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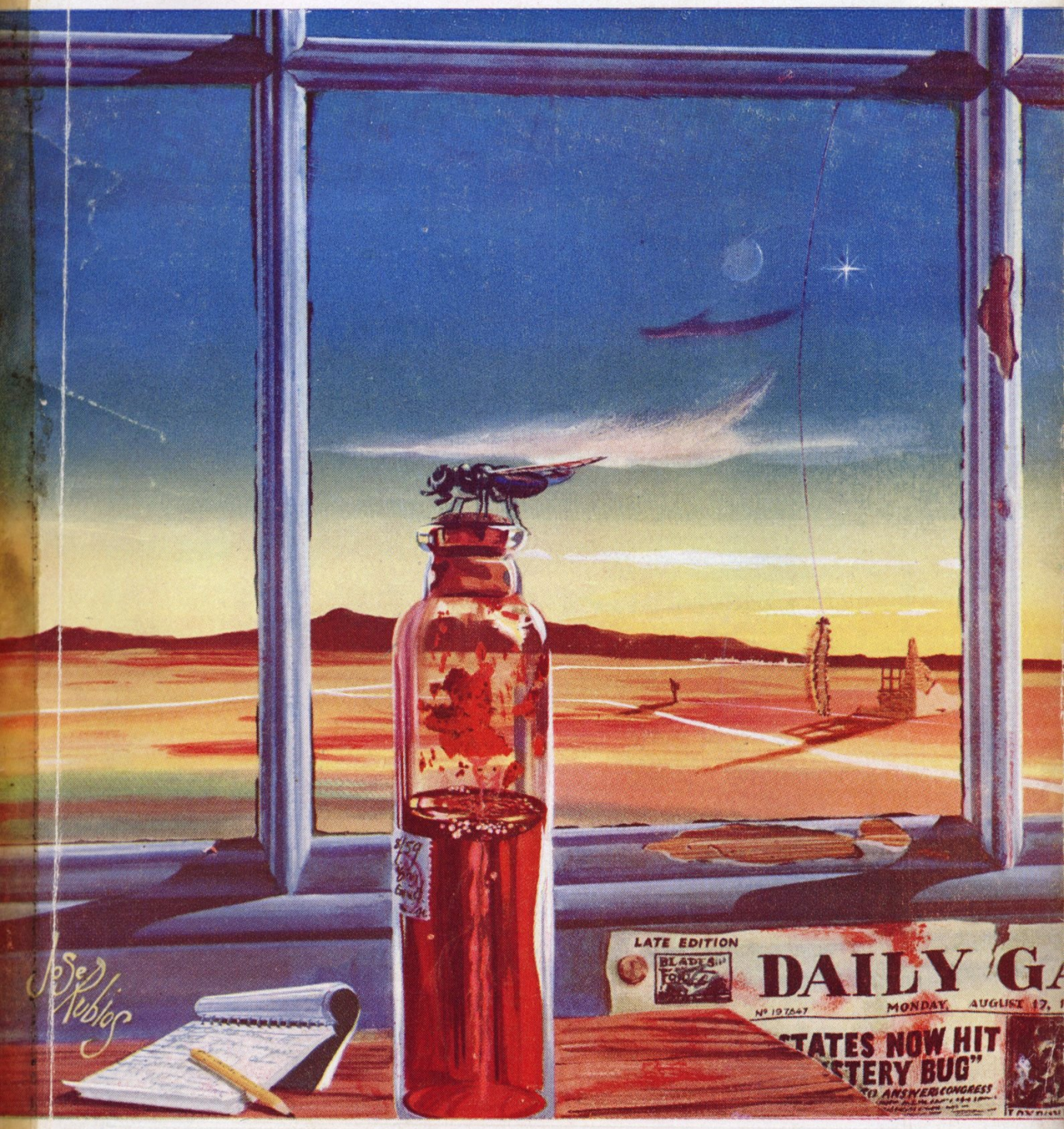

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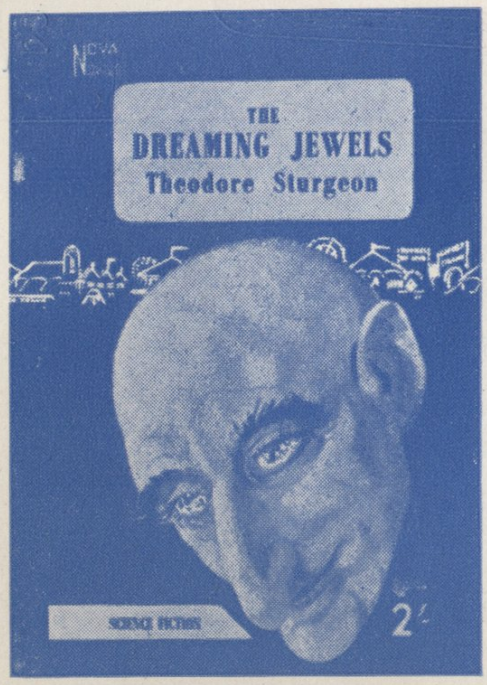

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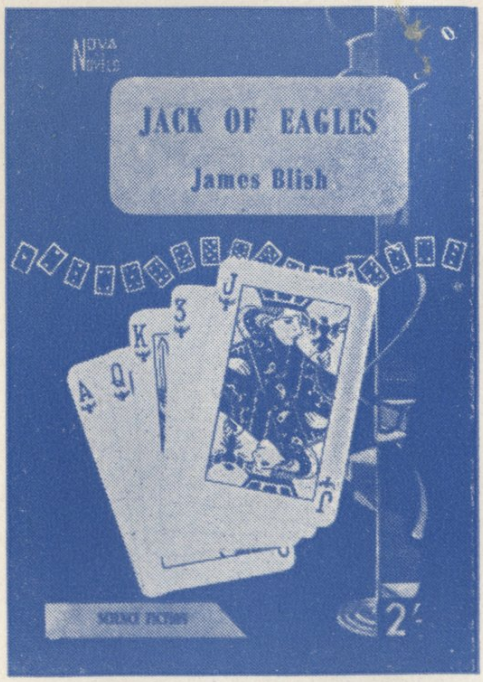

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PLAGUE

In these days of advanced medical science it is seldom that a disease reaches the pandemic stage. Robert Presslie, in his first story in our pages, presupposes just such a catastrophe—the difference being that the disease is one that primarily affects the emotions. The physical breakdown which follows is such that few people are left unaffected.

By ROBERT PRESSLIE

He strode across the lobby in a fury, his heels beating out a war-message on the marble mosaic. Behind him the main door was still spinning round. He barged into the elevator cage so blindly he didn't even see the girl who slipped in before him.

She rubbed her bruised shoulder. "Ladies first!" she chided. "That's if *you* don't mind!" Her sarcasm was wasted. He slammed the gates, punched the twelfth button and drummed his fingertips on the glossy veneered wall of the cage.

"You might have asked which floor I wanted," she said. He heard her this time but refused to answer. He had too much on his mind to bother about the niceties of etiquette.

"Look what you've done," she said, pulling her wide-necked jumper unnecessarily low over her shoulder. "That'll be black and blue tomorrow."

When he did not respond, she wriggled in front of him and jabbed the bottom button. The cage jerked and then plunged down. He threw her an angry accusing glance and sent the elevator upwards again. He did it properly, using the stop-button first.

Again she interfered and changed the course of the cage. She stood with her back against the buttons so he couldn't reach them—she thought. But he grabbed her arm and pushed her roughly aside.

" That makes two bruises I'll have," she grinned. " Whatever will mamma think !"

After the rough stuff he hadn't figured on any more nonsense. He was wrong. She tried to get at the buttons again, found he was blocking them and began to wrestle with him. All the time she was laughing brightly, showing all her teeth. He wrapped both her wrists in one of his hands and used the other to grab her hair and pulled her head back.

" Are you trying to kill us both ?" he asked.

" Lovely thought," she said. " You and me in the shades together." With her head strained back, her eyes were glittering slits under her shuttered lids. She trailed her gaze over his face, his shoulders and the hand that imprisoned her wrists.

" Big, aren't you—and strong !" she said. " You'd be fun to die with." She wet her bottom lip with her tongue. Her eyes closed almost entirely in speculation. " Or to live with," she added.

The elevator halted at his level. He released the girl with a shove. With a hand on the gates, he asked, " How long have you been here ?"

" Since yesterday. The other girl . . . went sick."

" You won't be here tomorrow."

" Oh, no ? "

" No. I'll see to that. They must have been crazy to hire an amino in the first place." He dragged the gate half open, stopped and turned back to her. After forty-eight hours of seeking the answer at the summit, a few minutes with a lowly consumer would not be wasted.

" How old are you ?" he asked.

" Sixteen. I look older, don't you think ?"

He tightened his lips as his fury boiled up again. " For God's sake, why do you do it ? What makes you want to

cram three-score-years-and-ten into one score? What makes you want to live at breakneck speed and flirt with death while you last? What makes you take dope so that you can keep pace with yourself?"

She kicked off her shoes to make herself tinier in contrast to his bulk. Both her lips were shiny with wetness. She swayed towards him.

"I know who you are," she said. "You're Pete Nathan. The other girl told me about you. You're the tough one, aren't you? She told me about you. The lone wolf. But you're not a wolf, are you? The other girl told me. Watch out for Nathan, she said. No wine, women or song for him. No dope. No nothing."

She laid her hands on his lapels and slid them up. She wasn't tall enough to get them round his neck. "Don't *you* like excitement, Pete Nathan? I like excitement."

He saw her eyes straying in the direction of the buttons and read her mind. "You go ahead and kill yourself any time you want to," he said. "Why should I care? But wait until I'm not here. I'm not ready to die yet."

She put her tongue out of one corner of her mouth. "You're not even ready to live!" she jeered. "I bet you're afraid even to kiss me."

He knew it was a come-on. "Kid," he said. "With you and your kind I wouldn't even want to shake hands. Do you get it? I'm not afraid, I just don't want to. And I don't think you look older than sixteen. I think you look fifteen and I think you are fifteen. You couldn't be long started on the aminos. Why don't you see a doctor? I'll give you the name of a square one."

"Square, square!" she blazed. "I don't want anything to do with squares. I want excitement, to live!"

"To die," he corrected. He made a last try. "If you hang around until I finish my business here, I'll take you home and see if your people can help—"

She laughed outright. "Catch them stopping me! The old man wouldn't come out of Twilight long enough to hear you and dear mamma would be too busy. She has boy friends. I want boy friends too." She dropped her hands to his waist and pulled herself close. "I want you," she said.

He thrust out one elbow and sent her reeling back to hit the rear of the elevator cage. The display of force only whetted her appetite. "I'm not too young," she said huskily.

Pete Nathan gave up. He stepped into the corridor, slammed the gates and marched grimly to Swift's office. He would have slammed that door too if Swift had not looked up from his desk, smiled and said, " Hello, Pete. I've been waiting for you."

Nathan sighed. " Thank God for a little sanity."

The deputy chief gave him a nod to sit down. " Rough ?" he asked.

" Rough ! I've been to a dozen capitals in two days. I've seen their police, their medical authorities, their vice squads. I even saw three presidents. I could have stayed at home for all the good it did. They've all got the same story to tell. Some of them were hoping we could help them."

Swift offered his cigarettes. " Knowing you, Pete, I'm sure you tried your best."

Pete Nathan looked sharply at the deputy. He had expected a rocket, not affability. He went on, " Just as we have here, every country I visited has organised suppliers. All the mobsters have jumped on the wagon ; petty thieves, muscle-men, race-track boys—from top to bottom of the criminal classes they have packed up their old rackets in favour of the new one. Peddling dope pays so much better. And there are more customers. About one-in-two of the world's population was one estimate I heard. But I found no sign of an international organisation, no root to the cancer that we could attack and dig out. Instead it's every man for himself. It's like the old prohibition days in America."

" Not so good," said Swift. He sounded as if he was selecting neckties and had just discarded one. He reached for a water carafe, uncapped the tumbler and poured himself a mouthful. " I wouldn't worry about it," he said.

" Wouldn't worry about it ! "

" About not uncovering any leads, I mean. Like you, I feel that the situation is ghastly. But I'm sure you did all that could be done and I'm equally sure Hermitage will understand."

Pete took his job and his courage in his hands. "A little over forty-eight hours ago you sent me on a mission and told me not to come back without results. You told me Hermitage was breathing down your neck and that if anybody's head was going to roll in the dust it would be mine first."

Swift tipped some more water into the glass. " I was unreasonable," he said. " Since then I've been thinking.

What if half the population is on drugs ? Everybody likes to feel good. Most people feel good when they're happy. Some feel good when they're downright sad, deep in the blues. Others enjoy hurting themselves. If taking drugs can induce the desired mood, good luck to them. It doesn't harm anybody except themselves—if it even does that."

Pete Nathan's expression was a snarl of disgust. " No harm ! The expectation of life is nearly halved, industry could collapse any day, innocent people are being murdered in their hundreds by dope-induced sadists and you say good luck to them !"

He got out of his seat, went round the desk behind his superior, put a half-nelson lock on him and picked up the carafe. He sniffed the clear liquid, scowled and set the bottle down with a thump.

" A benzylated glycol," he said. " No wonder you were so damn pleased with everything. With this stuff in your gullet you couldn't care less ! All the world is bright and rosy to a euphoric."

He released the deputy whose face still registered calm negativity. Swift was one of those who had succumbed to smoothing, tranquillising drugs. Serenity was their desire, the relaxed freedom from all worry. In Swift's case there was probably an excuse ; he was the deputy chief of the Narcotics Bureau and his worries had been multiplied a hundredfold over the past year. Yet his very position made his failing inexcusable.

Nathan left him smiling benignly. He locked the door behind him and went along the corridor to Hermitage's office.

Ordinarily he would have thought twice about going to see Hermitage without previous announcement. Big and hard as he was, he never felt comfortable in the chief's presence. It wasn't fear and it wasn't inferiority he felt, but Hermitage had more authority in his spare, lean five-and-a-half feet than a battalion of sergeants. Pete had heard that, back in the old days when dope meant heroin, cocaine and morphine, Hermitage's own mother had been led astray by a pedlar and had finished her days in a room with pillowed walls. It probably wasn't true. It was against all principles to place a department in charge of a man with a violent phobia ; such men are unstable. And Pete knew that Hermitage, in spite of his cold emotionless inscrutability, was as stable as a mountain and a model of impartiality.

He went in without knocking and Hermitage didn't berate him for it, he didn't say hello, he didn't even say "well" with a question mark after it. He was a miser with words. He hoarded his vocabulary like a life's savings. It was part of his technique to let the other man make the opening. Faced with his blank stare, nervous, guilty men had confessed on the spot.

Pete Nathan put his cards on the table. "It was a waste of time," he said. "I learned nothing we didn't already know from phone calls. Some of them are in a worse mess than we are."

"Berlin?" Hermitage snapped the word out. If he had to part with it, it was better that way—quick and painless.

"Mostly on chlorazo drugs. Accentuating their national characteristics. Everybody you meet is chock full of guts and ready to knock your head off. Aggressiveness is the noun descriptive."

"Tokio?"

"Amphetamines plus chlorazos. Pep plus courage. A nation of kamikazes. They're rushing to meet their ancestors so fast that if you stop one to ask the time he's bleeding at your feet before you can say 'please'."

"Moscow?"

"Bromides, barbiturates and the newer depressants. Misery is the fashion. They seldom get low enough to try suicide like the Nips but I never saw so many long faces in my life. And half the time they're so dopey the average working day is down to two hours."

"You're sure about that?"

"I've given you the general picture. Naturally every hophead doesn't have the same position. I saw euphorics in Berlin and amino-happy hedonists in Tokio and Moscow."

"You're quite sure about Moscow?"

Pete caught the insinuation. "Quite sure," he answered. "They've got the plague every bit as bad as the rest of the world. We can forget any notion that they are behind this trouble. Which is a pity—it would have been a lead of some kind."

Hermitage spoke drily: "They also boasted they had thirty-four atomic power stations about twenty years ago but photo-reconnaissance showed that thirty of them were plaster board shams."

" They weren't lying this time," Nathan said. " I wasn't there more than a couple of hours but I had time to prowl among the plebs. What I saw was too big and too general to have been laid on specially for my benefit. If I learned anything at all, it was the fact that it's getting worse and it's going to get worse still. That applies to every country I went to. And it applies here."

" We knew that before," said Hermitage.

" That's right. But did you know that it applies also in the very last place it should—in this building, in headquarters? I was propositioned in the elevator by some kid, a typist or something like that. I wasn't too surprised. The world is full of fun-bunnies. But when I found my immediate superior—"

" Swift ? I know about him too," said the chief. He flipped one of the switches on the office intercom and said, " Come in."

In the doorway the girl grinned widely at Pete. " You were wrong," she said. " I'm nineteen."

" My daughter Edwina." explained Hermitage.

" Dare call me anything except Eddie and I'll swipe you !"

Hermitage explained further. " Swift succumbed soon after you left. When I saw how close to home the trouble was getting I decided it was best to see if you had changed any in your travels. My daughter was the only one I could trust."

" You passed," said the girl. She rotated a shoulder and added, " with full marks."

Pete Nathan looked from one to the other. " What's the matter ?" he asked aggressively. " Don't you trust *me* any more ?"

" After Swift ?" asked Hermitage.

" I didn't see any signs of him being removed from office."

" He's still useful."

" A euphoric useful ? He doesn't care two hoots if we never break the drug plague."

" Granted. For that reason he has been divested of all authority. But he is still useful for taking care of all the routine paper work. That leaves me free for more active work."

