a bend in the tunnel. We found the pivotted flag—it opened over a chute similar to the other one. I thought at first that we should slide down it, then decided against it. The first chute had been both a warning and a test. The little yellow star was a warning. I switched my torch off, told the others to do the same. When our eyes became accustomed to the darkness we saw a dim, ruddy glow at the bottom of the chute. I pulled the glove off my hand, held it over the opening. I could detect the waves of heat striking my bare skin.

"Whoever They were, They played for keeps," said Hall.

"It's like one of those mazes they use to test the intelligence of rats," said Sue shakily.

We threw one of our heavy packs over the pivotting flagstone. The floor on the other side seemed solid enough. Then Hall jumped over; he made the other end of his rope fast around my waist with his own hands. Sue went next. I brought up the rear, but resumed the lead when I was safely over.

So we carried on. We wandered through a monotony of tunnels interspersed with hemispherical chambers. After the usual narrow, warning escapes we learned to be alert for booby traps, to distinguish the warning signs in floor or walls or ceiling. They weren't all visual. For example—a faint whistle meant that pressure on the next flagstone would bring a wicked knife whipping out of the wall the full width of the tunnel. A low grunt warned of a stone club swinging down from the overhead. We learned. We had to. Our nerves were stretched taut and all our senses were preternaturally alert. And yet, as I said, it was a monotony of tunnels. Even danger can become monotonous.

Then—it was shortly after we had rested in one of the chambers to nibble our tasteless tablets and sip from our water bottles—we struck a new kind of booby trap ; or, rather, it struck us. There was no warning, or, if there were, it was one not apparent to our senses. There was a sudden flash, not bright, although I thought at first that it had blinded me. I realised then that the torch in my hand was gone, that I was holding some queer object of irregular shape (it was the battery—or part of the battery). The pack on my back was suddenly light. The facepiece of my respirator fell to pieces.

But I could breathe comfortably. The air was quite dense, sufficiently rich in oxygen. That was all that I could do. I was completely baffled.

Hall, however, was trained to work, if need be, in complete darkness. His hands must have been busy touching, feeling. When he spoke there was wonderment and admiration in his voice.

"What a weapon!" he said. "What a weapon it would make!"

"What was it?" I heard Sue ask.

"Some sort of radiation that, somehow, destroys all metals. The casing of my torch—all that's left in my hand is a sprinkling of very fine dust. My oxygen cylinders. My knife. My gun. The zipper of my coveralls . . . Well, George, you're the expert. What do we do now?"

I waited until my own hands had verified the truth of Hall's statement.

I said, "That was intentional."

"You're telling me," replied Hall.

"I mean that it wasn't a booby trap. We've been tested in various ways, and come through the tests. Now we've been reduced to the status of primitive man . . ."

"All right. I believe you. What do we do now?"

"The only thing we can do. Carry on."

So we carried on in the pitch darkness. I stayed in the lead. Sue put her two hands on my waist, just above the hips. Hall, bringing up the rear, kept in touch with the girl in the same way. I shuffled ahead through the blackness. I was scared—and had every right to be. But I knew that we had to carry on.

I screamed when I felt the floor tilt beneath me. I heard Sue scream, and heard the spaceman curse. I tried to check my descent down the chute with knees and elbows, but could get no purchase on the polished sides. I was aware of light, dim light, and remembered the trap into which we had almost fallen. But this light was blue, and not red, and there was no fire waiting to receive us in the vast cavern into which we tumbled—no fire but bitter cold that seared our exposed flesh almost as a flame would have done.

The light seemed to have no source. It seemed to come from the air itself—the dry, still, bitterly cold air. Our breath condensed into little clouds of sparkling frost crystals.

"Keep moving!" shouted Hall. "Keep moving!"

"Where to?" asked Sue reasonably enough.

"Does it matter? If we don't move, we freeze!"

"Wait a minute," I said. "There's a clue here—or another test. Or both."

"What do you mean?" asked the others.

"This cave is cold. It's meant to be cold. But *here* are the means of survival."

I walked across to the untidy litter of dry sticks and twigs, kicked it. Judging by the sound it made, the wood was as dry as it looked.

"So we're supposed to make a fire," said Sue slowly. Her voice was shaky, but that was caused by cold rather than by fear.

"Yes," I said.

"How?" she asked.

"You're an archaeologist, you should know. Or don't you study *primitive* man?" I squatted down, began rummaging in the debris. I found a flat piece of fairly soft wood, a straight stick with a fairly sharp point to it. "Primitive man knew how to make fire without pocket lighters."

"Can you do it, George?" asked Hall.

"I don't know, Sam. I've never tried before."

I found another length of wood that would do for a bow, strung it with what remained of my reel of cord. (That cord was eventually of use to us). I took a couple of turns with the bowstring round the pointed stick, stood on the flat piece of wood and held the pointed stick upright between my boots. I began to saw the bow back and forth.

"I don't think that anybody will mind if we cheat a little," said Hall at last. "This is fascinating to watch—but it seems to be a long time in getting results. Whatever the radiation was that destroyed our metals it didn't affect organic compounds. My pistol holster is full of dust—and some of that will be the powder from cartridges . . ."

He poured some of the dust from his holster into the hollow I had worn in the flat piece of wood. He tore pages from his notebook and placed them around the firestick. I resumed my sawing, and did not have long to wait for results. I escaped with an only slightly scorched foot, and in a very short time we had a cheerful blaze going.

We sat down around it, grateful for the heat. We thawed our water bottles and drank. We nibbled the food concentrates with their delicate flavour of old sawdust. We began to feel a little better.

We discussed the advisability of sleep, then decided against it. The problem of which way to continue our exploration next exercised our minds. It was Sue who pointed out that the smoke from our fire did not stream straight up but drifted lazily towards the far end of the cave. It was Sue—she was catching on—who suggested that we take with us torches and a good supply of spares. I agreed with her. The nature of this clue argued that we should have need of fire again.

We trudged what seemed like miles—and it may have been—over the dry, sandy floor. Now and again we came upon more deposits of the dry sticks and, but more rarely, evidence of long dead (how long dead we didn't care to think) fires. At last we reached the sheer, smooth cliff that was the far wall of the cavern.

There was a strong draught into a gloomy tunnel mouth. We followed the smoke of our torches, making fair progress over the sandy floor. Other tunnels opened to left and to right of us, but we ignored them, following the smoke.

We heard rustlings—ahead of us, behind us, in the side tunnels. We heard something croaking. I looked back—and saw eyes glowing crimson in the torchlight. I heard Hall cry out—and saw more eyes ahead of us.

"Don't stop?" ordered Hall. "They—whatever they are—will be afraid of fire!"

"They might be attracted by it," I said. "But, in any case, we're surrounded."

Slowly we advanced. The glowing eyes ahead of us held their ground—there must have been at least six animals there, assuming that they had one pair of eyes apiece.