" What he means," said the girl, " is that he can now do twenty-four hours a day instead of a miserable twenty."

For the first time Pete noticed the drawn look on Hermitage's face. " You've been doing field work, my job ?" he asked. It was unheard of for the chief to leave his desk.

" Of a staff of nearly fifty," said Hermitage, " there are only two unaffected and still in full possession of their faculties. You and me. While you were globe-trotting, I had to do the rest."

" But only six or seven of them were pill-happy when I left a couple of days ago !"

" Which underlines how rapidly it is spreading."

Nathan's jaw muscles knotted. " At that rate," he said, " there could be total addiction in—well, just any time now."

" That's why I was forced to test you. You or I could be next, or perhaps Edwina. There is absolutely no way of predicting when or why any man succumbs. It happens suddenly and it happens to people in all walks of life."

Hermitage opened a green folder. " While you were gone, I rounded up a dozen sane and sober medical men and assigned them to a small clinic to work on the problem. I have their preliminary report. Read it."

Pete frowned as he took the clipped sheets. " We've been working on the medical angle all along, right from the start. With no success."

" Because we were looking for psychological reasons. Our lack of success indicates we were on the wrong track. I think we can assume that we must look for physical reasons. Read the report."

The preamble contained nothing new. About a year earlier the consumption of drugs which affected the emotional outlook had started to jump alarmingly. The true narcotics—morphine, heroine, cocaine, hashish, marijuanha—these were tightly controlled and unobtainable by the general public. But the others, drugs of fairly recent origin, were available over the counter ; these included pep drugs, boosters and tranquillisers. As the demand grew, so did the number of suppliers. Pharmaceutical firms blossomed like mushrooms, all churning out emotion catalysts.

From there the report went into a series of statistical tables. Victims were classified in age groups, income groups and sexes; the results were inconclusive. Deaths too were tabulated. All the expected causes were there ; accidental overdosage, liver and kidney failure, heart failure through living too fast, suicide by a hundred means. The causes of death proved nothing. But the next table gave one slight clue. It was a gruesome list of post mortem examinations.

Pete Nathan had started out to be a doctor. He still had the diploma somewhere but he had never practised medicine. He had decided too late that his appearance was against him. He was too big. He didn't look the part. Somebody once said he looked like a boxer—and they meant the dog, not the ring artist. After medical school, Pete took up law and finally landed in the Narcotics Bureau where he could make the best use of his two qualifications. As he read the eye-stretching medical terms in the post mortem tables, he appreciated his early training.

He soon spotted the item that cropped up in every group. " Leukaemia," he said aloud.

" Read on," said Hermitage.

The next sentence in the report denied the presence of leukaemia in the corpses. It denied the disease but admitted the symptoms. More than half the number of dead exhibited a high white cell count. And a random selection of living victims showed the same result on examination.

Pete looked up. He said, " That's the nearest thing to a constant we've come across."

" Read on."

It was a constant. Very few of the emotion catalysts were drugs of addiction, yet there were addicts. But there were also non-addicts. The report showed that the addicts had surplus white blood cells in every case. The non-addicts had normal blood. These figures had been gained in tests to wean people off the drugs. It was found that some could be weaned. The conclusion was that many people took pills simply to be in the fashion—like the man at your elbow in the bar can always persuade you to have another drink when you have already made up your mind to have only a couple.

" That makes it a disease," Pete said. " If you haven't got it, you can emote under the influence and stop when you like. But if you've got it, you can't stop. And the symptom of the disease is too many leucocytes."

Hermitage nodded. He extracted another sheet from his folder. " Now read this," he said.

The letter was dated for that morning. From the speed of delivery and its tendency to roll Pete deduced it had been sent by pneumato-mail. The heading named a hospital for diseases of the heart. They did a lot of transfusions there. They had discovered that the desire for emotion-boosting drugs was infectious. Non-addicts became addicts when they were

accidentally given blood from emoting donors—some of whom were able to conceal their addiction quite successfully.

Pete was about to say that made it a disease for sure when Hermitage spoke.

" I called the writer of that letter as soon as I read it," the chief said. " He told me something he didn't put down there. The disease—if it is a disease—does not breed true. An infected person becomes an emoter. But the nature of his craving is not necessarily the same as that of the person who infected him."

Pete worked it out for himself. " In other words," he said, " if I caught the disease from Swift who is happy being neutral, I could quite easily become an amino or a kamikaze ?"

" That," said Hermitage, " that you will have the opportunity to discover for yourself."

Nathan jumped out of his seat. Hermitage waved him down again.

" We've fought this thing from every angle except one—from the inside. You are a man of very strong character, Nathan. I think you would fight your addiction vigorously if you had one. And I want you to acquire one. I want you to get out and mix with as many addicts as possible. You know the sort of places where they gather. Learn all you can from the inside. Pick up anything at all, I don't care what. Phone in your findings every day to Swift. I want to know exactly how you react if and when you become an—"

" To Swift ! To that . . . ostrich !"

" I would remind you that he was and may again be your superior. Another thing I want you to do is to visit the clinic every day for a blood test. Perhaps the men there may be able to work out an antitoxin if they can get samples of blood in the early stages of leucocyte formation."

Pete was still annoyed about having to report to Swift. " Why can't I report direct to you ?" he asked.

Hermitage hesitated. He looked at his daughter as if he wished she wasn't present to hear his answer. He said, " There are times when I won't be here. You may think I'm asking a lot of you, but I ask nothing of any man which I am not prepared to undergo myself. I was injected with tainted blood a few moments before you arrived."

The girl gasped. Only slightly, then she regained her composure. " Take care of yourself," she said. " I know you wouldn't do it unless you thought it was necessary."

"Is it necessary?" Pete Nathan asked.

Hermitage tried to rub the tiredness out of his eyes. "We would almost certainly succumb sooner or later. We are only anticipating the event. And we are doing it under control. The men at the clinic will help us."

"What if they catch it first?"

Hermitage dodged that one. "I have nothing further to say. You have your instructions. Please go."

For the first time since he had joined the bureau, Pete felt close to the chief. He didn't know whether it was because Hermitage seemed more human or because he had been asked to risk his sanity and his life and could take liberties on that account. At any rate, he hesitated in the doorway.

He grinned crookedly to take the sting out of his words: "I always thought two consecutive words from you was a speech. I've never known you talk so much as you have today. I think I wish you hadn't!"

He didn't have to look far to find an addict haunt. Just any place was one, hotels, bars, dance halls. He had toured them all months ago when the policy had been to arrest pedlars in the hope of drying up the sources of supply, a policy which had been abandoned as futile; with the gradual breakdown of the police, legal and prison systems, the prisoners could not be held; and as fast as one pedlar was plucked from the crowd, two moved in to take his place.

But if Nathan was familiar with the haunts he was not prepared for the changes there had been since his last visits. Where the crowds in any place had previously been heterogeneous, they had now segregated themselves. Euphorics gathered with euphorics in one place, dreaming through their roseate existence together. Most of the dance halls had been taken over by the pep-pill addicts who had themselves a hell of a time from morning till night, dancing, gyrating, contorting until they dropped and carrying on again with another handful of pills to flog their depleted strength.

Not all the addicts gathered together with their kind. Some of the crowds were complimentary, like the getting together of the sadists and the masochists: those who liked to inflict suffering and those who liked to suffer.

Another change that Nathan found was the development of a new slang. Those addicts he had known as aminos were called Hedos. Their poison was the amphetamine group of

drugs—vastly more potent than the parent drug benzedrine—and they took the drugs for the pep they provided. A hedonist, or Hedo for short, didn't care much how long he lived but only how much pleasure he could cram into each minute of each day.

Six months earlier, chlorazo drugs had been known as the couldn't-care-less pills. The new name for the addicts of these was Twilighters and their state of well-being and indifference to surroundings was no longer called euphoric but Twilight.

The chlorazo drugs were adaptable. Taken with pep-pills, they produced a reckless state of mind and an addict called a Dicer. Hermitage's daughter had faked the symptoms of a Dicer when she had tested Nathan in the elevator. Dicers were never happier than when they were gambling with death.

Heavy doses of chlorazo drugs produced depression, especially when taken in conjunction with barbiturates. The same combination of drugs produced two types of addict; the suicidal Zombie and the masochistic Maso.

Pete Nathan made the rounds grimly. Ten years service in the narcotics business was not conducive to a queasy stomach, yet there were times when he felt he had a bellyful of depravity. Humanity was on the skids. To get the smell of it out of his nostrils for a while was a relief. When he felt that way he usually dropped in at the Courvoisier Hotel. It was too pricey for the mob. Few could afford the Courvoisier's charges and their dope too. One or the other but not both. Any addicts there, were strictly novices.

It was three days since Pete had seen or heard from Hermitage. He seemed always to have missed him at the clinic and there had been no occasion to phone the office since he had learned precisely nothing. He was feeling pretty low.

He was spooning dispiritedly at a bowl of chilled borsch when somebody took the other chair at the table. "Hello, Nathan," he said. "The government must be paying bigger wages, eh?"

The sour cream in the soup got sourer. "Not nearly as much as we deserve for hunting your kind, Boone."

"Is that why you're here? To arrest me again?"

"If we had a jury to try you and a gaol to hold you, you'd be sprung next day and you know it. But I wouldn't be so cocksure if I was you. My turn will come again."

Boone laid his cigar on Pete's ashtray. " I heard the bureau had folded."

" Meantime. This won't last forever. Don't spend all the loot you're extracting from the mugs. You'll need it all if you're going to try to hide when I do come looking for you."

Boone beckoned a wine waiter and ordered a bottle of brandy. He poured a couple of very large ones. Pete accepted his without comment. He thought Boone's new affluence hadn't improved his tastes any. His clothes testified to a good tailor but the dope king managed to wear them just a shade too rakishly. He paid the top price for his trade-mark cigars but didn't know enough to realise he was being sold cheap leaf at a jacked-up price. And he didn't know that brandy was not intended to be drunk from full glasses like pump beer.

" Do you come here often ?" Pete asked.

" Let's say regularly. I can't be in any one place often. I've got a lot of people to keep happy."

" That's what I thought. You mix around all the time, yet you've never become an addict."

" A wise seller doesn't. You should know that, Nathan."

Pete wondered if Boone was genuinely unaware of the difference between the present mass addiction and the rare scattered cases of the past. He didn't see any reason why he should spare the hoodlum the truth if he didn't already know it.

He said, " A seller has no choice. Before the bureau folded we learned that addiction today is as infectious as measles. Moving around among addicts like you do is a sure way to catch it."

Boone gave him an old-fashioned look. " Is that right ? I suppose you've got a little camphor block round your neck to keep the bugs at bay. Or maybe bureau men are more immune than the rest."

" I'm levelling. Nobody is immune."

Boone refilled the glasses, held his own up to the light. He said, " I've got a serum !" He already had quite a glow on. He drained the glass and laid a hand on Nathan's arm.

" How'd you like to go into business ?" he asked.

" Your business ? "

" Don't think I'm doing you any favours. I'm not owing you any. But you've got a point about the increased market. It's getting hard to find men I can use. I get a couple of days,

a week maybe out of them then they're no use. They start using the stuff themselves. They disappear. They come back as customers when they think I've forgotten or when they can't get their stuff anywhere else."

Pete helped himself to Boone's brandy. He said, "You know what I think about your business."

Boone shrugged. "It's dirty? So what? You're out of a job and I've got one. Funnily enough, I could trust you Nathan. With money and with the pills. You're too honest to steal and too high-minded to take dope."

"I could become an addict—"

"Don't give me that again. Only the weak fall. You're big. Like me. You can look after yourself."

"How much?"

If Boone was startled at Pete Nathan's question he didn't show it by more than the narrowing of his eyes. "Half of what you take is yours," he said. "Usually I say a quarter but that is when I have to allow for what they chisel me for."

"Where and when do I collect the merchandise?"

"You don't. Not to begin with. I've got stuff in my car for now. Later, if I see you're behaving yourself . . . let's leave it like that meantime."

Boone turned his head and beckoned with a finger. A flyweight of a man detached himself from a crowd at a corner table and strutted his way arrogantly across. Boone tossed him his car keys. He caught them deftly and about-turned.

Pete looked at Boone with some respect. "Wasn't that young Clyde?" he asked.

"None other." Boone was smug.

"You must have charm."

"You'd be surprised."

Clyde returned with a bulging multifold brief case. He followed Boone's nod and laid it at Pete Nathan's feet. He looked around for a spare chair, changed his mind and stood between the others with his palms on the table. Pete guessed he was self-conscious about his size.

"You needn't look so righteous," Clyde accused, although Nathan hadn't realised his face showed anything. "Quite a comedown, isn't it? For both of us."

Pete watched the little spaceman's hands clench and unclench. Clyde was working up a fine temper. Pete wondered if he was emoting naturally or under pill power. He offered his cigarettes.

" I don't touch them," scorned Clyde. " Tobacco, alcohol, drugs—I don't need any of them. Or don't you remember ?"

He put his face close to Nathan's and went on : " You cost me a heritage, you and the rest of the government stooges. I built my whole life to fit myself for one job. I did the job. I should have been a hero. Fame and fortune—that was my heritage. But what did I get ? Dirty names and dirty looks, that's what. You put the people against me. They've forgotten now but they wanted my blood once."

" Newspaper talk," said Pete.

Clyde stuck his hands in his pockets and began walking round the table. He jerked his shoulders forward alternately as he walked and talked, punctuating his words with the gesture.

" Talk, was it ? Just talk ! Two years solitude. All the way to Venus and back. Two years alone. Do you know what that's like ? A lifetime of training, learning, keeping fit, books upon books, all the books I wanted but no vices. Do you know what that's like ? Then when I come back for the pay-off I get a kick in the teeth."

He swung round Boone, took a hand from one pocket and jabbed the air in front of Pete. His voice was high. " And it's all your fault. You—you dirty snooper."

He began to cry and Pete marvelled at the educational system of the day which insisted so much on technology that it could turn a child into a living encyclopeodia but forgot to turn him into a man. Clyde was a typical product. All knowledge and no sense.

" I never lifted a finger against you," said Pete.

" No ? Who went over the ship with a fine comb when I came back ? Who put me in quarantine for a month ? "

" A lot of people. I was only one of them. We had to make sure the ship was clean—and you too. We had to be certain you hadn't brought back any bugs against which we had no natural immunity. You were quarantined for the same reason. The health authorities reckoned a month was long enough for any latent disease to develop. I was there in a very minor capacity—to see that none of the fauna you brought had narcotic constituents."

Clyde sobbed his hatred. " It was enough. It didn't take the public long to tie the spread of pill-gobbling with my return. They said I must have brought back something. They remembered you had given me the once-over and added two and two."

" You've got it wrong, Clyde. It was the clean bill of health we gave you that finally convinced the people and the press that you were not responsible. Besides, as you said yourself, you're not an addict. And if there was anything from Venus that started it all, you would have been the first victim, wouldn't you."

The little spaceman cuffed his wet eyes and went back to circumnavigating the table. It wasn't for Pete to moralise but he couldn't help thinking there was something wrong with a system that trained a man for one job and made no provision for his mental balance when the job didn't turn out the way it was meant to. Clyde's future had been kicked from under him and he had nothing left to cling to.

Pete gave Boone a cold eye. He said, " If I thought you were having a quiet laugh at him I'd beat your head off."

Boone took the last of the brandy for himself. " You try it and I'll turn the boys loose on you. Don't forget you haven't the bureau behind you now. But there's no need to quarrel, Nathan. I wasn't laughing. I feel sorry for the kid. That's why I took him on the payroll."

Pete placed no great credence on Boone's benevolence. He let the extravagant statement pass and hoisted the brief case on his knees. He pressed the snap lock and glanced at the contents.

" How much is this lot worth ?" he asked.

" Bring me five hundred and I'll be happy."

" Suppose I get like the rest ? Suppose I get the craze myself ? Is there anything in here to help me get over it ?"

Boone leaned over the table and pointed to a box. "They're sickness pills. A lot of the customers take them when they've overdosed themselves. They bring it all up and start over again. You know, like the shieks do at a forty-course banquet. I've heard tell that sickness pills help to keep the desire down when you're a new addict. It's not a cure but it helps."

" Thanks. I'll remember that—"

Pete's words were sheared off. Boone turned in his chair to see what had stopped them. He saw a small dark-haired girl threading her way through the tables.

The girl stopped a few feet away. She had looked distraught on her way over. When she saw Boone and Nathan together and the open brief case, shock, disgust and disappoint-

ment broke her self-control altogether. She turned away again, her shoulders sagging.

Pete rose as far as he could without tipping the brief case. " Eddie," he said.

She looked round. Her expression was terrible. In his circuit, Clyde blocked her view. She lifted a hand and back-slapped his face. He looked at her, teetered sideways. Then he stumbled to the door in complete abjection, pulling his head to his breast by the hair.

" I only came to tell you my father has disappeared," the girl said. " But I don't suppose you care !" She went in the same direction as Clyde.

Before she was out of earshot, Pete had time to shout after her, " Why the hell should I ?" He sat down and told Boone, " That was Hermitage's daughter."

" I gathered that," said Boone, and beckoned the wine waiter.

The crowd at the street corner near the big cinema looked like prospective customers. While others milled around them and made for the wide foyer, they stood still. There were six of them, dressed alike in funeral black which accented the pallor of their faces. They looked spent, desperately in need of pills to re-infuse life into them. They fanned out and blocked Pete Nathan's path.

" Got a fix ?" somebody asked.