Hall shouted. He lit another torch from the half consumed one in his hand. Waving both torches he ran forward. There was a scuffle and a high pitched squealing. The eyes vanished. The spaceman hurled one of his blazing brands after them. Something screamed.

"Another of your tests, or lessons, or clues," panted Hall. "The lower animals are afraid of fire—and they're more scared of us than we are of them. Lord! What a stink! It smells like a fire in a featherbed factory!"

And then we saw light ahead—not cold blue, not ruddy, but yellow, like sunlight.

We could not even make a guess as to the extent of the next cavern. Its lofty roof was hidden by grey mists, as were the further walls. Furthermore, it was a huge hothouse teeming with luxuriant, brilliantly green vegetation. What the trees and the shrubs were I cannot say. They were similar, perhaps, to rain forest growths on Earth. They bore no resemblance to the leathery, ragged trees on the surface of Mars.

The air was hot, humid, and full of strange, strong scents that made us drowsy. We shed our outer clothing, but we didn't dare to leave either it or our equipment behind; neither did we dare to dump our torches and our supply of dried sticks.

There was a path for us to follow. I didn't like it—it was all too obviously made by the regular passage of some huge, heavy beast. But we had now no means of hacking our own way through the jungle.

There were things in the undergrowth, among the trees. We heard them rustling and calling to each other, but we never saw them. We hoped that they weren't hostile—we had no weapons but our torches. Even so, we soon abandoned all attempts to walk silently. We weren't bushmen, and the only end achieved by our caution was to slow our progress.

The thing that came after us wasn't cautious either. It didn't need to be. It was at least as large as an Earthly elephant and had a mouth that could have swallowed a cow. I can't describe it. I didn't stop to look at it.

" Run !" I yelled to Sue, gave her a push that sent her reeling down the track. I wasted no time in following her. I assumed that Hall would follow suit.

As I have said before, he was a brave man. But bravery carried to extremes, is foolhardiness. I heard him yell, and paused in my flight. I turned round and saw him.

He wasn't running, he was walking. He was walking *towards* the monster, waving a flaming torch in each hand. Perhaps it had never seen fire before—in any case fire is not nearly so impressive when seen in broad daylight or its equivalent.

The beast never even paused in its ponderous advance. One massive, armoured foot smashed Hall into the ground. He started a scream, but never finished it. There was nothing that I could do.

When I resumed my flight I saw that Sue had vanished.

It was another of those pitfalls of which the maker of the Maze was so fond. I found it when the ground opened suddenly beneath me—and not a moment too soon either. Once again I was in darkness, once again I was falling. But this time it was different. On past occasions it had been a straight drop ; there had been no gut-wrenching twists, no sensation of being turned inside out, no consciousness of the passage of aeons of time.

I was sprawled on soft grass by the feel of it, and somebody was holding me very tight. I opened my eyes, and saw Sue's face. I saw the sky—the night sky and the stars, and the yellow, full moon, with its familiar markings, almost at the zenith. My body when I tried to raise myself to a sitting posture, was oddly heavy.

" I thought you were never coming through," she said.

I asked, absurdly enough, " Where am I ? "

I saw her smile.

" There's your clue," she said, pointing to the moon. " We're on Earth. But just where I can't say. Somewhere in the Tropics is my guess . . ."

" There must be a town or village close by," I said. " We must get to a radio transmitter at once."

" Must we ?" she asked. " *Can* we ?"

" What do you mean ?"

" While I was waiting for you I saw an animal. Luckily it wasn't hungry. It was a tiger—but far bigger than any tiger I've ever seen in a zoo. And it had teeth too long for its mouth . . ."

" Sue ! What are you suggesting ?"

" Oh, I know it's fantastic. But we've quite calmly accepted the idea of teleportation through Space. It's been through Time as well. Don't ask me how, or why . . ."

" You *can* ask me why," I said. " It's all beginning to make sense. The Maze isn't a puzzle so much as a school—a school designed to teach lessons in primitive living. Our last lesson—but I wish we hadn't learned it at Sam's expense—is that it is sometimes wiser to run than to stand and fight . . ."

" But what for ?" she asked.

" This is only a guess," I said, " but will have to do. There was, or will be, this war between the Martians and the beings of the Fifth Planet. Mars was ruined—the Fifth Planet utterly destroyed. But the Fifth Planet must have had a large and dreadfully armed fleet that survived the catastrophe. The surviving Martians escaped both in Time and Space.

" They decided to start from scratch, literally, on Earth. They knew that if they built up a technological civilisation too fast they might either attract the attention of their enemies or, possibly, develop space travel and interfere with their own history as Martians. I don't know if you've read any Time Travel stories—but they're full of paradoxes. The makers of the Maze were determined to avoid them."

" You may have something," she said slowly. " It may account for the true men co-existing with the Neanderthaler. Neanderthal Man must have been the aborigine—his supplanter an invader . . ."

Something roared not too far away. Something else screamed. We remembered the last lesson of the Maze and spent what should have been—but somehow wasn't—a miserable night in a tree.

We survived. We found ourselves a cave when the daylight came and moved in. We used the powder remaining in my holster to start a fire. We learned, sometimes by painful experience, what berries were edible and what weren't. We managed to snare the occasional not-quite-rabbit. I even—and of this I still feel proud—managed to make a quite deadly bow and a set of arrows. It brought down a small deer.

In a way I am sorry that our lonely life is now finished—but we have decided to join the band of nomads who have camped in our valley. They're friendly enough people, and I don't think that we shall have much trouble in learning their language. They have spears, but not the bow—Sue tells me no depiction of a bow has ever been found in Martian records or statuary—so it looks as though I shall be able to make quite a good living by manufacturing that weapon. Sue tells me, too, that they are, at the most, but two generations removed from the original Martian colonists.

There is very little pencil left, and I am on the last sheet of paper. I will bury this record, and then we will go to join—but not in the Biblical sense—our ancestors.

"But we're ancestors ourselves," Sue has just reminded me.

—Bertram Chandler

Some people just work for a living while others are so enthusiastic about their jobs that they try and impress everyone else with both the job's and their own importance. In certain circumstances this is a fine thing and can be used to urge other people into greater endeavours.

SPECIAL PLEADING

By PHILLIP MARTYN

It was one of those days. Everything had gone wrong from the moment when Jeff Hawkins had stepped out of bed and stubbed his toe until now. He'd cut himself while shaving, the wound had bled all over his shirt necessitating a last minute change, and he'd arrived late at the office on the one morning in the year that the area manager had chosen to be early. Dolly, the blonde secretary, had broken their date with an excuse as artificial as her hair. And now this.

Jeff scowled at the broken spring and slammed down the hood of his car. The damage wasn't too serious, a garage could fix it in a few hours, but deprived of his normal transport his sales figures would drop. With the area manager already talking about the necessity for increased effort, reduced returns and hinting darkly of certain proposed alterations in staff, it was the last straw. The world, as far as Jeff was concerned, was all to hell.

When a man is in that frame of mind there is only one logical thing he can do. Jeff phoned a garage, picked up his sample case and headed for the nearest bar. He was on his third drink when the plump man walked in.

He wore a conservative suit of dark blue serge picked out with a thin chalk stripe. His face was round and smooth but his hair was

touched with grey and the skin beneath his eyes was soft and flaccid. He removed his hat, dabbed delicately at his forehead with a square of spotless linen and settled himself comfortably on a stool.

"Morning, Harvey," he said. "Anything new?"

"Morning, Mr. Leander." The bartender swabbed the counter with an air of casual indifference. "You heard about the dutch down on Fourth and Vine?"

"I did." Leander tutted and shook his head. "A bad thing, Harvey. A very bad thing."

"Sure was." Harvey joined in the head shaking. "Well, there it is. The usual?"

"If you please."

Jeff, idly prodding the olive in his extra-dry martini, looked up in time to see that the 'usual' consisted of a well-iced whisky and soda. Covertly he stared at the new arrival, studying his reflection in the mirror which ran back of the bar.

The suit was hand-sewn and of expensive material. The watch around the plump wrist was of gold. The physical discomfort told of an easy life and the smooth cheeks of a well-supplied stomach. He looked, and probably was, a successful business man. Totally different from the other occupant of the bar, a thin, wizened man with broken shoes and a grease-stained tie who nursed a flat beer while he frowned over a racing form.

Jeff sighed and finished his drink. As a bar-room philosopher of many years standing he felt that he could draw an analogy between the two men and the state of the world. Prosperity and poverty, with himself, naturally, stuck in the middle. He became aware of Harvey refilling his glass.

"You will join me?" Leander, Jeff realised, had been also studying him in the mirror.

"Thanks." Jeff wasn't adverse to taking a drink from anyone and he relished the opportunity to strike up a conversation. At least it would kill time. "Did I hear you say that someone had committed suicide?"

"You did." Harvey folded thick arms on the counter. "Old man Berwick jumped from the top of a building and smeared himself all over the sidewalk." He glanced at Leander. "The ambulance boys were pretty sore about it."

"And they had a right to be," said the plump man sternly. "A thing like that sets a bad example. Before you know it others will be doing the same and then where will we be?"

"I don't know." Jeff sensed the possibility of an argument. "I take it that you are against suicide?"

"Not exactly," said Leander thoughtfully. "No, I wouldn't exactly say that. But I am against what Berwick did. If a man wants to kill himself then he should do it quietly in the privacy of his home."

"Dutching himself in the street has made him a public charge," said Harvey. "Isn't that right, Mr. Leander?"

"Yes, and I consider it an immoral thing to do." The plump man was obviously upset, he drank half his whisky and soda at a gulp.

"Isn't suicide always immoral?" Jeff warmed to the question like a hunting dog scenting its prey.

"Immoral?" Leander slowly finished his drink. "No," he said setting down the empty glass. "I wouldn't exactly say that either."

"Then would you say it's cowardice?" Jeff didn't really believe that but he was always willing to take any stand just as long as things could be kept going.

"Have another drink," said Leander.

"It's my turn," said Jeff. "The usual?"

"If you insist."

"The usual for Mr. Leander," ordered Jeff. "And another dry martini for me. Extra-dry. You want one yourself?"

"No thanks." Harvey set down the replenished glasses. "I don't drink."

"You don't drink?" Jeff blinked at the paragon.

"I don't drink and I don't smoke," said Harvey. "Those things are poison, ain't they? Well, what sensible man wants to poison himself?"

"You've got something there." Mention of smoking triggered off a response and Jeff pulled cigarettes from his pocket. Absently he lit one.

"Nonsense!" Leander was emphatic. "People can't drink and smoke enough." He held up his hand as if to still a protest. "Now I agree with you part way, Harvey, but look at the big pictures. Millions of people all drinking and smoking as hard as they can. It provides revenue for the governments, provides jobs for people like yourself and makes the world a happier place to live in." He looked at Jeff. "Don't you agree?"

"I don't know." Jeff frowned through a cloud of cigarette smoke. "There's another way to look at it, don't forget. If people didn't smoke or drink then they'd have plenty of money to spend on other things."

"Stagnation," said Leander. "Progress is due to pressure. Keep a man poor and he will work and struggle to get rich. If smoking

and drinking takes his money then that's a good thing. Competition, my friend, is the essence of business. Personally I'm all for smoking and drinking. In fact I'd like to see everyone doing it. It should be a law." He blinked at Jeff. " Have another drink."

Jeff had another drink, then one after that, and then another. Somehow the conversation had veered back to suicide.

" Takes plenty of sand to do a dutch," said Harvey. " Man I know tried it twice and lost his nerve both times."

" What happened to him ? " Jeff was interested.

" He turned religious, decided that he was meant to suffer for some crime he'd committed in a previous incarnation and went back to his wife." Harvey chuckled. " She made him suffer."

The wizened man at the end of the bar made a strangled sound. He folded up his racing form, tucked it into his pocket, swallowed his beer and slid from his stool. He glared at the bartender on his way to the door.

" Some people," he said stiffly, " have a funny sense of humour."

" Crazy ! " Harvey stared after him then shrugged. " You get all kinds in a bar," he said philosophically. " Never can tell."

" Maybe he tried to end it all too ? " suggested Jeff. He sighed, remembering his own circumstances. "You know, there's a lot to be said for it. Just one quick decision and then no more worry, no more nothing. Sometimes I wish I had the guts to do it myself."

" You surprise me," said Leander. " Personally I find this a very satisfactory world in which to live. Frankly, I can't understand anyone wanting to leave it before his time."

" You haven't got my boss," pointed out Jeff. " Nor my job. How would you like to drive around all day trying to sell electrical gear to housewives ? "

" Is that what you do ? "

" It is." Jeff was bitter. " Selling toasters, irons, sun-lamps, electric clocks,all the junk they don't really want and can do without. Driving around through all that traffic all day long trying to sell things." He felt a fresh wave of misery. " I'd rather be dead."

" Have another drink," said Leander. " Driving, you say ? Have a double."

" Better take it easy if you've got to hit the road," said Harvey. Jeff was annoyed.

" You just do as Mr. Leander says," he snapped. " I'm all right."

" Of course you're all right." The plump man looked impatient. " Hurry with that drink, Harvey."

Jeff sipped the double-strong extra-dry martini and felt a little better. Only a little. Leander seemed concerned.

"You shouldn't look at things the way you do," he said. "You should look on the bright side. You know, progress is a wonderful thing. Here you are enjoying more comfort than any king could command back in the old days. You have a car which is better than the most expensive coaches ever were. You have all the benefits of an electrical civilisation. You have gadgets which are more reliable and cheaper to run than a houseful of slaves. It's a wonderful world, my boy, and don't you forget it."

"Maybe you're right." Looked at in that way things didn't seem so bad. True, the area manager was a louse of the first water, Dolly was a hard-hearted two-timing gold-digger, the traffic was something chronic and his stomach was beginning to develop a fine crop of ulcers, but these were mere trifles against the big picture.