" Let's see what he's got," somebody else suggested. A cluster of hands dragged at the brief case. Pete sensed trouble.

" Money first," he said. He tightened his grip on the case.

" He's a square," a rat face spat. " Take him !" Two hands behind Pete clutched the collar of his coat and whipped it down over his arms. He should have dropped the case but instinctively held on to it. The man with the face of a rodent slugged him in the stomach. He folded and a knee slammed viciously on his mouth. He let the case fall but his arms were still pinned by his coat. The edge of a hand chopped down on the side of his neck. He hit the ground.

They gave him a scientific beating. They enjoyed their work and took care never to knock him cold. Pete felt every kick and blow as much as he was meant to. There were fleeting moments of clarity when he saw that the mob flocking into the cinema were blind to what was going on : they didn't

want to see. And Pete remembered that this was an everyday incident. Nobody was going to help him.

A voice suggested, "Give him to the Sadies," and only then did he get a precisely placed kick on the temple.

He thought he was in church when he came to. He was flat on his back. Far above him the ceiling had cherubs chasing across it. Below him were steps with brass rails at each side. There were stained glass windows in all the walls. He lifted the cloth under him with a weak hand. He rolled on one side and did a feeble push-up.

It was a typical quirk of the Sadies to use a place of worship for their perverted rites. In the aisles and the pews and even in the pulpit there were ghastly scenes of depravity. And over the screams of pain and the shrill cries of delight there thundered Bach's Toccata and Fugue, wrung from the organ by someone who contrived to make the work a hymn of evil.

Even as Pete's eyes sought out the organist, the music stopped and the player stood up. The Sadies froze and looked towards their master. The church was silent—except for moans from innocent victims and sighs of disappointment from the Masos.

In the street, the organist would have passed for a respectable company director. He was tall, lean, elegant. His prematurely grey hair lent an air of distinction. He could have posed for a whisky advertisement. It was only when he came closer that Pete saw the dancing of his eyes and the vibrato tremor of his long fingers.

"The lamb has returned from Lethe!" the tall man cried. "How shall we make the offering?"

"By suffering and pain!" his devotees chanted.

"How shall it be done?"

"Tell! Tell!" the mob shouted, eager to see what new delight their master could contrive.

Pete tried to get off the altar. He knew right away he had been drugged. His muscles didn't respond properly. He lay back to conserve his energy for when it would be most needed and willed his mind to full alertness.

The tall man patted him almost affectionately and looked around for inspiration. He found it in the apse. He pointed a finger dramatically at the life-size crucifix in the recess.

As the crowd broke into frantic squeals at his genius, he went back to the organ and whipped their frenzy with the menacing thunder of Mussorgsky's Night On A Bare Moun-

tain. Pete shut his eyes and his ears to the sight and the sound. He guessed he was safe until the organ stopped playing again.

The Mussorgsky piece came to an abrupt end and Pete tensed himself as the organist stood over him. He glued his shuttered eyes on the hypo in the long quivering fingers.

" The lamb must be prepared," the tall man intoned. " He must be alive to appreciate his suffering."

" Alive !" came the chant.

" He has been in Lethe where there is no pain. He must be made alive again."

Pete made a last minute gamble. It could be that the hypo held a pep drug to counteract the dope which had fuzzed his head and tamed his muscles. It could be that or it could be something else. He took the gamble.

The prick of the needle didn't bother him much. The hardest part was curbing his imagination while he waited for the shot to take effect. He let himself be carried off the altar ; with a dozen pairs of hands on him he didn't have much option.

He had been so limp and relaxed they were surprised. He kicked both feet out and sent two of his tormentors staggering back. He jumped into the space they left and flailed his fists brutally at every face in sight. He got out of the apse. The aisle was packed—no escape there. He made the length of the nave by jumping from pew to pew.

They swarmed down the centre aisle, reaching the door before he did. He twisted into a side aisle and sprinted toward the altar again, making for the vestry door. The chief sadist and three others moved in to block his path. He clubbed the nearest one. And the next. Shock froze his fist in mid-flight when he saw the next face.

He didn't have time to think twice. The mob was closing in behind him. He chopped a short hook at the familiar face, thrust the sagging body aside. Only the organist remained. He hit him three times, once for necessity and twice more for vengeance.

In a side street he stopped in a doorway for breath. His hands were shaking and he knew it wasn't from the effort alone. He hoped he hadn't hit Hermitage too hard.

Just to make sure he had not been mistaken, he asked questions at the clinic next day. The doctor in charge, a specialist in tropical diseases by name of Glenn, confirmed

that Hermitage had failed to report at the clinic on the previous two days. His last blood test had shown a rise in white cell count.

"Like yours does today," Glenn added.

"You mean I've got it—whatever it is?"

"It has begun."

"But I don't feel any craving. A little tired, that's all."

"You will," said Glenn ominously. "I think we might as well pack up. Eight of my staff have disappeared. Hermitage can be written off the books. And now you—probably that hypo was none too clean."

Pete rolled down his sleeve and put his coat on. "Do you know what sickness pills are?" he asked.

"Emetine mostly."

"Give me some. I'm not an addict yet. As soon as I get any urges I'm going to spew them out of my system. And I'm going to find Hermitage again if I can."

"What's the use?" Glenn was depressed.

"Something is nagging me, something I've seen or heard. It couldn't have been a direct observation or I would remember it. But I've got a feeling I should know why some people become addicts while others don't. If I can find what confers immunity you should be able to formulate a cure from the same thing."

"With a staff of three and myself? When there were twelve of us the only fresh fact we learned was that the excess white cells can survive *in vitro*."

"How did you separate them?"

"It was pure speculation. I wondered if the extra leucocytes were any different from the normal ones. Superficial examination showed them to be the same. But I centrifuged Hermitage's last specimen and got two distinct layers in the test-tube. I separated them. Six hours later the heavier cells were still alive. They could survive *in vitro*—outside the body. They were dividing!"

"Blood cells?" Pete was incredulous.

"Blood cells. Undergoing primitive binary fission. It surprised me too."

"Have you still got that sample?"

"I've got it but you can't see anything now. The cells are as dead as they ought to be. You can have a look if you want to. I have a slide here. You can see how the division was unequal—as if the nucleus had separated from each cell. Can

you see? The white dead cells and the much smaller dark spots outside them?"

Pete pinched his eyes with thumb and forefinger when he looked up from the microscope. "I hope you made a record of this. It's too significant to lose if you should happen to . . . well, we don't know for sure that you are immune. Better make a duplicate report and send it to Swift in case of accidents."

"I'll do that," said Glenn. He added, "Are you sure you can carry on? You looked bushed."

"I feel it. Can you fix me up with something? I've got to backtrack my movements over the past few days and I want to be wide awake to spot this thing I can't remember." He left with a carton of emetic pills in his pocket and ten milligrammes of propyl amphetamine citrate in his stomach. He was pepped to the eyes.

As he expected, he found Boone in the Courvoisier. The vice merchant was in the cocktail bar, flushed with alcohol and keeping the glow alight with yet another brandy. He gave Pete no sympathy.

"They weren't addicts," he said. "You were hijacked. It's a cut-throat business. Some of the boys don't have their own supply houses like I have. You'll learn."

Pete agreed. "I walked into that one. I won't make the same mistake next time."

"What next time?" Boone tagged a barman and indicated that his glass needed refilling. He didn't offer Pete a drink. "You still owe me five hundred," he said. "You're not back in business until I get that."

"Where can I get that kind of money?"

"You can get it the same way you lost it—take it. That's how things are done in this business."

"Suppose I just decide to get out of it altogether?"

"Try it! The Sadies would love to get their hands on you again."

Pete wasn't sure he had been wise to play the game on Boone's side, but the pedlar was one of his few contacts. He couldn't afford to change tactics now. "You'll get your money," he said. "Tell me where I can find some of your rivals."

"Any place where the living is high," Boone said airily. "When a business pays good you don't live like a pauper.

Look wherever the lights are bright, the food is good, the wine flows free and the girls are accommodating. If it was me, I'd try the Landorf—but then, maybe you don't hate Minty so much."

"Is he the one?"

"Find out. And get my five hundred."

The Landorf was twice as exclusive as the Courvoisier, the prices were twice as high and one look at Minty told Pete he was twice as big in the business as Boone. For one thing he wore his clothes as they should be worn. For another, he was flanked by a crew of hard-faced menials who were strictly non-addicts. Minty's men were unlikely to fiddle the stock for themselves.

"My name's Nathan," Pete introduced himself. "I don't believe we've met before. I'll tell you who I am. I used to be top leg-man for the Narcotics Bureau. When the bureau folded I went to work for Boone. I was a beginner. I lost my first consignment. Boone thinks you hijacked it."

Minty consulted a big two-fold card. He ticked off a name and transferred an empty bottle from the table to a trolley. From the trolley he selected a new bottle, opened it and poured pale yellow drinks all round. He was working his way through a list of liqueurs. With two fingers round the stem he slid a thimble glass across the table to Pete.

"What do *you* think?" he asked.

Pete didn't care for sweet drinks. He left the glass where it was. He said, "I think Boone doesn't like you very much. I think he wanted me to work you over, break you if I could."

"And could you?"

Pete looked at the ring of unsmiling faces. "I don't think so. I think it would be better if I came in with you."

Minty considered him. "I like your style, Nathan. You're frank. You're big and strong and probably honest. But I can't use you. I never use addicts . . . don't bother to tell me different, it's my business to recognise a prospective client. Your eyes are full of it."

This was the moment for the important question. "Couldn't you give me a cure?"

Minty's surprise was genuine. "You're off your rocker. There isn't any such."

Pete didn't believe him. "What about you?" he said. He nodded towards the others. "And them?" he added. "By

the law of averages some of your boys should be addicts. What are you keeping to yourself?"

"If there was a cure I'd be out of business. As for the boys, I told you I don't employ addicts and as soon as anybody who works for me shows the signs he's out. As for myself, I'm just lucky I suppose. I stay put as much as possible. I keep away from crowds."

He saw Pete's mouth droop. "Look," he said, "you levelled with me about Boone and I call that a favour. I'll give you one in return. Don't waste your time looking for the hijacker. There wasn't one."

"Boone!"

"One of his favourite tricks. Puts you in his debt and gives him an extra rake-off anything you pick up on the snatch. He always was greedy."

"Thanks. Thanks a lot," Pete said. He stood up from the table. "There's one thing more—could you give me a fix?"

Clyde. He had to find Clyde. And Boone. And Hermitage. And Hermitage's daughter Eddie. These were the only names in the picture. He had to find the people before he forgot the names. Especially Clyde. Boone could wait—that was only revenge. But he had to find Clyde before he killed himself. The craving was strong in him now. He knew his poison. He was a Dicer. Life had no kick except when the excitement of taunting death was running high in him. He had to find Clyde before death inevitably won.

He was full of bravado. He felt he could have fought an army single-handed. That was the result of the drugs. The chlorazo pills endowed complete indifference to danger and the pep-pills at the same time sharpened his animal senses so that he was forever conscious of his life ticking away. His heart beats were recorded as drumbeats in his temples and the pulses at his wrists jumped visibly.

He went back to Narcotics headquarters for the first time in days. The lobby echoed his steps. The place looked deserted. And it was deserted except for the one man who mattered. Pete was surprised to find Swift there—surprised and grateful. The deputy earned his respect.

"The files," Pete said without preamble and without giving Swift a clue to which files he wanted. "The files, man!" he shouted. "Get me the damn files!"

Swift smiled at him. He said, " Of course, the files." And that was all. No action.

Pete lifted him clean out of his chair by the throat. " Clyde," he said, " the Venus Project. Do we still have the files ? The reports on the flora. Clyde's physical, everything."

The deputy tore the relentless fingers from his windpipe and sobbed for breath. He was afraid. But at the expense of nearly killing him, Pete had managed to shake him out of his lethargy for a moment. He gasped out, " The government got the reports."

" We have carbons, haven't we ?"

" Yes. Carbons. I'll get them." It didn't take him five minutes to do so.

Pete waved them aside. " You look," he said. " I don't want our reports. I want the reports from other departments. I'm pretty sure everybody who was in on the project got a comprehensive report."

" Yes, yes." Swift was riffling the papers nervously. " They're all here."

" Give me the medical. Clyde's medical."

He took the double quire of papers and peeled the top sheets off rapidly as he discarded unwanted information. He was more than halfway down before he found what he was looking for, Clyde's blood tests. He had to turn yet another page before he came to the micro-photographs.

Even then he didn't trust his own twitching eyes and had to ask Swift if he too could see the dark spots. They were so tiny, so near in size to the resolution dots of the half-tone block, that there was every reason why their significance had been missed at the time of the blood tests.

He folded the relevant sheet, stuffed it into an inside pocket, shook a couple of pills into his hand, reached for Swift's water carafe, remembered what it contained, swallowed the pills dry and left as abruptly as he had entered.

In the street he stole the first car he saw and drove madly for the city centre, winging two innocent cars on the way.

He looked for Clyde in the Courvoisier. He wasn't sure which man he was most disappointed at not finding, Clyde or Boone. Both were absent. He stormed from dining-room to lounge and to bar. They weren't in any of them. But the girl was. Edwina Hermitage was swaying on a bar stool. She was pie-eyed.

He didn't see her but she saw him. He was passing her blindly when she grabbed his sleeve. He was going too fast to stop quickly. The girl's drunken grip dragged her off the stool. She sprawled on the floor. She spat at him.

" Nathan ! Pete Nathan the lone wolf !"

He helped her back to her stool and told the barman to bring a glass of rum. He crushed a couple of sickness pills into it before forcing the spirit between her lips.

She couldn't take it and it dribbled from her mouth. " Lone rat !" she snarled and passed out. He drank the rum himself. It was his first drink in days. Whether it was that or the emetic pills, he was undoubtedly very sick—outside, when he was loading the girl into the car.

It took four pills to restore his sense of well-being.

Although he didn't know it, he looked like a candidate for a giggle guest-house. He was unshaven, wild-eyed, a primitive in civilised dress. Probable that was why Glenn was so startled. Or it may have been the girl and the way Pete Nathan dumped her into the clinic and shouted, " Don't let her go—I'll be back with some more !"

When he got back to the Courvoisier, Boone had arrived. He never knew what hit him. Pete was across the dining-room floor like a tornado. With one swipe, he brushed aside the table and the food and drink adorning it. He could have killed Boone if the racketeer hadn't collapsed inert after the first flurry of blows.

" Here's another," he told Glenn.

" Wait !" The doctor took Pete's face in his hands and peeled back his eyelids. " Take it easy," he warned.

" Too much to do—"

" Got a headache ?"

" All the time. And if you want the rest of the symptoms, I have alternate pallor and flushes, my heart beats mad with tachycardia, my thoughts and actions are getting irrational—"

" And if you carry on the way you're going, you'll finish up with a subarachnoid haemhorrage. You know what that means."

" Sure, my brain bleeds and—"

" Come through here," Glenn said. He led Pete into another room. An elderly man lay on a bed in a deep induced sleep.

" Hermitage ! How did you get hold of him ?"

" He came voluntarily. It must have taken a tremendous feat of will ; he had as much dope in him as you have. I've got him under sedatives. I think you should let me do the same to you."

" Not yet. One more. I've got to find one more. I won't be long."

But Clyde was the hardest to find. The little spaceman wasn't an addict; he wasn't likely to be found in any of the joy palaces. Yet he did odd jobs for Boone so maybe he *should* be looked for in the haunts of addicts. Pete wished he could think straight.

He searched the hotels, the dance halls, the bars, even the churches. His mood of depression got worse and the pills had ceased to have any effect on it. He tried to remember everything Clyde had said. In his doped state, he couldn't. His mind refused to follow a chain of thought. It stuck on one point—Clyde's talk about his heritage.

Clyde had accused him of ruining his future. Clyde should have been a hero; Nathan had spoiled that. Clyde should have had fame and fortune; Nathan had snatched them away. Clyde—Clyde was a misfit. The Earth was no place for him. Space was his niche.

Space ! Pete kicked the accelerator fiercely and the car groaned as it tried to pick up. He juggled his way through the city traffic at suicidal speed. Out in the open country he was lucky the traffic was light. Otherwise he would never have made the spacefield alive.

The days of celebration and pride in achievement were over. The gates were unguarded and the ship was being left to rot. The searchlights had long been dimmed and only the moon remained to etch the ship in cold light. Nobody came to cheer any more. They didn't even come as they once had to spit on the finest thing man had ever made. Nobody cared one way or the other—nobody except Clyde.

He was still proud. But his pride had been crushed. Repressed within him it had become a twisted travesty of real pride, an evil thing almost. He was so engrossed in pity for the ship and for himself that he didn't hear the car approaching. The first thing he heard was the crumpling of the gates as Pete Nathan tore them off their rusted hinges with the bonnet of the car.

Pete didn't have to open the car door. It was sprung and permanently ruined. He shook the broken glass from his clothes like a dog dries itself.

Clyde's eyes still had their old keenness. He recognised Pete from thirty yards. He couldn't guess why the narcotics man had come but he divined it meant trouble for himself. He began to claw his way up the scaffolding round the ship. Pete followed him.

For his size, the spaceman was astonishingly strong and agile—a tribute probably to his early years. He was halfway up the rigging before Pete had made a dozen feet.

" You'll never get me, Nathan !" Clyde cried into the night.

Three hundred feet above the ground, at the top of the scaffolding, he was still confident that Pete would fall before reaching him. Nobody, he was sure, had his cat's eyes and his head for heights. He was right, but he reckoned without the insane agility of a Dicer.