"Just think of it," said Leander enthusiastically. "The roads filled with cars carrying busy people on their errands. The air getting filled with more and more aircraft. Houses going up all over the place and the population density increasing all the time. Why, a man now has more advantages and opportunities than ever before. I tell you we've never had it so good."

"I don't know," said Harvey. "Seems sometimes to me that there are too many people as it is."

"That's silly." Leander, to Jeff's surprise, seemed really annoyed. "You simply can't have too many people. The more there are the better. Would you like to live in a wilderness? Of course you wouldn't."

"I didn't say that," said Harvey. "All I said was that there were too many people." He began to polish glasses with an unnecessary vigour. Leander shrugged.

"Harvey's a conservative," he explained. "If he had his way we'd all be back in the middle ages." He snorted. "Too many people indeed! Ridiculous!"

"Well, we can have too many," said Jeff thoughtfully. "If people get too cramped then they start to suffer from diseases and things. I . . ."

"Progress," interrupted Leander. "You mustn't think of it in any other way. How can we progress without plenty of manpower? Those gadgets you sell, who would buy them if it wasn't for the fact that everyone is trying to make life easier? And how can they do that unless there are plenty of people around them to provide a surplus of capital?"

"Maybe you're right." Jeff sipped at his outsized drink. "You and Mr. Gerlman should get together sometime."

"Gerlman?"

"My area manager. He's always on about progress and pressure and the need to drive and keep driving until a sale is made." Jeff's face darkened with too recent memory. "I always think that he would have made a wonderful overseer. You know, on a plantation or on a galley, whipping the slaves to make them work."

"I can see the trouble," said Leander. He nodded as if he had suspected it all along. "You're suffering from an inferiority complex. You don't think that you're good enough for the world. Why, you talk of slaves as if you felt that you were one yourself. That's nonsense, as you must admit."

"Is it?" Leander had touched on a sore point. "What else am I?" Jeff shrugged. "Sure, I can quit but what then? I'd have to work for someone else and things would be just the same. Work today so that you can eat tomorrow. No whips, I agree, but the threat of getting fired instead."

"Self pity." Leander shook his head. "My friend, I feel sorry for you. Here you are living in the best of all possible worlds and one which is getting better all the time, and still you aren't satisfied. Competition, I'll admit, is sometimes troublesome, but there is plenty for all. That's what I always tell them at conventions. there is plenty for all." He stared into his whisky and soda. "Yes," he repeated, "plenty for all."

"And it all comes to those who wait." Jeff was catching the other's spirit. "Is that it?"

"That's it exactly." Leander beamed. "It all comes to those who wait," he said. "You know, that's pretty good."

"It's philosophy," said Jeff. He straightened on his stool. He was feeling pretty good now, much better than he had when he'd entered the bar. Talking to strangers had a way of clarifying things. He'd felt sorry for himself, he admitted it. But Gerlman was just a boss, Dolly just one girl out of millions, and the world was his oyster. He frowned as Leander slipped from his stool.

"You leaving?"

"I must, business you know." The plump man nodded towards Harvey. "Give my friend another drink, a big one." He beamed and was gone.

"Nice fellow," said Jeff, sipping at his drink. "Yes, sir, a real nice man. Has a way of putting things so that nothing seems so bad after all." He sipped again. "What does he do?"

"Mr. Leander?" Harvey paused in his eternal task of polishing glasses. "He's a mortician."

—Phillip Martyn

ALIENATION

The misconception of people's ideals and intentions by the masses will always be with us, unfortunately, and witch-hunting is likely to be just as popular a mob-sport in the future as it has been in the past. In this story, however, it is a case of "which witch is which!"

OF AFFECTION

By J. E. TOMERLIN

Five years ago, he thought, watching the mob eddy and swirl about the entrance to the court-house. Five years ago they laughed at superstition, scorned any theory that was not scientific and prated of their enlightened civilization. And look at them now.

Parnell Browning did look at them. They weren't like people to him at all; but, rather, like ants. Hundreds of ants, angrily swarming, seeking their tormentor, and the court-house was a great cement ant hill.

The object of the mob's fury was inside the cement ant hill. His name was Alan Kemper, a small frightened man, who seemed incapable of committing a crime.

Kemper was sparely built on a frame that showed, by its softness and lack of development, the results of a cloistered life. He was, perhaps, five and a half feet tall, one hundred and ten pounds and 45 years of age. His hair and eyes were a nondescript brown.

He had a nervous habit which caused him to draw the back of his hand across his mouth from time to time. When he did this, his eyes would dart up, ferret-like, to see if anyone was watching him. His appearance was altogether harmless and ineffectual.

And yet, the crime for which he was to stand trial was the most terrible of them all ; so terrible that no one accused of it had ever been acquitted.

This was the man whom it was Parnell Browning's duty to defend. To defend with all the force of his vigorous youth, all the conviction of his active mind, and with confidence of winning the case.

Browning forced his way slowly through the milling clot of people toward the door to the court-house. He was a large, energetic man with the build of a professional athlete, and his wide shoulders helped him jam forward through the crowd.

As he pushed his way, he spoke to one and then another of them : " What do you think about him ? "

" I think they oughta' let us get our hands on him," came the reply.

And to another, " Do you think they'll convict him ? "

" Convict him ? " the man said. " Why not ? He's an *alien*, ain't he."

So this was the language of the people, Browning thought. In the language of the court, the defendant was " An alien being, from planet or planets unknown." Either way it made no sense. Either way the phrases should have implied no particular guilt in themselves ; but so well had the people been propagandized in the past three or four years that even the word, alien, was sufficient in most cases to send the populace into blind, unreasoning rages.

Browning reached the court-house door and identified himself to the bailiff's standing guard.

" Attorney for the defence," he shouted above the crowd.

The first guard examined his papers ; the second one commented laconically, " Nice job you got today, mister. But don't get in the way if this bunch starts moving."

" I won't," said Browning as the first guard returned his papers.

He edged through the crack of the door, past the guards and into the hallway of the huge court-house. The interior was modern and well lighted, redundant with chrome and glass fixtures. Its light-green walls were adorned with pictures of the great arbiters of justice of the past fifty years, their faces stern and unyielding and at the same time encouraging in their promise of fairness and honour.

The big man's heels clacked down the polished, beige-floored corridor until he came to the main courtroom. The guard at the door

passed him without question and he found himself standing inside a vaulted, nearly vacant chamber. As he moved down the aisle he noted with relief that there would be no spectators ; only the members of the jury, the principals of the trial itself and one or two chosen representatives of the radio press.

Judge Leonard Cork looked up irritably from his place of prominence at the head of the room and glared at Browning. " Who are you ? " he challenged.

" Parnell Browning, counsel for the defence, if it please your honour."