Pete halted a few feet below him and yelled, " Come down, Clyde. I want you."

With the wind whipping his clothes, Clyde asked, " What for ?"

" Never mind what for. Come down. I won't hurt you."

Clyde allowed himself a smile. Nathan wouldn't hurt him ! Him ! He shuffled along a steel brace, deliberately not using his hands for support. Above Pete, he daringly stepped off and landed on the brace side-saddle. The entire structure vibrated. He used his hands now, grabbed the brace and swung himself down. His feet were above Pete's hands.

He kicked his heels viciously at Pete's fingers and laughed when he heard the body rattling its way through the girders. It was on the way down that he discovered Pete draped over a cross-tie, not very far from where he had fallen.

Clyde did a curious thing. He could have given Nathan the *coup de grace* and sent him hurtling to the ground. He could have killed him also by just doing nothing and letting him fall of his own accord. He did neither. Maybe it was the hero material in him, maybe it was sheer bravado. Whatever his motives, he manoeuvred Pete's bulk over his own diminutive back and started to carry him to safety.

He nearly made it too. But twenty feet from the ground his stubborn strength gave out and his hands fumbled their grip. He was underneath when they hit the concrete together.

A long time afterwards, Pete woke, found Clyde and carried him into the half-wrecked car. His memory of the climb up the scaffolding was vague, he couldn't remember coming down, but burning bright in the haze of his mind was one driving thought—he must get Clyde to the clinic.

Glenn was amazed at the incredible shots of sedative he pumped into Pete without being able to put him out completely. After the first massive dose he was pleased to note that he had managed to establish a regular pulse in the narcotic agent. After the second dose he saw the signs which indicated the calming of the mind, the relaxing of driving tensions. The third dose stopped the meaningless ramble of words but failed to put Pete to sleep. Instead, he sat up.

"Clyde?" he asked. "You got him?"

"He's here. Try to rest."

"The others? Boone—"

"Relax, please! You nearly killed yourself with drugs. Give yourself a chance to recover."

"Answer me!"

Glenn said resignedly, "They're all here. I have Boone and Hermitage under sedation, they won't get away. Miss Hermitage is here too. She's been a great help. I don't know what I would have done without her. I'm the only doctor left here, you know."

Pete got off the iron bed. "You're still immune?" he asked.

"I believe so."

The girl came through from the lab, saw Nathan standing like a propped-up corpse and threw Glenn an accusing look. The doctor shrugged and she went to Pete, taking his arm. He didn't refuse it. Leaning heavily on the girl, he shuffled to the next cot and the one after that.

"Boone," he indicated with a nod. "Hermitage," with another nod. He looked down at the girl. "Her," he added. "And you, Glenn." He turned around. "Clyde—where's Clyde?"

"In the lab."

"Bring him through here, doc. I've brought you all the pieces of the jigsaw. Let's see how they fit together."

"It can wait. Why don't you have a few hours sleep first?"

"Now, Glenn. It's got to be now while I still remember."

"Remember what?"

Pete slapped his brow. "Something, something . . . . Glenn, get me out of this stupor. Give me a pep pill."

"That's about all you need—one more to finish you. If you'll sit down, Eddie will make coffee. That's as much as I'll allow you. I need some myself. Will you, Eddie?"

The girl steered Pete to the edge of his cot, folded him into a sitting position and went into the lab. When she had gone, Glenn consulted his watch and rolled up one sleeve. He swabbed his arm with spirit and filled a hypo from a vial.

Pete tried to rise but sat down heavily after the effort. "Glenn," he grated, "you said you were immune!"

Glenn smiled. "Insulin," he explained. "It's way past my time for a shot but I'm touchy about doing this in front of women. Shouldn't be, I suppose, but there it is."

"Diabetes? Is that the tie up, Glenn?" Pete beat his brow again. "In that report you made up for Hermitage, was there anything about diabetics being immune?"

"We only classified the addicts. It was impossible to classify non-addicts when they changed sides any minute."

Pete punched the pillow at his side. "But there's got to be a tie-up! That's why I've brought together everybody I met before I saw you last time—the time you showed me that slide of white cells dividing. I told you then that something was nagging me. It still is. There's got to be a common factor somewhere, some reason why Hermitage and I became addicts yet you and Boone and Eddie and Clyde are immune. The factor is there. I know it. For God's sake help me find it!"

"Clyde won't be much help," said Glenn. "You brought him in with a broken neck. He's dead."

"Was he dead when I took him in?"

"Just about."

"I don't suppose you took a blood sample?"

Glenn lifted an eyebrow. "It so happens I did. Force of habit, I suppose."

"That's something to be thankful for," Pete sighed. "I think the entire plague of drug addiction stems from Clyde. I know it isn't a disease in the true sense but it spread like one. And although Clyde was immune to it himself, he was the prime carrier. Remember Typhoid Mary?"

Eddie Hermitage came through from the lab with a trayful of cups. She back-heeled the door behind her. Glenn took

one cup off the tray. He moved aside the cotton wool he had swabbed his arm with and picked up a small bottle of clear fluid. He used the fluid to lace the coffee.

" Drink that," he said, giving the cup to Pete.

" What was that you put in it ?"

" Neat alcohol. It'll do you good. Doctor's orders !"

The hot raw fumes stung Pete's nostrils—and his memory. He drained the cup at a gulp, tossed it on the bed, stood up and weaved his way towards Glenn. He put both hands on Glenn's shoulders and laughed in his face.

" Doc," he said, " you're a flaming genius ! "

He asked the girl. " Did you go on a binge from the moment you saw me with Boone ?" She nodded and he said to Glenn, " She went on a binge and stayed immune. Boone drank like a fish, so did Minty. And they were immune. The joke is I didn't know what gave them the immunity. Boone made a crack once—that was the thing I couldn't remember. I asked him why he wasn't an addict and he held up a glass of brandy —' I've got a serum,' he said. And he didn't know it was true !"

Glenn pushed him back to the bed, forced him to sit down. " Go on," he encouraged.

" Boone, Minty and all their kind, they don't know how to handle wealth. They spend it on high living. In this case it turned out to be the right thing to do. I could have saved myself a lot of grief if I hadn't sickened up a certain glass of rum. You, Glenn—do you know why you've been immune ? Because every day, twice a day maybe, you swab your skin with alcohol and a little of it goes into your bloodstream with the point of the insulin needle. Not much, but enough at regular intervals to kill the bugs."

Glenn wasn't lost but he felt a little clarification was necessary. " What bugs ?" he asked.

Pete fished in his inside pocket for a paper. He said, " The dark spots you saw dividing out of white blood cells." He tossed the paper to Glenn. " That's a photograph of Clyde's blood, taken when he came back from Venus. Get the sample of blood you took before he died. Let's have a look at it."

The prepared slide showed the spaceman's blood had been filthy with dark spots at the end. Even now the spots were still alive, still parting from their leucocyte hosts. Glenn

dipped a needle in alcohol, shook off the surplus and touched the slide with the point of the needle. When he looked through the microscope again, the spots had shrivelled. They were much smaller and darker. Under a higher powered objective, they appeared shrunken and wrinkled. They looked dead.

"Pete," he said, "what's the rest of the story?"

"It can only be my guess, but I think we have just been looking at the natives of Venus. Clyde's ship was checked for everything. Outlandish as the idea may seem, we even checked to make sure no aliens had been inadvertently brought back to Earth. But although we checked Clyde's blood, we weren't looking for the aliens there."

He got up once again. He looked much better this time.

"I think they were sentient," he went on. "They still are, those that are alive in every addict in the world. They were sentient enough, I think, to play possum in Clyde's blood-stream. They deliberately refrained from making an addict of him."

Glenn had a question. In fact, he had several. "Take it a bit slower," he said. "There was no life on Venus, no microscopic life, nothing big enough to act as hosts to the bugs. Where did they live up there? How did they manage to stay alive until a host arrived? And what connection is there between the bugs and drug addiction?"

Pete didn't have to pause for thought. The picture was strong and clear inside him. "There *was* no large-size life on Venus when Clyde went there. But *there may have been* at some time. When the hosts died out, the bugs encysted. In that form they survived for nobody knows how long. Along comes Clyde and they get carried into the ship in the dust on his boots. He takes off his suit, breathes the dust and the bugs are born again from their cysts. They come to Earth, find millions of hosts and multiply. They don't need food—not matter anyway. They need energy. Not a lot of energy like the sun gives, or a battery gives, or even the heat of my hand gives. They need energy in minute quanta—the kind of electrical energy that flows when a man is emoting."

Glenn stopped him. "Are you trying to tell me they made addicts of their hosts simply for the energy released by their emotions?"

"Every drug of addiction was emotion-provoking, wasn't it? Even the sense-dulling drugs meant a change from normal emotions—releasing abnormal flows of current."

" What makes you think they didn't need food in the accepted sense ?"

" Alcohol is a food—to us. To them it is poison. And don't think it is impossible for anything to live without food : we have insects on Earth which are born, multiply and die all in the course of a day and they don't eat a thing in their short lives."

The girl brought them both back from the realms of speculation. " What about my father ?" she asked. " Is he going to recover ?"

Pete passed it to Glenn. " I've been out of medicine too long. What do you think ? Is there any chemical with the properties of alcohol that can be safely used for mass innoculation ? "

" Any one of a dozen will do."

" There's your answer," Pete told Eddie Hermitage. " It will take time to clean up the whole world but if we start curing the medical men first it will speed the operation. The damage to organised living will take longer to repair, but that too will be done. For the moment Boone and his kind will go free. Maybe the loss of their livelihood will be punishment enough. Maybe their ex-customers will take care of them—anything could happen before we get the forces of law and order running again."

" Lie down," the girl said. " You've done more than your share. You can relax now."

He agreed. " I could sleep for a hundred years."

He saw Glenn filling a hypo. " I won't need that, Doc. If you must give me something, just give me a cigarette."

But with his head on the pillow and the first drag drifting from his nostrils, he made a face and snapped the cigarette in two. He dropped the pieces on the floor.

" It doesn't taste so good," he mumbled. " Foul . . . like a drug—"

The girl smiled at Glenn and pulled the coverlet over Pete's sleeping body.

—**Robert Presslie**

The modern ghost story as exemplified by Brian Aldiss herewith is a far cry from the tales expounded by Algernon Blackwood and his contemporaries at the beginning of the century. Yet there is a close affinity between the two eras—the difference is only in the method of telling the story.

FLOWERS OF THE FOREST

By BRIAN W. ALDISS

The canoe grounded in mud. Hopkins sat where he was, hunched in his cape, looking ahead into the enchanted forest. This was the witch Subyata's territory : Hopkins knew that without question. The surrounding vegetation was the same dreary tangle he had been passing for miles, but the call within him shrilled like a high chord of music.

He flung the paddles into the bottom of the native boat and pulled himself ashore by an overhanging branch. It was pouring with rain, a heavy downpour even for this slice of Sumatra.

A leopard stood in a bower of leaves awaiting him, its coat dark with the wet. Hopkins jumped back with a faint cry, then saw its eyes were deep and Chinese ; he said to himself

reassuringly, " That's Subyata's clouded leopard of which they told me." Then he felt no more fear. When the animal shook beads of moisture from its grey whiskers and turned down a narrow trail, he followed without hesitation.

He expected nothing. He was coming to Subyata : that was all. A whole year had passed while slowly he had made up his mind to risk the journey, a whole year while his body performed the routine tasks in the ex-Dutch cannery and his heart crept up here in the highlands. He came without hope or pessimism ; feeling was dead inside him.

So it was no surprise to find a solid-built, peak-roofed native house standing serenely in the centre of a clearing. It was no surprise when Subyata's leopard faded into thin green air and he himself walked up the creaking wooden steps into the front room.

He was a small man, shrunken by thirteen years of the tropical heat corroding from the outside and the sense of guilt corroding from within. He stood before Subyata humbly, water pouring off his hat and cape, trickling down his cheeks and onto the floor with a sound that seemed the loudest thing in the room.

Even Subyata held no surprise for him. She waited for him, and that was sufficient. She was younger than the furtive rumours had whispered, and she was beautiful, a point on which the cautious tongues had been perfectly silent, and she radiated power, as all the secrets had declared.

The room vas empty although her presence filled it. He took its dereliction in at a glance and said to himself, " If her magic's so powerful, why doesn't she wish herself some comfort." It was an old habit reasserting itself, even in these circumstances : compensation for self by denigration of others. It had become by now, by his thirty-sixth year, almost the essence of him.

" It is raining as you arrive here, Mr. Hopkins, but before the next rain the flowers of the forest will blossom." That was her greeting, neither welcoming nor forbidding to his ear.

" If you know my name, you'll know I didn't come here to search the forest for flowers," he said. Well, why should he be astonished that she knew his name ? Everyone understood that if you were—what was the phrase ?—one with nature, secret lore read like an open book.

" You are impatient for me to help you." It was neither a guess nor an accusation. As though to deny the charge and

make conversation, he replied, "You speak English well, Subyata."

Her smile curled her mouth up in the corners like yesterday's sandwich as she answered, "I have uttered no word. You can hear me well without my needing speech."

Impatiently, with a gesture which indicated she would discuss that topic no more, she added, "But you have come here because you wish to see Carol again?"

Carol! Nobody had mentioned that name to him in years; liberated at last, it crackled round the room like fate jumping out of a telegram.

"I could never go back," he said in a whisper. That ten thousand miles between them had not grown accidentally. Now it was something too gigantic to span physically. "But if I could just see her . . . See how she was . . ."

"That can be done, Hopkins," she told him. "The soul which is the essence of a being can leave its body as easily as perfume, the essence of a flower, leaves its nectary."

She touched him lightly on the forehead. He stood there stupidly, still dripping onto the bare boards, wrestling with the significance of her gesture. Outside, the rain swished limply away through the rank grass.

"Wait. My promise is made, Hopkins, but it must be sealed in a shared dish of food."

As she turned to go through a door into a back room, he noticed she wore the simple wooden soles used by the Indonesian women of the bazaar, and her buttocks moved invitingly beneath her tight sarong. Awe of her left, another emotion taking its place. Well, set up house with her and you would not need to work your heart out of its sockets; forget Carol . . .

Feeling more at home, he shed his cape and hat, stretched his small frame, patted his knife and peered out of the rear window. This was not much of a place to live in. He could not see far, perhaps thirty yards, before the everlasting green entanglement rose in a wall. But before that a well-defined path led to a giant tree, a ludicrously contorted tree, whose roots, creeper-entangled, struggled out of the ground like an octopus kicking aside the bedclothes. Amid these roots Hopkins could see an alien growth with widespread leaves and one gigantic bud rising from the middle of them.

It was a rafflesia, the biggest, ugliest flower on the whole planet. The rain had ceased now, and in the pale returning

sun, collections of water shone on the bloated growth like lenses covering a cabbage. Uneasily, Hopkins turned away, to find Subyata returning with two small bowls.

" Where is your cape ? . . . Oh," she added, a glance into the corner answering her question for her.

" She isn't omniscient then," he observed, " or she would have known."

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, she beckoned him to follow and he deliberately sat close. It was bitter stuff they ate, something green chopped fine. To make conversation he said familiarly, "You need a man around this place, Subyata, not just a mangy leopard."

Her anger and contempt smouldered into his mind with the force of a burn, so that at first he could not comprehend her flow of words.

" I have granted you the mark of liberation, Hopkins, because you sought my aid, and that I never refuse. As a part of nature here, I know better than to distinguish between good and evil, but what you did over a dozen years ago placed you as a human forever beyond human bonds. Your life looks to me like—"

With the last of the sour pulp unchewed in his mouth, he sat transfixed as she related back to him the details of those last few terrible hours before he had fled from the civilization that was too much for him. Her gleaming eyes faded, and he was back in the big orchard, returning unexpectedly early to lie down and recover from a touch of sun. It was a blazing day just before the picking, and as he approached the bungalow that he and Carol leased, it was as quiet as if the sky had conquered and killed all men—except for the faint mutter of a man's voice drifting out the bedroom window like a guilty cat.

He remembered the still fury with which he had scurried hump-backed under the low windows and kicked his shoes off on the rear mat. The passage was cool to his feet as he tip-toed along it, and then he had the door open.

Oh, he caught them all right. Carol let out a shrill, defensive scream, " You didn't expect me to live forever without a man, did you, you skinny little lizard ? ! " Then the thing had gone snap in his head that had broken once before. Even in those days he always wore a knife; the burly back half-way through the window took it centrally and continued its motion until it sprawled onto the rutted drive. Then he turned his attention

and his knife to Carol, who had collapsed on the bed. Not death for her, no, but a horrible, slight deformity that should guarantee she never from shame took another lover. After, his sense had returned, and with it the urge to escape—to escape memory and retribution. Panic. Flight. The port, the ship, the miles of frothing ocean, Subyata threw it all back at him until suddenly the thing in his mind snapped again.

For a long while after he had made that sudden, swift movement, Hopkins did not stir. The knife hilt did not show as she lay in a last relaxation across his knees. He had killed again. He had killed Subyata, the spirit of the jungle. Repentance stirred sluggishly, congealing like blood under the scab of his thought, as he sat with bowed head.

The heat, the blinding sunlight outside, finally brought back a realisation of the world. He stood up in slow motion, resuming the old selfish cloak of protection by saying, " I've done myself no harm provided her spell or whatever-it-is still sticks. I'm safe as houses."