The judge riffled quickly through his papers. " The counsel for the defence is given here as Lew Winter. Why isn't he here ? "

Browning surveyed the judge coolly. The man had a reputation for harshness and he was beginning to feel that the term was well applied. " Mr. Winter was taken unexpectedly ill, your honour. He asked me to act in his stead for the defendant, in as much as I helped him prepare the briefs." Browning turned to the defendant, " If this arrangement is agreeable to Mr. Kemper."

Judge Cork ignored the intended concession to the man in the prisoner's dock and seemed not to hear Kemper's " What difference does it make ? "

" I consider this extremely irregular," said the judge, " but under the circumstances, and not wishing to delay this matter any longer, I will allow the substitution."

" Thank you, your honour." Browning took his seat at the defence table.

In the pause before proceedings began, he took stock of his situation. As was customary in these cases, the jury box had been wire-caged. Ordinarily this was an unnecessary precaution, but in the past, on one or two occasions, feeling had risen so high during alien trials that the jurymen had attempted to take onto their own shoulders the burden of punishment as well as judgment.

At the front doors he could sense the growing pressure of the mobs. Just how long the bailiffs could restrain the crowd at the door was problematical, but Browning decided there was no purpose in dwelling on that idea until it should actually happen.

The real danger, he thought, was much more insidiously disguised in the person of prosecutor Shelby Cameron and Judge Leonard Cork : two men who knew the cost of failing to convict an alien.

The District Attorney was the lesser of these. Cameron was an uninspired ex-corporation lawyer turned D.A. by the grace of influential friends and an unsuspecting electorate. Furthermore, he would not, in all likelihood, be taking this case too seriously. Alien trials

were chiefly a matter of rote, the conclusion foregone. Cameron would state the "evidence" against Kemper in the usual way, not bothering to so much as call a witness or display an exhibit. Chances were that he was poorly prepared for the unexpected attack Browning hoped to deliver, and he felt Cameron might possibly crack.

Judge Cork was another matter. The man sat sinisterly on the bench, making notations, rearranging his papers and clearing his throat quietly at regular intervals. His head was small and innocent of all but the slightest fringe of hair round the side and back. His low sloping forehead curved back unbroken and smooth to the bald pate, and even his eyebrows were thin and wispy. The general effect was that of slickness, plus a certain featurelessness which concealed the judge's emotions from observers. But Browning could estimate those emotions with fair accuracy. The judge was an excellent representative of the will of the people, their wills and their desires. He would, Browning was certain, share their unreasoning and illogical condemnation of anything relating to the dreadful aliens. And his position was such that he could effectively stifle any bid on Browning's part to turn the tide of the case too strongly.

As the trial began, Cameron proved to be thoroughly predictable. His opening speech to the jury was the sum and the total of his case, and in it he included all the evidence he had at hand, confident that it would be more than enough.

The semi-familiar words came droning to Browning's ears like an ancient ritual. "Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury. It will be the purpose of the state to prove to you that the defendant, Alan Kemper, is in truth an 'alien being, of planet or planets unknown,' that he has been and is residing among us as a spy and saboteur designing against the safety and freedom of the peoples of the planet Earth."

Then, with a rather perverse admiration, Browning watched the prosecutor subtly shift from the accusation itself into an account of the evidence, giving a factual effect to both.

"For the past several years the defendant has engaged in experimental activities without the knowledge of the government. Although for a time he was employed in governmental laboratories, the nature of his interests and experiments prompted his dismissal from these laboratories. Subsequently, we now discover, the defendant resumed practise of his 'unnatural' experiments in the secrecy of his own home."

Cameron turned and strode across to the prisoner's dock. He glared down at the small man sitting there. "Fortunately for the people of this planet, his neighbours have testified in detail on his

suspicious activities during this period. And the most damning proof of all comes from our own scientific staff who have examined Mr. Kemper's projects. They report that the experiments in which the defendant was engaged involved data and techniques supposed to have been known only to our *most advanced governmental researchers.*"

Cameron leaned forward to the jury, " Where, if not by subversive means, could Mr. Kemper have obtained such information ? " he demanded.

Browning swung casually to his feet, " Don't you consider it possible he might have developed the ideas himself ? " The courtroom sat for a moment in surprised silence, then fell to an angry muttering.

" The counsel for the defence is out of order," sputtered Judge Cork.

" Then I object to the prosecution's line of evidence."

" Objection overruled. The prosecution is not being cross-examined," stated the judge.

Slightly off balance, the prosecutor blundered. Like a fighting bull, suddenly finding itself assailed from an unexpected quarter, Shelby Cameron switched his attack from the defendant to his counsel.

" Oh, I'm sure our Mr. Browning will have something very humanitarian to say. Certainly he will take occasion to plead with us not to persecute a man just because he happens to be a little different from the rest of us. And I'm certain we can depend upon him to give us the old, old song that goes ' don't hate that which you don't understand,' but I don't believe it will work."

He crossed the floor to face Parnell Browning. " We didn't hate Edgar Fleming two years ago, but when he was caught trying to steal government secrets, we began to *understand* him. We tried not to hate Paul Allison last year when he planted explosives in the World League Building, but we found him quite simple to understand. I think we understand aliens and what they want to do to us only too well ; that's *why* we have learned to hate them."

Cameron turned to the jurors, bringing his open palm down hard on the railing. " I demand that you put a stop to this man's scheming ! Show his inhuman bosses that their plans to undermine the science of Earth are doomed to failure. Let us have an end to his dangerous and treasonable inventions by putting an end to his dangerous and treasonable life." Cameron brought his fist down again with finality, drawing a howl of approval from the jury box. The judge rapped his gavel for order.

" The prosecution rests."

They recessed then, the court officials rising to stretch their legs as if they had just been through a long and rigorous session, the jurors exchanging words and looks of approval among themselves, their decisions well formulated.

Browning closed his briefcase in disgust and walked over to the prisoner's dock where Alan Kemper sat, head bowed and unmoving.

"Mr. Kemper." The little man did not move for a minute, and Browning had just decided that he hadn't heard, when the accused man slowly raised his head.

Browning was suddenly embarrassed ; ashamed of himself and of the other people in the room with him. "I just wondered," he said gently, "if there was anything else you could tell me that might—" he groped for a phrase, then ended weakly, "—that might help."

The prisoner sat for a moment, gazing steadily at Browning. When he spoke his voice was hardly above a whisper. "Would anything I say help ?" he asked. "Would it really make any difference if I told them how my life was contained in my experiments ? How once that was taken from me I would as soon all were taken, even my life ?"

The small man smiled a twisted smile and continued asking the questions to which he expected no answer. "Would it matter if I told them that what I knew I discovered for myself, that many of my findings were not government secrets at all but actually unknown to the government—in any form. And that these techniques were for the betterment, not the destruction of mankind—as are most of the findings of our illustrious government ? "

He lowered his head again, seeming to shrink yet further in stature and he wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. His last words were a sigh, "I think not, Mr. Browning. I think not."

"Will the counsel for the defence prepare to proceed," ordered Judge Cork.