The cabbage-like bud glittered through the window at him. A white steam curled up silently everywhere setting the jungle alive, and he felt abruptly not so safe. Uneasily, he took a turn outside, and round the back of the building nearly trod on Subyata's leopard. He jumped away, but the splendid hoop of rib never so much as stirred; it might have been as dead as its mistress. Then through the mists he caught sight of a wraith, the spectre of the leopard, at present free from its body. Well, presumably the spectre could not hurt him ; neither could the body without the spectre in it, so he was safe till they joined forces again.

Out here, he could hear a horde of insects, chiefly flies, buzzing round the rafflesia bud. Soon, they would be attracted indoors . . . Which reminded him he ought to make a move —test the efficacy of the spell and then be away. He moved inside again, glad to be out of sight of those angry eyes in the mist.

He settled himself on the bare boards, back to the wall, legs crossed. Subyata had made so little fuss—he had expected cabalistic signs, dancing maybe. But machines became smaller more compact, less impressive to view the more they were developed ; no doubt Subyata's spells had been perfected in the same way. That was reassuring.

At first he had no idea what to do. How do you go about severing spirit and flesh, short of taking a knife and—no, he controlled his thoughts, pictured as vividly as possible rising out of his own body. Floating out . . .

Below him, his body sat propped against the bare wall ; the floorboards, parallel as ruled lines, slanted away from his doubled knees. He was away ! The realisation and surprise took him down again, but in a moment he was floating once more among the rafters, well above himself.

It was easy now. He came down and stood on the floor, tentatively, in the manner of someone learning to skate taking their first steps on the ice. Carefully, he moved to the door. His body remained lifelessly propped against the wall.

Nothing now remained between him and the long desire to see Carol again, to know if she had survived the thing he had done. Nothing . . . except trees and land and ocean and land and trees . . . and now these faded beneath him like a mirage when it is approached. Faded, wavered, went.

Whatever time schedule it was that his spirit obeyed, it was night when he arrived. Nor did he know what town he had arrived at. All he was certain of was that Carol was near and that some lost compartment of kindness in him prayed that she might appear happy. He was too quick with a blade, that was his whole trouble, but at heart he would always love her . . . in his fashion.

He moved through walls and rooms and people, seeking her. She would only be thirty-five now ; she was just a kid when he had left her like that; perhaps once he had seen her settled down normally he could forget her, stretch a more human existence out of that little town in Sumatra. . .

Somehow he had lost the scent of her. It was day again and he moved bemused but tireless. Then, abruptly, he was on the right track. A big man with a carefree air and a wide-open face strolled out of a restaurant and climbed into a parked vehicle. He was heading for Carol, of that Hopkins was certain.

More discreetly than a shadow, he sat behind the gay fellow as they slid out into a bright neat countryside. Hopkins' spirits rose; this was a fine man for Carol—more her own kind han he had ever been, a little young now possibly, but as reassuring as a good cigar.

The truck was parked and the gay fellow jumped out and made down a side-lane, singing quietly. Hopkins followed close, listening to a song he remembered from long ago but which wore well on those carefree lips. Oblivious to all else, Hopkins knew Carol was close. He could feel her vibrations. She was happy !

He observed, starting from his dream of satisfaction, that the gay fellow was stepping through a shabby door. When he got in, he paused and called softly. Was he wooing Carol or married to her ? A slight wariness about him suggested the former.

And then Carol was there. Her arms about the gay fellow, her face buried in his jacket, she did not for a while give Hopkins a chance to see her face. Then she led her conquest happily into another room and closed the door. Hopkins floated through the panels and drank in the tonic of her looks. Carol ! She was younger than ever ! The years that had scoured him, the time that had branded him seemed to have left no sign on her. Doubtless his lines were the lines of a guilty conscience.

Hopkins saw now that they were lovers. Before his invisible gaze they emptied themselves into each others' arms with an easy gladness that spoke of new familiarity between them. His heart welled up with thankfulness to see so clearly that his cruelty had left such little mark on Carol.

He stood in the middle of the bedroom, torn between pleasure and embarrassment, when suddenly the door was flung open. A little man with a lizard face twisted with hate stood on the threshold. Carol screamed and called something. The gay fellow leaped up with ashen face and plunged for the open window. He was half-way out when the lizard was onto him. A knife flashed—the stab in the back carried the gay fellow clean through the window and then realisation swept through Hopkins like a scythe. The lizard was himself !

Subyata had sent him back as he had desired. But back in *time* as well as distance. He had just relived the old horror . . .

Beyond the tight closure of his eyelids was a world of whispers and gentle rustling, the myriad sounds that are collectively known as the silence of the rain-forest. He was back—from the scene of one crime to the scene of another.

Yet now he knew what he had to do. The old load of regret had shifted position in the recent shock. Now his duty

seemed clear: he must make his way back to Carol in person. The amends that were needed required a body as well as a spirit. Anyhow he had to get out of here before an outcry was raised for Subyata. Might as well head home: that old, unpalatable crime would be cold on his plate by this time. That left only Carol . . . Carol . . .

Two great valueless tears squeezed open his eyes, and he looked about him.

It was night. A moon so full it bulged at the sides was making all speed up to the highest point of dark blue sky. Dew fell like a nervous rain—Hopkins could hear it, but not feel it as it dripped through him.

Subyata's sharp-roofed house was a short distance away ; forty yards' worth of long grass lay between him and it and, presumably, his body. He felt suddenly he would be glad to be in it again, and wondered if the mosquitoes had been greedy with it.

He was picking himself off the damp ground when Subyata's clouded leopard appeared. Hopkins knew at once that it was the spirit not the reality, for no plants parted at its approach, no grass flattened beneath its tread. It saw him, invisible as he was; two sad stars of eyes took him in through a long gaze, and then it turned and made steadily for the hut.

A sudden intuition of fear made Hopkins break into a run. His body was in there, helpless, and in some sort of danger. He had to get to it first. The leopard had a start on him, but further to travel. For a moment it looked any ghost's race, and then the beast's superior speed told. Like a dark flash, it was through the door feet ahead of Hopkins.

He paused, frightened on the threshold. Within was a seedy brilliance, the room being lit by a window-shaped patch of moonlight on the boards. His body still sat dummy-like against one wall. Of the leopard there was no sign.

" Better get my bones on and make tracks for the boat," he told himself grimly.

Gathering up his tenuity, he tried to shrink it back into the silent form. It would not go. He could not get in. He pushed and pushed, as if against a jammed door. But he was left out in the cold for a very good reason—the husk had a spirit in it already.

He realised this sickening truth when his body moved. Its eyes opened, its lips curled back revealing a snarl of teeth, and

slowly it stood up. Hopkins jumped back in terror. This was worse than seeing the dead walk. And then he—his body—gave out a snarl : a leopard-like roar.

That was where Subyata's enchanted cat was hiding.

Hopkins could do nothing. His spirit quailed at the sight, as with clumsy, misfitting gestures his rightful adornment lumbered across the room. The leopard was not making a good job of it; the controls were somehow just beyond its control. Abandoning the attempt at walking, it dropped Hopkins' body heavily to the floor and proceeded on all fours in a mockery of a cat walk.

Falling back in front of it, Hopkins was quite without thought, his mind a blank ruin of dismay. This was beyond all mortal kidnapping. Only when the terrible aberrant had dragged itself down the steps and round to the back of the building did it occur to him that the leopard might have some sinister purpose in mind besides mere grotesquerie.

Helplessly, he flitted beside his lumbering body, watching it, calling to it, as it pulled itself through the intense shadow behind the house and emerged into the blue light of the clearing. It moved with a sort of deformed purpose horrible to watch. In agony of mind, Hopkins charged his body—how he hated it now !—but went through it like an unborn breeze : he had no substance or power beyond the power to suffer.

The over-ripe moon was high now, sailing superb above the tree tops ; it created a strange flare of light low among the pillars and patches of the jungle, and towards this the spirit of Subyata's leopard headed Hopkins' body. Distractedly, Hopkins' spirit peered at the brilliance ahead.

At first sight it looked like a giant spider sitting awaiting them between hunched legs. Then it resolved into a more ominous clarity. Bathed in moonlight, the rafflesia flower lay among its greasy, sheltering roots. The bud was now open, presenting a gaping mouth of thick petals to the contorted tree, which bowed over it as if gloating at the obscene blossom it had fostered.

" The flowers of the forest will bloom before the next rain," Subyata had said.

Oppressed by the knowledge that something foul was about to happen, Hopkins-in-spirit tried to think, and a desperate idea came to him. He faded rapidly to the back of the house. There, the body of the mighty cat still lay. Its spirit had taken

Hopkins' body ; Hopkins must take it. With a leopard's strength, he could save his own body from whatever fate hung over it.

Hopkins bent over the fume-coloured head. The eyes looked as dead as dusty lantern slides. He forced himself into them, striving to take over the being of the creature. Just for a moment, he felt leopardness yield to him and touched a centre of fur and fire—then he was rejected ! He was rejected violently, battered and bowled away. It was as if a python struck with a cobra's fury.

Sickened, Hopkins grasped the truth. Subyata was a witch: Subyata did not die. Her body was dead but her spirit endured—and it was waiting in the fortress of the cat until Hopkins was destroyed. He had come spiritually face to face with her, and had been repulsed.

He flittered helplessly about the clearing, crying without voice. Distraught beyond words, he ghosted back to his own body. Unremittingly and hideously, it was still being lumped towards the rafflesia. Hopkins flung himself before it. It trundled over him. He was as much of an obstacle as a snuffed draught.

What would happen if his body was destroyed ? His spirit would be bound forever to these tangled haunts, perpetually harried by the more puissant demons of Subyata and her cat. He could die then every day—and she would see that he did.

All the time, the laborious progress to the flower continued. At last it was reached. Its thick, outer petals, fungoid in texture, seemed already to be decaying, but the great inner cup, three feet wide, stood high and solid. Twittering soundlessly with terror, Hopkins peered into that sinister cup. It contained about two gallons of rain water and syrup mixed, in which floated dozens of insects, big and small; some of the insects were dead, some still moved. On the bright, dark surface of this stuff, falling dew chased an ever-varying pattern of circles.

The leopard spirit, meanwhile, had manoeuvred Hopkins' body onto one of the tree roots which overhung the brimming bowl. Only then, as it slid into position, did Hopkins fully understand . . . and then, of course, it was too late. Subyata had claimed she was one with nature; soon, he would be in the same state; his body would rot until it was indistinguishable from the rotting vegetation round it.

Obedient to its mistress, the spirit of the leopard performed its task well. It jammed one of Hopkins' feet firmly into a

fork of the tree, so that his body lay along the protruding root. Then the head dipped awkwardly down, down into the insect soup.

Hopkins felt the shock through his transparent soul. That evil glutinousness seemed to press against his eyes; the insects big and small swam slowly into his mouth; he could feel them, the dead ones and the ones still dying, sail grandly down into his lungs. The leisured treacle stream came on and on and on, and treacled him into extinction.

But that, of course, was only the beginning of his troubles.

—**Brian W. Aldiss**

Over the years Jonathan Burke has evolved a philosophy regarding the future which shows remarkably well in most of his short stories. He contends that the world will be a vastly different place to what it is today. As witness the following cameo where television has reached its ultimate peak.

PETER PRESERVED

By JONATHAN BURKE

They were doing all they could to make her feel at home. The food, the welcome, top-grade deliveries from the food dispenser . . . all perfect. And there she was, not giving any sign of appreciation. Cool grey eyes taking in the tasteful austerity of the room without a flicker of approval. No disapproval, of course : just a calm indifference.

If this was what Peter had chosen for himself, thought Peter's mother, he was going to make a big mistake. This sleek, remote young creature was not his kind at all.

But Peter was turning towards her in adoration. Peter was saying : "And now you've got to tell them all about your trip to the Moon, darling."

" Yes ; oh, yes," said Mrs. Jordan quickly. " I'm simply dying to hear all about it."

She glanced at her husband. He started, and said : " Yes."

The girl's long, slender fingers toyed with the safeseal wrapping of her fork. She peeled the transparent envelope away abstractedly, looking beyond them, as though this were one of those old-fashioned apartments with a window through which she could see something.

Something.

" The Moon," she said in her soft yet penetrating voice, " is different. There isn't any way of describing it."

Mr. Jordan cleared his throat. " It says on the newscasts—"

" So different," she went on smoothly, " that it's hard to get used to the ordinary world when you return to it."

Mrs. Jordan sniffed. It was too much, really ! Just on the strength of a month's holiday with her engineer father on the Moon, this young wisp of a girl was giving herself the most dreadful airs. And Peter was taking it all in ; Peter was yearning towards her, watching her lips as they gently moved, trying to make her look at him and smile.

" Inside the town domes it's noisy, and sometimes you feel that you could scream and hammer against the dome until it cracked. And yet at the same time you are aware only of stillness. In spite of all that's going on inside, the cold and the stillness are lying in wait for you outside."

" Tell them," urged Peter, " about the surface bus—and about the food . . ."

" It's like being high up," she murmured. " High up, far beyond the highest mountain, in a world of no air and no sound and no solidity. You belong to the stars. Coming back to Earth is like being dragged down by terrible weights into a marsh. The stars fade, You've no idea how the stars have faded."

" H'm," said Mrs. Jordan. She offered their guest the bowl of fresh-forced fruit, and watched the pallid fingers dip like ice splinters into the bowl. " Peter used to say—"

" Now, Mother !"

" Peter used to say," she went on remorselessly, " that there must be a great big light on the other side of the sky, and a lot of bits torn out of the sky."

" He was always coming out with things like that," her husband proudly confirmed.

Peter said : " Mother, for heaven's sake—"

" For the heavens' sake," murmured the girl, as though it were an incantation.

She smiled at him now. Peter was happy. But his mother did not like the smile because she did not understand it : it was too far away and unreal, and it was condescending rather than affectionate.

" Well," said Mr. Jordan loudly.

It was a signal which his family knew well. It meant that, as far as he could see, the meal was ended and it was time to move away from the table.

They got up. The two women drifted together while Mr. Jordan and Peter moved the table close to the wall. The flaps folded over it, the automatic disposal chute took charge, and the room was clear and beautiful.

Peter said : " Darling, you must come out and see our balcony."

Her shoulders moved impulsively. For a moment she was absurdly like a little girl who had been promised a treat.

" A balcony ? I hadn't realised."

He slid back the door, and the night air was moon-cold in the opening.

" Your coats," cried Mrs. Jordan. " It's bitter out there."

" It's wonderful," said the girl.

Peter put his arm round her shoulders and they went out. The door sidled back into place.

Mrs. Jordan looked at her husband.

She said : " What do you think of her ?"

" Very pretty, isn't she ?" said Mr. Jordan vaguely.

" Pretty ? That may be. But she doesn't belong here. And she doesn't belong with Peter."

" Oh," said Mr. Jordan.

When they came back into the room they were close together. Not physically close—they moved apart at once—but close in a way that Mrs. Jordan recognised.

Still she did not trust the girl. Peter might look at her as warmly as he liked, and draw closer to her : still she was cold having acquired and brought back with her the disturbing, luminous chill of the Moon.

Mrs. Jordan said : " Do sit down and get warm."

They sat down. Peter fidgeted, and could not take his eyes off the girl. Moonstruck, thought his mother contemptuously.

The girl was completely relaxed. Almost she might have been asleep. But slowly she came out of the trance-like state

that had wrapped her round like a cocoon when she came in from the balcony. She awoke to their existence, and with demure politeness said :

" Do you go out a great deal, Mrs. Jordan ?"

" Not a lot," said Mrs. Jordan brusquely.

" We're a couple of stay-at-homes," added Mr. Jordan with a happy smile at their visitor, then at his wife and then at his son.

Peter said : " We took a strato-flyer to Europe and Moscow and then on to America and back home, last year."

" And we'd have seen just as much," said Mrs. Jordan, " if we'd stayed at home. People who can't be satisfied with a happy home life . . . well, I just don't understand them. Not when there's as much as there is nowadays. Home's cosier than it ever was."

Mr. Jordan nodded vigorously. He nodded towards the pale blank wall ahead of their group of chairs.

" New World-Vision," he said with modest pride. " Installed last month. Full-size. Complete terrestrial link-up."

" It's so real," said Mrs. Jordan. " We saw," she said, " everything there is to be seen on the Moon, without getting up from our chairs."

The girl folded her hands in her lap and contemplated the uncommunicative surface of the wall. She might have been watching a programme that nobody else could see.

Mrs. Jordan said : " Now, that's an idea." They all looked at her. " Now that we're all comfy," she said, " we can run through one or two of Peter's things. I know you'll want to see what he was like—"

" No, Mother." Peter rapped it out with sudden sharpness.

A fine, golden eyebrow lifted faintly in the sketch of a question.

" But we've simply *got* to." Mrs. Jordan spread out her hands towards their guest. " It's a wonderful opportunity, don't you think ? It must be wonderful to have the chance of knowing what your young man is really like—all his background, his boyhood, everything. If they'd had things like this before I was married "—archly she glanced at her husband, who chuckled dutifully—" I don't know that I'd have been so keen."

" Mother," said Peter, " you're not to."

But his father was answering unspoken commands. His father was getting up and playing with the control panel behind the scrolled grating.

And his mother was saying : " Of course, the early parts are rather crude by modern standards. We had a tape recorder for Peter's baby talk, and I'm afraid it will sound a little tinny. We're used to it, of course—it really brings back those days to us."

" Of course."

" And we wouldn't be without it. It's a very precious record of something we wouldn't want to have lost. The foundation of his life, you might say, mightn't you ?"

" Yes."