He wanted to scream at them, tell them what fools they were, what a terrible thing they were doing, but he knew that he couldn't. They wouldn't even hear me, he thought, no matter how loud I shouted : they would be just as deaf as they are blind. He walked to the front of the room.

Twelve hostile faces were turned upon him, three rows of four behind the steel mesh, and as he looked at the faces he knew they hated him too. Yes, hating Kemper was not enough for them ; destroying one such inoffensive-looking man was not enough to bolster their terrified spirits. The hulking, heavy-jowled man in the front row for instance. Every roll and layer of his obese body quivered with a secret fear, rallied now into hatred of the alien and his defender.

It would take a wholesale slaughter of green-antennaed Martians to give that one so much as a good night's sleep, he thought.

One by one he searched the faces of the men, and in each he saw something of the same dread-become-hate that was personified by the fat man. And in the faces of the women he saw something worse.

The women were always worse in these affairs, Browning remembered. The felt the terror of the unknown entity, too, but with them it went deeper. Perhaps he considered, it was the female's fear of *any* intruder, the protecting of the nest from the marauder ; something primeval that made them *enjoy* seeing strangers die.

The faces of the jury waited for him now and as he looked at them, the uncertainty left him. Perhaps if there had been one among the twelve that looked as though he could even begin to understand, he would have broken and begun babbling at them. Their uniformity against him made him suddenly calm. And he began to speak.

" I, too, fear aliens," he began and the soft confidence of his voice held their attention. " I fear them as I do any unknown thing, instinctively, intuitively.

" But I'm not a very brave man, and I am afraid of many things. The night ; hunger ; death ; and much else in addition to aliens." He clasped his hands together in front of him and regarded them solemnly. " But I think, more than any of these things, I fear what is happening here in this court-room today. For here I see a frightened people, striking out blindly at a foe they cannot comprehend."

He talked rapidly, now, his words following one after another in a full-rushing stream, washing over the minds of the people who heard him, soothing and comforting. He reminded them of what it was to fear for one's rights as an individual, to be awakened and arrested in the night, to spy and be spied upon, and his voice was soft and firm.

At last he paused in his speech and drew a book from his briefcase and held it up for them to see. The book was a dirty, green-covered volume with sheets greyed and yellowed from age ; he held it gently in his hands. In the quiet of the room the sounds from outside, the rising sound of the mob, had the distant sound of the surf.

" Today the light of science has flushed the shadows from the corners of men's minds ; but not very long ago, as the puny span of man's existence on earth is reckoned, such was not the case. In those darker years there were fantastic spectres to fear ; not only disease and intolerance, but goblins, devils and witches as well.

" I have been reading this," he said. " Here I have learned of the fear of men and women ; the fear so great that it could cause them to burn innocent people alive, at the stake."

Pacing slowly back and forth before them, Browning painted for the jurors a grotesque picture in words. A picture of black night and orange flames, of piercing, agonized screams and the scrid odour of searing flesh, of fear-maddened humans and the blasphemy of their deeds.

And then he told them of themselves and the " alien " witches they burned. " Because those people years ago didn't understand the physical world in which they lived, and because they were afraid, they invented superstitions. With these superstitions they created focal points for their fears, the witches ; then they murdered them, not out of sadism or malice, but out of their abysmal ignorance."

Several of the jurors stirred uneasily, wondering where this powerful young man was trying to lead them. He brought his clasped hands up before him almost as in a gesture of supplication. " Don't you understand that here, today, four centuries later, because we have again been confronted with something we don't understand, we're burning our witches again ? "

He pointed to the defendant, " This man is not an alien. He is merely a brilliant man with a fine mind who happens to be a little ' different ' from the rest of us." Browning dropped the book from his hand onto the table and walked over to face the jurors.

" If you kill Alan Kemper for being what he is, and if you continue to murder all the other Alan Kempers of this world, you will bring disaster on this planet as no alien power ever could. *Stop burning your witches,*" he cried.

And when he had finished and pronounced the final words, " The defence rests," he thought, perhaps, he had won after all.

The twelve members of the jury sat silent, as though hypnotised, prosecutor Cameron made no move to reply, Judge Cork remained transfixed.

Then, through the oak-panelled doors came a rushing, trampling sound like thunder. Judge Cork came to his feet ; there was no time now to risk the verdict to the jury. He must act quickly to protect himself. " The court finds you, Alan Kemper, Guilty as charged," he pronounced. " Guilty ! "

Kemper stood up as though to receive sentence.

The people in the courtroom scrambled for the doorways at the rear of the room leading to the judge's chambers on the one side and the jail cells on the other. A crackling, crushing sound split the room as the great doors from the hall burst inward admitting the wall of monomaniacal flesh. They poured into the room and down the aisles.

The last sight Browning saw clearly was the little scientist, standing in the prisoner's dock, wiping his hand across his mouth, waiting for

them. Then he disappeared as the mob swept to the end of the chamber and left the room awash with humanity.

His key turned in the lock, the door opened and Parnell Browning's nearly naked form slipped into his apartment. The few remnants of his clothing trailed in tatters from his body and yet, curiously, there was not a mark visible on his flesh.

He didn't turn on the lights, though the last rays of the day were dying from the sky, but instead he drew the window shades, pitching the room into murkiness.

Outside, he knew, the people were in the streets. One human form had not been enough for them to tear asunder, and they were seeking another. Another vessel of blood from which to quench their thirst, he thought, and knew that they were searching for the young, athletic man who had so eloquently defended the hateful alien.

They would trace him quickly once one among them thought to get his name from some person who had been in the courtroom, and so he moved hurriedly.

The apartment consisted of kitchen, bath and main room ; of these only the main room was sufficiently large for his purpose.

He ignored the muffled sounds being made by the young attorney, Lew Winters, leaving him on the kitchen floor, still tightly bound with a thin, strong cord. He set to work feverishly, tipping the double bed up on its side and pushing it into a corner of the room. The rug he stripped back and tossed heedlessly into the bathroom. He pushed the several chairs and tables into the kitchen area and found himself with a large cleared space in the centre of the roomî

Going to the closet by the front door he unfastened the complicate lock and pulled open the door ; and from its depths he began to draw numerous oddly-shaped and curiously-wrought pieces of material which he immediately set to arranging on the front room floor.

In the dark the work should have taken much more time than it did, but Browning's hands moved with amazing surety and the business was completed in only a few minutes. He stepped back, then, to the doorway and switched on the light ; in its glare he examined the contraption critically, then nodded once in satisfaction.

The object he had constructed was totally strange in shape although of a pleasing and obviously geometrical form. More than anything else it resembled the weird, curiously inspired result of a giant idiot with a giant tinker-toy set. Its rods and spires were of a light, jade-coloured material looking like a beautifully alloyed metal, and the whole skeletal form hummed with a vibrant life.

He stripped off the remaining pieces of clothing on his body and stepped into the centre of the device. Then he moved one of the parts of the machine near his face and spoke into it.