A faint hum struck a deep resonance in the room. Over and through it, a baby crowed and gurgled. An adult voice made a blurred and indistinguishable remark in the distance— " Remember the way he looked at you when you did that ?" fluttered Mrs. Jordan at her husband, who beamed—and then the spluttered beginnings of words roared out. Mr. Jordan adjusted the volume control.

" The trouble is," said Mrs. Jordan, " that you can't get people nowadays to repair these old-fashioned things. I'm sure there's something needs doing to the speaker or something —Peter's not nearly as clear as he used to be. But they just say there's nothing you can do with these museum pieces. Of course, at that time we couldn't afford anything better."

From the wall Peter, twenty years ago, said " Dad " and " Dad-dad " and " Cake, wanna cake, wanna cake." From his chair Peter said : " Turn the damned thing off, will you ? We don't want to hear this right through."

His father obliged. But only because the wall was now glowing with light.

Colour transparencies of Peter at the age of three, on a lawn somewhere. Boosted up to film size.

" Oh," cried Mrs. Jordan, " that was when we had to live in that dreadful house in the country, because of the war. But we managed. We gritted out teeth and managed, and we brought our boy up well, even if I do say so myself."

She smiled, with tears of love in her eyes, at her son : at her son on the wall, four years of age, tearing up a daffodil.

And then there were the home movies with sound. And the three-dimensional quickies at school stage, followed by the very latest re-makes on Material Projection equipment. The ghost of Peter walked substantially about the room before

them. He talked, laughed, smiled coyly and nodded casually. The years were condensed into minutes.

When the light faded from the wall and blended into normal room diffusion strength, Mrs. Jordan glanced quickly at her son. She always did this. Each time she felt surprised that he should be there, sitting hunched up in his looklisten chair. His lower lip jutted out. He was scowling. He was not the same as the child, boy and young man preserved in the Jordan archives. Mr. Jordan, of course, had edited the tapes and films to keep the best and cut out some of the less successful shots. The sections that were left represented Peter perfected. Sometimes it seemed to Mrs. Jordan that the reliable, lovable Peter who walked out of the wall at their command was more real than the unpredictable young man in the chair.

"Well now," said Mr. Jordan happily. "What did you think of that? Nice to have that sort of record of one's boy, eh?"

"He's so sweet in that first one—the first film we ever made, even if it did have only two dimensions," breathed Mrs. Jordan.

"It's a striking biography," the girl said, not looking at Peter.

"All there," said Mr. Jordan. "That's Peter—just as he was. All of him."

The girl nodded to herself. "There's not really anything left, is there? For anyone else, I mean."

Mrs. Jordan did not understand. She saw Peter turn and stare at the girl, and then reach for her hand. The hand opened to his, and lay limply in his grasp.

The sooner he got *that* dreamy creature out of his system, the better, thought his mother.

She was glad when the visitor left. The lift carried her away, out for a few moments into the open air for which she had such a fantastic passion. A few moments, before she stepped into a house-hopper and was carried home.

Peter did not come back at once. Probably he had gone part of the way with her. Mrs. Jordan sighed, and jerked her head at her husband. He knew the gesture. He reached for the switches, and the comforting colours of World-Vision suffused the wall and came seeping out into the room.

"This evening we bring you carnival from Nice. Years ago this brilliant spectacle was clumsily staged in the open

air, in daylight, but now a vaster audience demands more. To this audience—to you, all over the world, we bring yet another in our series of modern marvels . . . "

If only, thought Mrs. Jordan, the boy would find himself a nice sensible girl and settle down in a nice sensible home. Somewhere close at hand. Somewhere fitted with Personal Projection, so that his parents could flood their wall with light and see him and talk to him whenever they wanted. Switch him on as wanted, and switch him off if he was in one of his moods. Peter edited for everyday life. She would love him then, as now she loved the past, judiciously remembered Peter.

The gaiety of the World-Vision programme carried her away. Time meant nothing. It was a shock when the colours faded, only to reassemble into the powerful shape of a new make of heli-car.

" Wherever has Peter got to ?" she demanded.

" Saying goodnight, I suppose," muttered Mr. Jordan. He leaned towards the car as though to touch it. " Nice lines—we might trade our old one in next month."

" He ought not to be out this late. It can't take that long to get there and back."

" Though people are saying the heli-car is out. Too much congestion in Traffic Layer Five. They're going to develop a new job with higher vertical push, to make use of Layer Six."

Mrs. Jordan said : " Gazing at the Moon, I wouldn't be surprised."

She was right. When Peter returned, in the middle of a musical programme, his eyes were wide and remote. He said distantly, in answer to the inevitable question, that he and the girl had walked back to her home.

" Walked ?" cried Mrs. Jordan. " In the night air ?"

" The Moon was high," he said, his strained tones almost swamped by the surge of music.

" The Moon !" echoed his mother in disgust.

Peter stood behind their chairs. There were several other things Mrs. Jordan wanted to say to him, but they would have to wait. When this programme had finished, she would say her piece.

Peter said abruptly : " Why did you show her those damned films and projections ?"

" Hush. We'll talk about it later."

" I'm sure," said Mr. Jordan, not taking his eyes from the resplendent wall, " that she appreciated it very much."

" She says she doesn't want to see me again," said Peter.

His anguish died away beneath the triumph of the electronic orchestra. Mrs. Jordan stirred in her chair. The news, if it were true, was good—but a bit sudden. She did not believe it . She said :

" You've had a tiff? It'll all blow over."

" She means it," persisted Peter achingly through the clamant sound and colour. " I know her. I know she means it. And it's because of you."

" Now, Peter—"

" All that rubbish finished her. She said she could never love me. She said I was earthbound."

Mr. Jordan said : " Your mother is viewing. Please be quiet for a few minutes. We can talk about it later."

Peter moved away from them. Faintly they heard him say " Earthbound," and they felt the momentary coldness as he slid back the balcony door. Absurd, thought his mother with one detached part of her mind : absurd, when there was nothing to see but the serried dark ranks of apartment blocks. Nothing but high-reared houses and, above them, the sky and the Moon.

Earthbound . . .

They did not worry about his absence for several minutes. When Mr. Jordan went out to call him back, there was nobody on the balcony.

Perhaps he had reached for the Moon, and fallen.

After the cremation, they added the last vestiges of Peter to their collection. The urn of ashes stood on a ledge newly fitted to one smooth wall. A three-dimensional colour portrait, illuminated from within by a neverdie lamp, smiled steadily. Sitting in their looklisten chairs, his bereaved parents had only to turn their heads to see his eternal smile.

" We've not lost him," said Mr. Jordan with a stiff upper lip. " He's still with us."

" Yes," said his wife. " We've got him as he was—our boy as he really was, deep down inside."

And they set the tapes and films in motion. The happy days echoed once more through the room.

Yet Mrs. Jordan found herself moving uneasily in her chair. Somehow she could not settle. Peter gurgled, talked, laughed, smiled, and moved out towards them. It was all real and all true : this was the way it had happened. Yet concentration grew more and more difficult. She turned, over and over again, to see the accompanying reality—the final reality, the urn of ashes and the smiling face.

Mr. Jordan got up suddenly from his chair.

" That light keeps distracting me from the screen," he complained.

He stood close to the urn, peering fretfully into his son's face. Light glowed in his eyes and cast shadows down his face.

He said : " Is there no way of turning this thing off ?"

—**Jonathan Burke**

Few writers today can successfully tackle the problem of presenting synthetic man-made life and make the resultant story plausible and interesting. Richard Wilson has taken an old formula in the following story and by adroit writing and some clever twists turned the theme into something really worthwhile.

THE UBIQUITOUS YOU

By RICHARD WILSON

The Chaplain said, " I'm a man of God, not a man of science so I'll be able to tell you only part of what you ought to know."

Then he had to leap back to avoid the fist that swung at him through the bars.

" There's no reason for you to try to hurt me," he said. " I'm only trying to make you understand why you're here."

" I'll kill you," said the man behind the bars. His face was contorted by hate as he strained to reach the other, who stood just out of range.

" There's been enough killing," the chaplain said.

" Let there be one more, Padre," the prisoner said mockingly " Let it be you."

" You're evil," the chaplain said unemotionally. " You're all evil, literally. You killed the doctor and the others. It wasn't your fault, but it was you who did it and you must pay for it, under society's law. I'll try to explain that to you, if you'll listen."

He wondered if there was a shred of tortured sanity left in the prisoner. He sought it in the blazing eyes but could find only blind hate.

" I'll kill," the prisoner said. " That's what I do best. I'll explain that to *you*, if *you'll* listen."

" All right," the chaplain said. He seemed gratified at the response. " I don't want to monopolise the explanations. I'll listen to you first and then you listen to me."

" I've killed with a gun and with a club, but the best way is with the hands. Then it's all you doing the killing, nothing intermediate. That brings the most satisfaction. It eases the pressure longest."

" I pray God will have mercy on your soul."

The prisoner spat. " Pray for yourself. I'll kill you if I can. With my hands. I'll strangle you till you're purple, then I'll give you air for a moment and let your eyes sink back into their sockets. Then I'll strangle you again, my thumbs in your windpipe. Suddenly you'll be limp. Then you'll be dead and I'll feel at peace, briefly."

" There are other ways to find peace."

" None so good. There is torture, but it is too subtle for me. I am not a subtle man. The fine points of inflicting pain do not interest me. It is only in the climax that I find satisfaction. While you live, however painfully, I am frustrated. Death and death alone provides fulfilment."

" You are articulate, at least."

" I know my needs."

" Do you know why ?" the chaplain asked.

" No. I've told you I'm not interested in subtleties. Does the starving man inquire into the makings of a loaf of bread ? Does a drowning man ask why a life preserver floats ?"

" I believe what you say, much as I deplore it. But you should know why you're as you are. There may be some comfort in it. Or maybe only remorse. Anything would be better than unalloyed hate. Do you know *who* you are ?"

" Robert Blane. A meaningless name. It would be more appropriate if it were Samuel Hall. Did he really exist ?"

" Samuel Hall ?"

" ' May name is Samuel Hall. I hate you one and all—damn your eyes.' "

" I don't know. I think he existed, but that a legend was built up around him. You sound almost as if you have a sense of humour."

" I have no humour. I killed the humorous one."

" So you did. Do you remember his name ?"

" No."

" It was Robert Blane," the chaplain said. " You killed him first."

" I didn't know he had the same name. It wouldn't have mattered, of course. I shot him. Grinning and laughing all the time. I think he was the worst."

"What do you remember before that?"

"There weren't any before that," Blane said. "I killed the others later."

"I don't mean the killings," the chaplain said. "Don't you remember a time when you didn't want to kill?"

"I woke up wanting to kill."

"Before you woke up."

"Was there a before? I don't know."

"Do you know how old you are, Robert?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Do you remember anything of the first twenty-seven years of your life?"

"I was twenty-eight when I woke up," Blane insisted.

"But twenty-eight years ago you were *born*."

"I suppose I was; I know a great many things that I didn't learn actively after I woke up. There must have been some kind of life before that. But all this talk bores me. Come in a little closer, Padre. My hunger to kill is growing more acute."

"One would almost think you were joking. But I'll stay where I am while I tell you what made you wake up at the age of twenty-eight at Lost Oaks."

Lost Oaks was an estate. The great house in the centre of its fifty-odd acres was built in the boom years of the twenties, abandoned by its once-wealthy owner in the depression years, and sold for taxes in the forties. To reach it you drove sixty miles out of the city on a main highway, followed a second-class road for ten miles beyond the reservoir, an improved road for four miles more, then turned off that onto a private dirt road that ended at locked iron gates in a high stone fence.

Dr. Norvell Antioch was the man who had bought Lost Oaks for taxes. It was when he retired that he went there to live, taking with him from the faculty of the university a worshipful young laboratory assistant, Robert Blane. Antioch told Blane he had picked him to be his colleague, but instead he made him his guinea pig.

Antioch also took from the university a belief that cellular matter contained within itself all the attributes of the organism as a whole. He believed that a living cell, taken from the muscle tissue of the forearm, for instance, had the makings not only of other forearm muscle tissue cells, but that the cells, properly fed, could reproduce themselves and that the resulting colonies eventually could be persuaded to take the orm of the whole creature.

And Dr. Antioch, who had spent forty years studying the nucleolus, the dense area inside a cell's nucleus, thought he knew, finally, how to persuade it to do just that.

Fortunately, he had a private income, in addition to his pension, to help him devote the rest of his life to this goal.

Robert Blane gladly gave up the cells from his forearm and helped Antioch pare one of them down to the linin network. Antioch took it from there, alone.

Blane was kept busy thereafter with the menial work of a housekeeper, and Antioch kept a sloppy house. There were twenty-two rooms, from cellar to attic, and Antioch used every one of them. He slept in one, ate in another, did his reading and kept his journals in a third, relaxed with recordings or motion pictures films in others, cluttered up the bathrooms, threw his dirty clothes out in the hall and, in general, behaved like a pig.

Poor, devoted Blane cleaned up after him many hours each day. He prepared the meals, did the dishes, fetched supplies from town in the station wagon, saw that two generators were switched over every twenty-four hours—a crotchet of Antioch's —to guard against an electricity failure, stacked away the gramophone records, rewound the films and did the laundry.

It was backbreaking work and only rarely did Blane find time to visit the lab to see how the experiment was coming along.

It was coming along very well. Antioch, pig though he was in his personal habits, was a demon biologist. He had got down to the nucleolus. What he did next, exactly, was described in the code Antioch used in his journals.

What he ended up with, as far as any layman could see, was half a dozen small covered glass dishes. Whatever was in them certainly was growing, because, from week to week, it had to be transferred to larger dishes, then to deep jars and finally to huge vats.

Blane had run all around the county in the station wagon looking for vats of suitable size and shape and when he'd found them he'd had to lug them up the two flights of stairs to the lab by himself. Antioch never allowed any outsider beyond the gates of Lost Oaks.

Blane huffed and sweated and got the vats in place, then was locked out while Antioch transferred the contents of the jars to the vats. Blane listened outside the door and heard a

sloshing sound. Antioch was talking to himself and the sloshes punctuated his almost inaudible monologue. Blane waited for the sixth slosh, then had to go to his room and lie down. His heart was hammering from the exertion of carrying the huge vats upstairs.

Blane died the next day, as he was carrying a basketful of wet wash from the tubs to the clothesline. Antioch cursed when he found the body. He buried it, grudgingly and not very deep, a few steps from where it had fallen.

Antioch went directly back to the lab. He must have been a little off by this time.

" Die on me, will you ?" he said to the semicircle of vats. " No matter. One Robert Blane is gone—but I'll soon have six more."

He chuckled and mumbled as he went from one vat to another, carefully measuring out something green and liquid and pouring it onto the semi-gelatinous blob of each. He stepped back then and said over his shoulder as if to the ghost of his late assistant : " That's you all over, Robert Blane." He chuckled again as a phrase struck him. " The ubiquitous you ! "

He gave each vat a final inspection for the morning and went up to the attic for an hour's relaxation in his film library. On the way he unbuttoned his stained smock and dropped it behind him in the hall.

When the creatures were full size, Antioch slid them from the vats onto a portable table and washed them off. Antioch weighed them. Each was 145 pounds. They were exactly alike in build and muscular development; they were duplicates of the late Robert Blane in every way but one. Their faces were different, each from the other, although they had a family resemblance.

Antioch fretted over that, but not for long. It was a minor flaw in a major achievement.

He started them breathing with a pulmotor but they didn't waken immediately. He trundled each to a separate room. He'd been so confident of success that he'd prepared the rooms and bought clothing for them. Robert Blane, the original, had been fitted at the tailor shop. He'd wondered at the time why Antioch was buying him a dozen suits, and wondered later why he'd never seen them again after they'd been delivered Antioch grunted and sweated and got each of the men in a

bed. Then he gave each an injection which, among other things, would result in their waking at separate times so he could observe their individual reactions.

The study was a mess. Antioch grumbled around and finally located his journal under a pile of papers in an armchair. He sat down with it at his desk and was making a coded entry when he heard footsteps in the hall. He whirled in his chair and saw the door open.

One of the new Robert Blanes came in, smiling broadly. He walked confidently toward Antioch.

Antioch took a revolver out of the desk drawer and said, " Just stay where you are."

Blane laughed. " That's a gun, isn't it ?" He veered away from Antioch and sat down in a chair, first pushing a stack of books off it onto the floor.

" I know what a gun is and I assure you you won't have to use it on me," he said. " I know lots of things in a general way, but "—he chuckled—" when it comes to particulars I'm pretty vague."

Antioch still held the revolver, but he rested it in his lap when Blane sat down. " That's interesting," he said. " Just what do you know in particular ?"

Blane laughed again. There were furrows in his cheeks which suggested a great deal of past laughter and crinkles at the corners of his eyes. His attitude, even as he sat relaxed in the chair, was one of tremendous good will and vitality.

" In particular," Blane said, " I know I'm Robert Blane and that I'm twenty-eight years old. I know it's good to be alive. That's about all." He laughed again. " Silly, isn't it, to be so lacking in vital statistics ? I don't know who you are, or where I am, or how I got here. I suppose I've had a touch of amnesia."

" You might say so," Antioch said. " What do you know about biology ?"

" Biology ? That's a science isn't it ? Must have had a bit of it in school, but I can't remember for sure. Can't even remember having gone to school, thought I must have, mustn't I ?" He laughed. " Embarrassing, in a way. Is this an institution ?"

" Not exactly," Antioch said. " Do you know how to drive a car ? Can you operate a generator ?"

"A car? Why, yes. I can't remember having driven one but somehow I know I can. And the same thing applies to a generator. I can run one, I'm sure."