"This is Selkza 117, arl ogrunda eirstimir, Parnell Browning—Earth." He waited now and, after a moment, the part near his face glowed suddenly orange several times in quick succession. He considered his next words carefully.

"The time is not yet," he said. "They are not ready for us. Please take me back ; I'm prepared."

He waited another moment and then the whole machine began to glow blue to green to yellow to orange, pulsating with a strange power. And then, as the precise shade of colour turned from orange to red, the shape of the machine and Browning in it began to shimmer and fade.

When the people came, Parnell Browning was gone.

—J. E. Tomerlin

It is one thing to become a successful conjuror but quite another to be able to convince your audience that the tricks are genuine. A susceptible audience, however, may view such trickery in quite another light.

VANISHING TRICK

By LAN WRIGHT

The day the Aliens landed was the day Barney Truman played truant from school. The matter was entirely coincidental, and neither Barney nor the aliens realised exactly the effect of the coincidence. The end result of the whole business was that Barney got a hiding from his father for missing school—a fact which he had anticipated ; and the aliens left hurriedly for parts unknown—a fact which they had not anticipated.

Barney left home at eight thirty as he always did, and the first quarter mile of his journey was towards the village school. At the stile leading across Half Mile Meadow he paused and looked around with the exaggerated caution of a twelve year old. Then he left the road to climb over the stile and strike out across the meadow up to the woods and moorland beyond.

The leaves were already turning to the golden brown of autumn, and the meadow grass was wet with overnight dew. In Barney's school bag were not only his books and mid-morning snack, but the hoops, cards, billiard balls and other impedimenta of his one passion and hobby. For all his twelve years Barney was no mean conjuror, and only two days previously he had sent in his entry form for the talent concert at the Regal Cinema in Exmouth, some five miles away on the Devon coast.

Thus the bag of tricks, and thus the need to play truant. Barney was leaving nothing to chance, for if practice made perfect then perfect he would most certainly be.

His first and only human encounter was at the head of the meadow where the path entered Crowley Woods. Small as he was he made little noise walking along the soft short grass of the path, and his coming took old Tom Mullion by surprise. Tom was late returning home because of a lost trap and a stray ferret, but two large rabbits and four plump pheasants strung over his shoulder gave evidence of the success of his night's work.

Barney looked askance at Old Tom, and Old Tom looked equally askance at Barney.

"Ah! 'Mornin', Barney."

"'Morning, Tom."

"No school today?"

"Holiday," said Barney reddening briefly.

"Oh, ah." The signs of guilt were not lost on Old Tom. "O' course. 'Oliday. Well now." Tom winked hugely. "I reckon as I didn't see you, Barney."

Barney brightened visibly.

"An' I reckon," continued Tom expansively, "as you didn't see me."

Barney smiled in sudden and delighted understanding of the pheasants strung over Tom's shoulder. "I guess not," he agreed.

"Then, everythin's all right." Old Tom winked again, and went away along the path.

Barney sighed with relief and hurried on along the track through the woods towards his destination, an old ruin of a barn that stood on the edge of the moor on the far side of the woods. Here, in the

dry, undisturbed quiet beneath the rotting wooden roof, Barney spent his free hours, practising, practising and practising with the dedication of a fanatic and the single mindedness of one much older than himself.

A broken tea chest served as his table, and an old rainwater tank provided water for such things as the Bottomless Tumbler and the Never Empty Wine Bottle.

Barney started off with the cards and spent nearly half an hour proving that the hand is quicker than the eye, and that Queens, Kings and Aces are not really what they seem or in places where they should be. He laid the cards aside at last, satisfied that he was as good with them as he ever would be, and turned to the Everchanging Billiard Balls. They were not really billiard balls but red and white marbles, large size, more suited to his small hands. As he picked them up he realised that he was not alone.

Standing in the doorway of the barn was a group of four men, each of them barely a head taller than his own four feet eight. They were dressed in an odd collection of clothing made from brown leather —at least, that was the nearest description that Barney could put to it—and they had a selection of queer instruments strapped to belts around their pudgy waists. They were round and plump, with wide green eyes and a yellowish skin which made Barney classify them at once as being Chinese magicians like the Great Wong whom he'd once seen on the stage.

His immediate apprehension at being caught playing truant was drowned by the fact that they were obviously strangers and therefore unlikely to be aware of his crime. Then, too, there was the exciting possibility that they *were* magicians and might be able to give him a tip or two.

" Hallo," he said tentatively.

The centre one of the group replied unintelligibly and fumbled with a black box attached to the front of his belt.

" What did you say ?" asked Barney, puzzled by sounds which he had never heard before, and which he could not have recognised as being alien.

" Who are you ? " The black box echoed metallic words across the barn as it's wearer's lips moved in speech. The connection was lost on Barney, though he did think it odd that the little man should need a hearing aid—in fact when he came to notice, all of them wore hearing aids, which was very puzzling.

He shrugged the matter off and said, " I'm Barney. Barney Truman. Who are you ? I have never seen you in these parts before."

"We have just arrived a few hours ago," replied the black box.

"Oh! You must have walked across the moors."

There was a hurried consultation and then the man on the extreme left said, via his box, "Yes, but we shall not stay long. We want to look around a little and then we shall go."

"Ain't much to see round here," Barney told him. "You should have gone to Exeter or somewhere interesting. What's your name, Mister?"

There was another hurried mumbling together, and the one in the middle said, "I am Santor, and these are my friends, Pich, Kolth and Sayvan. Where is this Exeter you speak of? If it is interesting we might go there."

"'Bout eight miles from here. You can get the bus down by the village hall about twelve, or better still there's a train from Long Appleby just before eleven, and that's only a couple of miles walk. I went there once with a school outing, it was fun."

"School?" queried Santor. "You are at school? Learning things?"

Barney eyed him in surprise. "Why, sure. I got to go till I'm fifteen, an' that's another three years off." He sighed. "Seems an awful long time."

Santor chatted animatedly with Pich and Kolth while Sayvan wrote hurriedly in a small book. Barney strained his ears but could only make out odd words as they issued from the black box. They didn't make much sense to him because 'juvenile' and 'educational curriculum' were not yet part of his vocabulary.

The whispering ceased and Santor said, "Tell me, Barney, why are you not at school now?"

Barney's heart did a somersault and guilt was written all over his face. "Well," he hesitated, and then realising that the hesitation made his guilt even more obvious, he rushed on, "Well, I came up here to practise."

"Ah, I see. On your own you work better," remarked Santor.

"Yes, yes, that's it," Barney agreed eagerly. "I've got to work on my own so that I can get better at it. Or else I won't win the first prize."

"Prize?" queried Sayvan, his box emitting a high falsetto, very different to that of Santor.

"Yes. You know. If I'm better than the rest I'll get first prize, and that's a place in the finals at Exeter. And after that if I'm really good perhaps I'll get to London in the big final."

Sayvan and Santor put their heads together again and muttered while Pich and Kolth did nothing but fiddle with things on their belts. The muttering and fiddling went on for several minutes and made Barney uneasy as he heard ' elimination of the unfit ' and ' choice of leaders ' issuing from the black box in complete contradiction of the noises uttered by Santor and Sayvan.

He fiddled awkwardly with the billiard balls and made the red one turn white, then he made the two white ones into three red ones between his fingers, and then flipped them one by one into thin air. He fumbled the last one and nearly made a hash of it, but finally it ran obligingly up his left sleeve.

By that time the muttering had stopped and Santor and his three companions were watching him with fascinated horror—though Barney wasn't capable of recognising it as such. He slid the final ball expertly down his sleeve and out of sight into a side pocket, and looked at the four strangers.

They stood stock still, their large green eyes fixed on him with unwinking intensity. Barney shifted awkwardly.

" Something wrong ?" he enquired at last.

His words broke the spell. Santor pulled himself a little straighter. " No, no. What were you doing then ? "

" Aw, just practising." Barney blushed as he realised that they'd seen through his act. " But I'm not very good at it yet."

" You are not ? "

" No, but I'll be better. Some time I might even be as good as the Great Wong."

" Who," enquired Sayvan's falsetto, " is the Great Wong ? "

" Oh, he's wonderful," Barney told him enthusiastically. " He can make big things disappear right before your eyes in the middle of a bare stage. He made a man disappear once when I saw him, and he sawed a woman in half and put her back together again, and he got twelve rabbits out of one top hat." Barney sighed. " I can only get one rabbit out so far, and that's not really a rabbit, it's only make believe."

" Make believe ? " said Santor a trifle weakly.

" Sure, you know, like this."

Barney reached for the small, folded topper that lay on the table. He tapped it professionally to prove that it was flat, then he popped it open, reached inside, and brought out the small, toy rabbit that had to substitute for the real, wriggling kind that the Great Wong used.

Santor eyed him with amazement, and Kolth crumbled inert to the floor.

" Is he ill ? " asked Barney.

Santor seemed upset. His hands moved vaguely and his mouth opened and shut but no sound came.

"Perhaps he's tired," suggested Barney helpfully. "If you've come a long way I guess he would be tired."

"Yes," agreed Santor hurriedly. "Yes, that is it. He is tired." He seemed to regain his composure and motioned to the hat and the rabbit. "Will—will you do that at the initiation?"

"Init—what?" asked Barney.

"The—the test. Will you do these things then?"

"Oh, at the Regal. Sure, and others. Like to see some more?"

Barney didn't wait for agreement on Santor's part. Once let loose on an audience, willing or otherwise, he made the most of the chance to advertise his capabilities. He picked up the dummy rabbit, held it aloft for all to see and expertly tripped the switch on the magnesium flare. The magnesium puffed and smoked and flamed, and Barney twitched the rabbit inside his coat under cover of the disturbance.

At this point Pich seemed tired as well and joined Kolth on the floor.

In an ecstasy of abandon, thrilled at having a real live audience—Barney didn't count his parents as an audience—he flung himself into his repertoire keeping up a rapid fire of patter as he did so. Handkerchiefs appeared, changed colour, and vanished; steel rings became joined, parted and chained once more; marbles pirouetted in his skilful fingers and three pencils were pushed through a small pane of glass one after the other. True, it was not a wonderful performance from the purists point of view. The Great Wong would have shuddered at the triteness of some of the illusions, but for his age Barney was pretty good.

For his *piece-de-resistance* Barney emptied the Never Empty Bottle into the Bottomless Tumbler for well over half a minute, the longest he had ever managed to make the rubber bulb last out. At last, breathless and triumphant, he stopped and turned his flushed face and glistening eyes in the direction of Santor and his companions.

"There," he said. "What do you think of that? Do you think I'm good enough to win?"

Santor was speechless. Pich and Kolth seemed to recover a little, for they sat on the floor and watched with fascinated terror.

"Well?" Barney was disappointed at the seeming lack of response. He thought for a minute that perhaps he was no good and they were afraid to say so.

Santor stuttered badly as he tried to speak, but at last he said, "I think—you—you are very good. Do you think that you may not win?"

Barney shrugged. "I dunno. There's bound to be others there older than me, and with more time to practise what they'll do. Still," he brightened, "if I get in the first three that'd be something wouldn't it?"

"Yes, of course, certainly it would."

"Say." A thought struck Barney and blinded him with its brilliance. "Say—do you know any tricks you could show me? If they were real good and I used them—that is, if you wouldn't mind."

There was a hurried yammering between Santor and Sayvan, with intermittent braying from the floor as Kolth and Pich added their views, but Barney had long ceased to be puzzled by the strange tongue which came in snatches of English from the box at Santor's belt. In any event phrases like 'Chance to impress' or 'establish authority' and 'impossibly superior' meant nothing to him, taken as they were out of context.

Santor turned at last and enquired uncertainly, "What—what would you like me to do?"

"Well," Barney frowned in concentration, "well, now—"

"Shall I make something disappear?"

"Yes, sure. That'll be fine." Barney looked eagerly around the barn for something suitable. "Here . . ." He took his school cap from the top of the old box and offered it to Santor. "How about that?"

"What? From over here?" asked Santor.

Barney's eyes widened. "Can you? Really? From over there?"

"Please put it on the floor."

Barney did as he was bid and retreated a foot or two, his eyes glistening with expectation. Santor took a small instrument from his belt and pointed it at the cap. There was a puff of smoke and a bright flash and the cap vanished.

"Gosh." Barney was lost in admiration. "That was great. Just like the rabbit."

"Just like the rabbit," agreed Santor, replacing the instrument in his belt.

"Now bring it back," demanded Barney.

"Bring it back?" queried Santor.

"Yes. You know. Like this." Barney waved his hands, and flipped the rabbit expertly out of his jacket.

There was a moan as Kolth lifted himself from the floor and turned towards the door. Santor retreated a step or two and Sayvan went with him.

"Very—very good," said Santor in a slightly choked voice.

From Sayvan the words " mental giant " and " telekinesis " meant nothing to Barney lost as they were in a panic stricken babble of alien chatter. He saw only that the four men were retreating through the door with every intention of leaving hurriedly.

" You going ? " he asked anxiously.

" Yes. Yes, we go. Must hurry," agreed Santor in a loud and shaky mumble, and the four of them were gone out of the barn door in an undignified scramble.

" Hey, wait." Barney ran to the door. " Hey, what about my cap ?" But the four strangers were already some way off and moving fast on stumpy legs.

There was a report in an Exeter paper of a Flying Saucer scare on the fringe of Dartmoor, but Barney didn't see it. He would not have connected the two events in any case. Besides, the next day was Saturday, and his father made him run errands and wash dishes to make up for the cap that he'd inexplicably lost while playing truant.

Incidentally, Barney came third in the contest and won two free tickets to the film *Invaders from Outer Space.*

—Lan Wright