"Motor skills retained," Antioch muttered. "But no carry-over of specific intellectual training. Though I dare say your motor skill would take charge if I were to ask you to cut up a frog. But personality? That isn't Blane's personality at all. He was no laughing boy."

"*Laughing Boy*, by Oliver LaFarge," said the new Blane. "A novel, about Indians. *Laughing Boy Blues*, by Woody Herman, a swing record. More generalized knowledge, I suppose? But I don't know your name. Should I?"

"Antioch." He looked at the amiable man, then got up. "I don't know why you woke so early. But if you did the others might, too. I'd better go see. Stay here."

"Of course, Mr. Antioch," Blane said agreeably. "There are others, then? The more the merrier, I always say."

"You don't know the half of it," the old man said grimly. "And it's *Doctor* Antioch."

"Anything you say, Doctor. I'll be right here."

Antioch hurried out of the room, looking anxiously at his watch.

He hadn't been gone long when another Robert Blane came into the study. This one was scowling. He wore pants, an undershirt, shoes and socks only, in contrast to the amiable man, who had dressed meticulously, with the tie neat between the collar points and suit jacket buttoned.

The scowling man said, "Who the hell are you?"

"An amnesia victim," the other said cheerfully. "Dr. Antioch is treating me. Come in, come in."

"I *am* in. I don't need any grinning idiot to tell me what to do." He went to the desk and pawed through the papers on it. He pulled open drawers and in the bottom one he found a revolver, a mate to the one Antioch had taken. He hefted the weapon with satisfaction.

"Dr. Antioch might not like you going through his desk that way," the amiable man said with an ingratiating smile. "Might have his little secrets, you know." He laughed.

The scowling man whirled on him. "Don't tell me what to do, you hyena!" he yelled.

The other continued to laugh. "That's good," he said. "Dr. Antioch called me Laughing Boy and you say I'm a

hyena. That's another laughing animal, you know. That's very good." His laughter rolled out.

"Stop that!" The scowling man swing the revolver so it pointed at the other's chest. "Nobody laughs at me."

"I can't help it. You look so droll now, like the late Humphrey Bogart being a menace." Peals of laughter came from him. "All right, Louie, drop the gun." He laughed and laughed.

The shot doubled him over. His last laugh became a gurgle as he slumped in the chair.

"Nobody laughs at Robert Blane," the killer said.

The shot brought Dr. Antioch at a run. He came around the doorway with his revolver in his hand and jerked it up when he saw the scowling man. He was too late; the bulle caught him in the heart and he fell with a little moan.

Robert Blane the killer, inspected the bodies for signs of life. He found none. He eased into the hallway, cautiously. It was empty. Pointing the revolver ahead of him, he walked down the hall, swerving at each open door.

He found no one and became bolder. There was one more door before the stairway at the end of the hall and he approached it carelessly. As he went by a hand thrust out. It was holding a stove poker, which cracked on Blane's wrist. The gun fell.

"I want that," the man with the poker said. He was a duplicate of Blane, but his features were sharper, his eyes narrower. His lips were pulled back in a greedy smile and his whole expression was one of acquisitiveness.

He stooped and retrieved the revolver. Blane lunged at him in the same instant and fell across the bent back. The other straightened and Blane went over his shoulder and fell in a heap behind him. He must have fallen on his injured wrist because he howled with pain.

The other whirled and covered him with the revolver. He held it in his right hand, having transferred the poker to his left.

Blane leaped to his feet but then stood still, looking at the gun and the man behind it.

They were in a room that was a miniature museum. There were oil paintings on the wall and statuary in the corners. Here and there stood glass cases displaying pottery and ancient jewellery.

" Who are you ?" asked Robert Blane, massaging his wrist and scowling. " Another laughing one ?"

" I'm Robert Blane," the other said, " and I hardly ever laugh. Who are you ?"

" *I'm* Robert Blane."

" What ?" the other said. " You took my name ? You can't have it !" His thin features trembled with emotion. He edged toward the other, the gun quivering in his fist.

The scowling man moved backward until he was stopped by a mantelpiece. His hand groped along it and found a bronze figurine, one of a pair.

" Put that down," the greedy man said. " I want that, too." He jerked forward and picked up the mate to it with the hand holding the poker. He managed to get it into his coat pocket then transferred the poker to his right armpit. With his free hand he began gathering up other knick-knacks from the mantlepiece and stuffing them into his pockets.

" These are mine," the greedy man said. " All of them. You give that back, do you hear ? I need it. It goes with the other one and I want both of them."

As he spoke his eyes found a display of cut stones in a glass case. He trembled at the sight of the treasure and used the revolver to smash the case. He smashed it repeatedly until the glass lay in splinters in the case and on the floor.

He began scooping up the stones with his left hand, but was able to take only a few at a time. Panting and shaking, he used his right hand, too, but the revolver made it awkward. He thrust the weapon into his pocket and used both hands to take the stones.

Then Robert Blane, the killer, laid open the skull of the greedy man with the bronze figurine.

The lazy man had not stirred from the bed in which he'd awakened. Robert Blane killed him there, more as a matter of inertia than of plan.

Robert the Good awoke with a minimum of memories but with a sense of well-being that made him smile as he stretched in his bed. After a while he got up and dressed in the clothing he found in the closet.

He opened the door then stopped as he heard the sound that was the dying gasp of the lazy man in the adjoining room. He looked into the room as the killer stepped back, panting from the emotion of the murder.

Robert the Good moved backwards softly, then turned and walked to a bend in the hall, where he stopped and watched. The killer came into the hall. He looked weary. He massaged the back of his neck and, with his head bent, went to his room.

Robert the Good crept to the open doorway. The killer had thrown himself face down on his bed and was already asleep.

The good man went to the room of the lazy man. Tears came to his eyes as he examined the corpse. He crossed the hands on the chest and pulled the sheet up over the face. He said a prayer.

He explored the rest of the house and found the other three corpses. He did what he could to make them less ugly in death.

Robert the Good visited the room where the vats had spawned him and the other five. Some uncoded notes left by Dr. Antioch lay in a corner where they had fallen unnoticed. He read them. He made another tour of the great house and bit by bit began to know what had happened.

Somewhere there was another Robert Blane, in addition to the dead ones, their killer and himself. He went back to the hall that led to his room and behind one of the closed doors he found the sixth Robert Blane still asleep.

Robert the Good closed the door behind him and, finding no lock, placed a chair under the knob. He awoke the sleeper.

Later in the laboratory, Robert the Good said: "That's why I got you out of there so fast. Here's your tie, if you want to finish dressing."

"A homicidal maniac?" the other asked, buttoning his shirt.

"Strictly speaking, no. Not a maniac. He's a killer because he was made that way. The other parts of his personality —the ones that would balance or cancel out the killer instinct that may be in everyone—have been distributed among the other five of us. As I've reconstructed it, he'd killed Greed, Laughter and Sloth, which dominated three of his other selves, and Dr. Antioch."

"That would leave two other duplicates of the original Robert Blane. You're one of them, I suppose. Which one?"

"I seem to be the good one," Robert the Good said, "basing the premise on an admittedly short period of self-analysis. Now the question remains—which one are you?"

The other had knotted his tie into a wide Windsor. He let Robert the Good help him into his coat.

"I'm not one of you, I'm sure," he said, adjusting the length of his shirt cuffs. "My name is Hillary Manchester."

Robert the Good smiled indulgently. "Your name is Robert Blane, the same as the rest of us. It's a disappointment to you that you're not the good one; I can understand that. But then you're not the evil one, either. Apparently you're amoral, which is unfortunate. But that's only the lack of an attribute. We must try to learn what your dominant characteristic is, Robert."

"Hillary Manchester's the name," the other said. "You may call me Hillary. And you needn't be so smug about being good, if that's what you are. Goodness unrelieved by any other trait can be pretty insufferable."

"We've no time to quarrel. It really doesn't matter what you choose to call yourself. What we've got to do is team up and overcome the killer. Otherwise he'll pick us off separately."

"You say he's killed four people already. How do you know?"

"I'll show you the corpses if you like."

"I grant you there are corpses," Hillary said. "My point is that they weren't necessarily all killed by the same man. Some of them might have killed each other. Lord knows this place is weird enough for anything to have happened." He looked around at the vats. "As apparently it did."

Robert the Good furrowed his forehead. "It's true that I have no proof that they were all killed by the same man, but somehow I know they were. It's as if there were some kind of link among all us duplicated men. As if the common cell from which we sprang gave us a common memory. You and I must have that faculty, then. Do I communicate anything to you? Do you get anything from me?"

"Only a lot of blather. I've told you I'm not one of your biological freaks. I'm Hillary Manchester, the—the explorer and big game hunter, among other things." He managed to look at Robert as if from a height, though they were of identical build.

"You're Robert the Liar, possibly," Robert the Good muttered to himself.

"I came here last night when my car broke down," Hillary said, not listening. "I had been on my way to a lecture

engagement. Dr. Antioch was kind enough to put me up. As an overnight guest I suppose I have certain obligations, but they don't include participating in a manhunt. Especially when that man may be an innocent victim."

"What do you mean?" Robert the Good asked.

"What proof do I have that *you're* not the killer?"

Robert the Good drew himself up righteously. "You have my word," he said. "And if that isn't sufficient, you have only to wait till the killer awakes. Or go wake him, if you're foolish enough, and see whether he strangles you on the spot."

Hillary fingered his neck. "I suppose I have to trust you. But if he's asleep, why don't we go and truss him up now, while we have the chance?"

"Mainly because it's taken me this long to persuade you that you are involved, distasteful as it may be to the mind of one who claims he is a Hillary Manchester. Another reason is that we can't afford to make a mistake. When he's aroused all his energies flow into his killing instinct and he may be able to overcome both of us, who lack that drive."

"You're afraid of him, then."

"Only afraid we might fail unless we plan it carefully. *We* know what he is; but if he overcomes us, he'll go out among people who do not know him. Then he might kill dozens before he was captured."

Hillary Manchester leaned against a vat. "I'm reminded of the time I trapped a man-eating tiger in India," he said. "The beast had been raiding the village, killing goats and sometimes people. You may have read my account in the publication of the Adventurers Club. *A Beast There Was*, I called it."

"Pathological," Robert the Good commented to himself.

"I've made quite a name for myself as a writer of crime fiction, too," Hillary went on. "You're probably familiar with my private detective character, Ace Hillary, nemesis of crime. Fourteen novels, dozens of short stories and five—no, six films. Radio and television, too, of course. I recall the time a rich old recluse was burned to death in the cupola of his mansion. Accidental, the police supposed, and were prepared to close the case when I arrived on the scene."

"Listen, Hillary—"

"Call me Ace. Everyone does. So I said to the chief of police, 'There's more to this than meets the eye, Chief.'

I said to him, 'I smell murder here—murder for gain—and I'd like you to round up all the old man's heirs. When I've done questioning them you'll have your killer.'"

"Walter Mitty," Robert the Good said. "Out of the sixth vat."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing."

"Oh. Well, needless to say—But this is neither here nor there, is it? The problem here is to capture your killer for you. Now—old Ace is clicking right along—here's what we'll do. In the hall outside his room . . ."

Robert the Good listened resignedly. Even the help of this—this protean man, who changed personalities at the swerve of a conversation, would be better than no help at all.

Ace Hillary Manchester, or whoever he was (Robert the Good had no doubt that he was Robert Blane VI, multiple personality), was busy booby-trapping the basement stairs.

"The simplest snare is always the best," Hillary said. "I apply this bear grease"—it was really jellied soap—"to every second step. We know which ones to use—the first, third, fifth, and so on. But our friend the killer, in hot pursuit, gets his legs skidded out from under him and crashes down in a heap. Then he's ours."

"Oh, fine," said Robert the Good impatiently. "But why would he be chasing us? Why wouldn't he just shoot us?"

"Because," Hillary said, "he wouldn't have any guns; we'll have taken them away from him."

"If that's the case, why wouldn't we have him right then? Cover him with the guns and march him off to the authorities?"

"Think of yourself as being in Africa, with a pistol, a cage and a killer lion. Is the lion going to slink into the cage simply because he's covered by your little gun? No. He's going to rush you. Same thing here. Ol' Killer Bob is going to come raging at us, no matter how much artillery we've got trained on him. So we've got to decoy him down here and hope that when he slips he lands on his head. If that doesn't knock him out so we can tie him up we've got to use Plan Two. How's the net coming?"

"I'm untangling it," Robert the Good said. "But isn't he going to notice it, all spread out at the bottom of the steps?"

"Never. The smell of blood will be too heavy in his nostrils."

"Whose blood?"

" Nobody's. Figure of speech. So—the thrill of the hunt sends him pounding down here after us, he slips, falls, lands in the net and if that doesn't knock him out, we tangle him up. Check ?"

" I guess so," Robert the Good said doubtfully. " Couldn't we just call the police ?"

" Never. Get his wind up. He'd be out and gone at the first flat footfall. Besides, you forget that old Ace Hillary is here. Always gets his man. Reminds me of a time in Blackpool, when the Yard called me in for consultation . . ."

Dusk had come as they finished their preparations. At the top of the basement stairs they clicked off the light and crept silently through the darkening halls.

" Have you got the flashlight ?" Robert the Good whispered.

" Yes, yes. Leave it to me, now. You don't have to do anything except stand by and, when the time comes, run like hell."

They reached the killer's door and listened. They heard nothing. Silently Hillary turned the knob and opened the door an inch. Then he kicked the door inward and stabbed the flashlight beam at the bed.

" We've come for you, Killer Bob !" Hillary thundered.

But the beam was shining on an empty bed. Their quarry was not in his room. " Oh, dear," Hillary said.

" There are the guns," Robert the Good said more practically. " He's left them behind." He picked up the revolvers from a corner where the killer had apparently tossed them. He gave one to Hillary.

" Where do you suppose he is ?" Hillary asked.

" He could be anywhere. Maybe he's eating. The kitchen is one flight down, in the back."

He wasn't in the kitchen, either, but he had been there. A platter on the table had a gnawed ham bone on it and there were other signs that someone had raided the refrigerator. They themselves ate, realizing they were hungry, and as they discussed what to do next it began to rain.

Dr. Antioch had lived well. The refrigerator was crammed with leftovers the frugal Blane had saved and, next to it, an upright freezer held provisions enough for months.

The rain, carried by a gusty wind, pelted the kitchen window. " Time to be wary," Hillary said. " He could sneak up on us under cover of the elements. Time to move."

" Stop talking like one of your mythical books," Robert the Good said, irritated in spite of himself. " But I suppose you're right. Let's try the attic. He could be up there."

" What's in the attic ?"

" You know as well as I do. But if you must pretend, it's Dr. Antioch's film library. He was a collector of classic films. Had almost as good a library as the Modern Museum."

" An old-time movie buff, eh ? I guess it takes all kinds. Projector and all ?"

" Yes."

" I wonder if any of mine are up there. *Calling Ace Hillary* is my favourite. Huston did that one. Let's go up."

Robert the Good sighed and led the way.

They heard a voice and paused on the stairs. It wasn't the evil man's voice, Robert the Good knew. It had a tinny, mechanical sound to it.

" It's Vince Barnett !" Hillary Manchester whispered.

" Who ? "

" It's a movie. The telephone booth scene from *Scarface*. Listen." There was a burst of machine-gun fire. " Ol' Killer Bob is getting his violence vicariously. Everybody was in that one—Paul Muni, Georgie Raft, Boris Karloff. Listen. Poor old Vince is dying now, but he's still trying to take the message. Now's our chance."

" You mean rush him ?" They crept up to the door.

" Right. His eyes'll be glued to the screen. I'll yank open the door. You rush in—you know the way. He'll jump at you. I'll slip in unnoticed and clobber him from behind."

" I'm not so sure that's—"

But Hillary had pulled open the door and pushed the other inside.

Robert Blane, the killer, was sitting in one of the half dozen upholstered chairs. The only light was coming from the projector behind him and the square of screen at the other end of the room.

Robert the Good tripped over a folding wooden chair that went down with a clatter. The killer jumped up, Hollywood's violence forgotten. He leaped on the prone form, secured a throat-hold and hauled his namesake erect.

Hillary crawled silently across the room. Something on a mantlepiece caught his eye in the dimness. He lifted it, hefted it, then made his way toward the two men struggling

in and out of the projector's beam. Hillary swung once, felt a crunch as of a skull, then swung again for good measure. The struggle ended.

Hillary held his weapon up in the beam, silhouetting it against Paul Muni. It was a lead copy of an Academy Awards Oscar. It had served.

The man in the garb of a chaplain said :

" And so you must pay, Robert the Killer Blane. Society demands it."

" You're no society. Where are the cops ?"

" There are no police at Lost Oaks. We are a world—and a law—unto ourselves here. These bars aren't a jail, Dr. Antioch once kept an ape here. Now they restrain you, though I would have preferred the ape."

" Come closer, Padre. Let me feel your throat."

" It's you who will die, my poor lost friend, not I. What means would you prefer ? The pistol at the base of the skull ? The noose ? The electric chair, I'm afraid is more than Lost Oaks can offer."

" You wouldn't kill me, you sanctimonious son of a bitch ; you're too holy."

" Poison, perhaps ? It's rather painful. How about drowning ?"

" Trying to give me a little hell on earth, Padre ? Quit moralizing and call the cops."

The other wrote something on a pad. He'd done it before.

" What's that ?" the caged man asked. " What are you writing ?"

" Oh, you're curious, are you ? Just a bit of dialogue. Yours, as a matter of fact. Rather good. I always strive for authenticity."

" Playing father confessor, you fake ? You're no priest. You're just something out of a vat. I'll make a bargain with you, fellow experiment. Let me go and you can play-act in your turned-around collar till the saints come home. I don't have to kill you. There are others."

" No bargains with the devil."

The caged man lunged, his hands reaching through the bars.

The other stepped back, smiling. " You're right about one thing. I am play-acting. You knew I was no priest, but here's something you didn't know—I'm not even Robert the Good."

The killer stared, his hands gripping the bars.

" You begin to see the implications of that ? You said you didn't have to kill me. But I have to kill you, and I can. I have no sanctimonious compunctions. I'm not a pure killer, like you, but I'm no saint, either. Amoral, Robert the Good called me. You see, I'm the one out of the sixth vat."

He yanked off his collar. The caged man shuddered. With hate only ? Or was there a trace of fear, as well ?

The protean man went on : " I pretended with our good friend that I was Hillary Manchester, explorer-lecturer-writer. That was mostly to irritate him, he was rather stuffy. I don't have to pretend with you any more. I've picked your brains and taken what I need. Sure, I'm Robert Blane—and soon I'll be the sole survivor of the six of us. You've got to go, Killer Bob."

" Where's the good one ?" There was a trace of panic in the killer's voice.

" Apparently you failed to notice my careful use of the past tense. Good grammar is also a characteristic of my books. Robert the Good has gone to his reward, poor fellow."

" You killed him ?"

" Oh, purely by accident. I was the one who hit you over the head up there ar the theatre party. Then I swung again, for the *coup de grace*. Unfortunately Good Robert's head got in the way. He was still among us while I hauled you down here to the cellar but when I got back hehad breathed his last, the dear soul."

The protean man, Robert Blane VI, the multiple personality, said : " So it's just you and me, old buddy, and pretty soon it'll be just me—Robert Ace Hillary Manchester Blane. I think I'll poison you, friend. Doc Antioch had quite a collection of the stuff. I'll put it in your food or your water, or both, and you can die that way or starve to death. I'm not particular. Good-bye for now, Killer Bob. See you at feeding time."

" Wait !" the other called, but Robert Blane VI was gone.

Robert the killer died of neither poison nor starvation. On the morning of the third day, as Blane-Hillary arrived with a breakfast consisting of a bowl of oatmeal sprinkled with sugar and strychine and a glass of milk laced with chloral hydrate, he found his prisoner hanging by the neck from his belt, which he had looped around one of the high horizontal bars.

Hillary, fearing a trap, merely set the tray down near the cage, as he had on each of the previous days, and went away.

Twenty-four hours later, when he returned and found everything exactly as he had left it, he took down and disposed of the body.

Hillary Manchester Blane, the noted biochemist, hummed as he worked.

His alter ego, the crack cryptographer, had been useful, his skills making the study of Dr. Antioch's coded journals a mere matter of sight translation.

A third facet of the man paused occasionally to write something down in a notebook.

Manchester Blane, humming contentedly, worked deftly with the linin network, resisting the urge to scratch his bandaged forearm which had yielded the muscle tissue cells.

Next stop nucleolus. The half dozen small covered dishes were ready. So were the jars and vats.

Hillary Manchester was getting ready to repopulate Lost Oaks.

One thing he'd have to remember, though. Hillary the Killer must never be allowed to wake up. He could do without Hillary the Good, too. The four in-betweens, and himself, would be enough. A good amoral lot.

He supposed he was really doing all this for his favourite self, Ace Hillary. There ought to be a good story in it.

—**Richard Wilson**

There are innumerable occasions when you will find you have mislaid something ; the most diligent search fails to reveal the missing article—yet, suddenly, it will be found in a most prominent position, probably where you have already looked a score of times. Why is this ?

THE TROUBLE WITH *THEM*

By BERTRAM CHANDLER

They can be, at times, a confounded nuisance. It is possible that *they*, on occasion, can be more than a nuisance—suppose that you are, for example, the pilot of an aircraft and that some vital piece of equipment goes a-missing just as you're coming in for a landing ? It could well be that quite a number of spectacular disasters can be blamed on *them.*

There may be—but I doubt it—individuals and families whom they leave severely alone. There may be people who never have to waste hours looking for things—a book, a kitchen knife, a can opener—only to find that the missing object is in some place that has already been thoroughly searched at least seven times. There may be such people—but I have yet to meet one. Furthermore—I'm not one of them.

This afternoon in question *they* had it in for me. I was, at the time, Second Mate of a small vessel on the coastal trade, but neither the size nor the trade of the ship relieved me from

the onus of chart correcting. Luckily she did not carry many charts—only those to cover the ports to which she ran and the coastline in between—but my predecessor had found even these too much with which to cope. So, my services not being required on deck, I retired to the chart room with a bundle of back Notices to Mariners and the intention to get through a solid four hours' work.

The intention, as I have said, was there.

I made a start, then found that the strap of my wristwatch—the small, retaining loop was missing—was getting in the way, so took it off and laid it on the chart table. I resumed work, running through Notices and deciding which ones applied to the charts that we carried, putting in shoal patches and amending the position and characteristics of lights and buoys. The first few corrections were permanent ones, made in waterproof violet ink. Then there was a run of temporary corrections, made, of course, in pencil. The next one was the cancellation of a past temporary correction, and this involved a spot of rubbing out. A few more permanent corrections followed, and then another of a temporary character.

This was when I struck the first snag—the chart pencil was missing. I looked for it high and low—and bear in mind the fact that the chart room of a small coaster is very little larger than a telephone box. I looked for it under charts and books. I looked for it in drawers. I looked for it on the deck. At last, resignedly, I opened the stationery locker and got out and sharpened a new pencil. A few corrections later and I found that the rubber was gone. Once again I had to renew from stock.

After these interruptions the afternoon went quite well. At last I looked up from the chart upon which I had just finished working, saw the clock on the Post Office clock tower through the port. The time was five minutes to five. It was, I decided, time to knock off work.

I put the pencil in the rack, put away the bottle of violet ink and the mapping pen. I put the parallel rulers in their racks, then tidied up the chartroom generally. After I had put on my jacket I remembered my watch—I had left it on a small ledge at the back of the lid of the chronometer box. It was no longer there.

"I could have sworn that this was where I left it," I muttered, "but I must have been mistaken . . ."

So I looked in all the obvious places, then in quite a few that weren't so obvious. I looked in the obvious places a second time, and a third. I looked in places that were decidedly awkward to get at.

The ship was quiet, the day's work having finished. The stevedores were all ashore, the crew were no longer wielding scaling hammers and scrapers. As I stood there, cursing to myself, it seemed to me that I heard a faint ticking.

It must be, I thought, the clock—yet it didn't sound like the clock. It was additional to the ticking of the clock. To make sure, I reached up, opened the verge glass of the chart room clock and, with my index finger, stopped the sweep second hand. The clock stopped too. The faint ticking persisted.

I knew it was my watch—but it seemed to me that if I could hear it I should be able to see it. However, there was just a chance that it might be the chronometer. I opened the lid of the box, lifted the chronometer out in its case and carried it through into the wheelhouse. I shut the connecting door. The ticking persisted.

Nobody likes to be completely baffled, and I'm no exception to the rule. By the time I'd finished the hunt the chart room looked as though a six inch shell had exploded inside it. I could still hear my watch somewhere—there was a peculiar hesitancy in its tick that was unmistakable—but where?

There was, I decided, only one solution to the problem. Eyesight was, obviously, useless. I'd have to rely upon one sense only, that of hearing. I knew that sound can play queer tricks, that in fog the siren of an approaching ship or the notes of a bell buoy can seem to come on an entirely erroneous bearing. But there was no fog here.

I shut my eyes and listened.

Tick . . . Tick . . . Tickety tick . . . Tick . . . Tick . . . Tickety tick . . .

The sound was loud enough, yet it seemed to be coming from a long way away. I took a step towards it, and another. Charts rustled and crackled underfoot, and I felt a sense of guilt—after all, the Second Mate is supposed to correct his charts, not wipe his feet on them.

I took another step forward.

Surely, I thought, I should have reached the port bulkhead of the chartroom by now.

I took another step forward . . .

And tripped.

As I fell, I opened my eyes. I did not see the familiar coir matting that covered the deck, neither did I see the horribly untidy litter that I had made. I saw . . . nothing. No—not blackness ; not at first, that is. Just . . . nothing.

The natural reaction when falling is to stretch out one's hands—I did just this. My right hand closed on something, something familiar. I felt the metal case, the leather strap. I felt something else, too—a steel wire cable it felt like, the end of which that was, somehow, intertwined with the strap of the watch. Almost I let go, but the instinct to clutch at something, at anything, was stronger than the instinct of revulsion from the unknown.

Suddenly light hit me like a blow. I shut my eyes, then, after a few seconds, opened them slowly, carefully. I knew, without looking down, that I was standing on a firm surface, so I looked first at my right hand and at what it gripped. It was my watch all right. The wire that also was holding it was about the thickness of a pencil, but tapered to a hair-thin filament at its tip. I looked along the length of it—about six feet, it was—and saw that it issued from a squat, boxlike machine of grey metal.

There was a man standing by the machine—at least, I thought at first that it was a man, then realised with a shock that men do not have skulls rising to a conical peak, neither do their arms and legs have an extra joint. (The being's simple, short, sacklike garment made all the anatomical oddities quite obvious). I gawped at him, and he gawped at me—at least I assume that his expression meant the same as mine did.

Not taking my eyes from his almost human face I disentangled the wire from the strap of the watch. It came away quite easily, then retracted into the metal box with an almost inaudible whirr. Before buckling the watch on to my left wrist I glanced down at it. It said five minutes after four—and yet it had been almost five o'clock when I started my frantic hunt. A second quick glance assured me that the watch had not stopped.

The man by the machine was saying something. It was in no language that I had ever heard.

" What was that again ?" I asked.

And then I noticed the small table just behind him. It was littered with perhaps half a dozen small objects, and among them were my chart pencil and my eraser. The sight of the pencil stirred me to action—one of the most onerous tasks of a Second Mate is the maintenance of an adequate supply of pencils in the chartroom and the rounding up of the strayed members of his flock from the breast pockets of his fellow officers' shirts or jackets. There, as I have said, was my missing pencil.

"That's mine," I said indignantly.

I stepped forward. The man yelled something, and bolted.

First things first. I walked to the table, retrieved the pencil and the eraser, putting them in my pockets. Then I studied the other objects. There was a rather cheap looking cup. There was a bag of boiled sweets. There was a box of those wax vestas you get in the Argentine. There was a notebook; I know very little of foreign languages, but I think I'm right in saying that its owner was either a Greek or a Russian—unless he or she practised some new variety of not very time saving shorthand. There was a pair of nail scissors.

I turned away from the table. I looked at the machine first. It wasn't very spectacular, being, at first glance, no more than a cube of lustreless grey metal standing about five feet in height. Three sides of it were blank save for little holes, six of them, through which, presumably, the metallic tentacles were obtruded. The controls of the thing were on the fourth side. There were dials, graduated, covered with symbols that could have meant anything and which, as far as I was concerned, meant nothing. There were half a dozen push buttons. There were six little round ports. I bent down, looked through one of them. There was nothing to see, literally *nothing*—and it isn't good to look into absolute nothingness.

Rather hastily, I backed away from the machine, started to explore the room. There wasn't much to explore. I was trapped in the interior of a huge cube. The light came from the walls and the floor and the ceiling, a steady white glow. I tried to find the door through which the odd looking being had escaped—but every wall was blank, featureless.

It was by sheer luck that I found the window. I had retreated to one of the walls and was leaning on it, and I found something give under my shoulder, heard a faint, but distinct, click. Abruptly a section of the wall, about four feet square, cleared. I thought at first that it was the door, but it wasn't.

My exploring hand found a hard transparency between me and the outer world.

The scene to which I looked could have been Earth. There were undulating green fields, and blue hills in the distance, and a white ribbon of road. There was, I decided, something a little odd about the trees—I've travelled pretty widely and I'd seen nothing quite like them in any country I've visited. On the other hand, I'm not sufficient of a botanist to say just what the oddity was, after all, why shouldn't a deciduous tree have a long, straight trunk like a palm and all its foliage in one almost globular clump at the top? There *may* be such trees on this world.

There were a few buildings in sight, some set on the roadside, some well back from it. They seemed to consist of cubical units of various sizes assembled in almost the same manner as a child assembles his building blocks. By modern standards there was nothing particularly outre about them.

I looked at the sky next. It was a perfectly normal looking sky with perfectly normal looking clouds—fine weather cumulus with a few thin shreds of cirrus high up—and the helicopter coming in for a landing was a perfectly normal looking helicopter. What did scare me was the moons. There were two of them—one high in the sky, a fat crescent, and the other low on the horizon, just clearing the hills, almost at the full. I could tell by the long shadow cast by the building in which I was imprisoned that the sun would not be long in setting.

I didn't see the helicopter land. When I looked down from the sky it was already on the ground, and three figures had emerged from the cabin and were hurrying across the green lawn. They moved with a singular absence of jerkiness—the extra joints in their legs, I realised, would account for that.

So, I thought, they were coming for me.

I walked quickly to the table, picked up the pair of scissors. They might, just possibly, serve as a weapon. I put my clenched hand, still holding the scissors, in the right hand pocket of my jacket. I stood there and waited.

There wasn't long to wait. A door opened in the wall opposite the window. Four of the beings walked cautiously in. One was the man who had been standing by the machine —I recognised him by his orange smock. Two of the others

wore green smocks and short green boots, and carried what looked like steel batons. The fourth man was obviously older than his companions—they were all bald, but only he had a lined face—and was dressed in black. He carried a book.

There was a long and sticky silence. I stood still with my back to the window, the four beings stood just inside the door. The one in black said something to the other three, then opened his book. His eyes, I was shocked to see, were extended from his head like the eyes of a snail as he studied the pages.

Then—" Do you speak English ?" he asked. The accent was odd, the voice had a peculiar metallic quality, but the words were understandable.

" Of course," I said.

He rifled through the pages of his book.

" This is," he said slowly, " a most unfortunate . . . accident. You should not be here."

" Where is ' here ' ?" I asked.

" A translation of the name of this world," he said, " would be ' Earth ' . . ."

Time travel ? I thought wildly. Was this the world of the future ? But it couldn't be. There were the two moons on the sky to prove that this was not Earth.

" You're Martians," I said. " This is Mars."

The man in black made a strange choking noise. I realised suddenly that he was laughing.

" Oh, no," he gasped. " Oh, no. We have heard of the planet Mars in your solar system, we have read about it. We know that it has two moons—but we know that it is a barren world, a planet of red deserts . . ."

" Then where am I ?"

" I don't know that I can tell you," he said slowly. " You are on a world revolving around a sun at the other side of the galaxy and what this sun is called on your star charts I do not know."

" I demand to be sent back to my own world," I said, trying to sound authoritative.

Again came the choking laughter.

" All in good time, all in good time. But first I insist that you come with us. It is necessary that we talk awhile before any action is taken."

There were four of them, and there was only one of me, and at least two of them were armed. I made a token show of careful consideration of the proposition, then agreed.

It was the first time that I had ridden in a helicopter. The cabin was a little too small for comfort and, in addition, there was the strong body odour of my captors, rather like sweaty woollen socks, it was, with a strong infusion of wet terrier dog. Perhaps my own was as repugnent to them. Even so, I was able to see something of the countryside over which we flew.

First of all I looked back at the building we had left. Like all the others I had seen, it was an assemblage of cubical units. On its roof there was an array of antennae resembling radar scanners, none of which were in motion. I asked the old man —Gelob, he said his name was—what they were, and he promised to tell me later. My attention shifted then to the scenery below. Apart from those two moons in the sky, everything was so earthlike. There was even a railway, and what looked like an electric locomotive pulling a long string of freight cars.

I remarked on this to Gelob.

" Yes," he said, " we cast our nets wide, and everything we catch of value is utilised. Oddly enough, although there is considerable duplication of most things, yours is the only race that has invented the railway . . ."

" What about yours ?" I asked him.

" We didn't invent it," he replied. " We have no need to invent anything now. Our last invention was the . . . the . . . Oh, there's no word for it in your language. You could call it, I suppose, the ' snatcher ' . . ."

He refused to answer any further questions, insisted that the remainder of the journey should be spent in the discussion of the points of interest over which we passed. He might have found them interesting, I didn't. A sawmill is a sawmill in Canada, Australia or on a world whose natives insist on calling it ' Earth ' even though it isn't.

It was after sunset when we reached the city.

It was an imposing sight from the air, although rather too geometrical for my taste. It was like a vast checkerboard picked out in coloured lights. Our landing was made on the flat roof of a building which must have been almost exactly at the city centre. Gelob allowed me to walk to the parapet,

to peer down at the lighted street all of five hundred feet below, at the small, black, scurrying shapes that were vehicles and pedestrians.

After a few minutes he took me gently by the elbow, led me to a sort of kiosk in the centre of the roof. The two green clad men were already waiting there, followed us through the door that Gelob opened. It was obviously, I thought, a fairly conventional elevator, the floor and walls and ceiling of the cage glowing with the apparently sourceless illumination that I had already encountered. There must have been some sort of control panel, but it was invisible to my eyes. Gelob put out his hand—and the floor fell away from us. The shock when I found myself standing once again on a solid surface was almost as great as the shock of the initial fall had been.

Gelob was apologetic.

" I'm sorry. I forgot. I thought that this was one of the inventions from your world, but it's not. We got it, if I remember rightly, from some people calling themselves the Greeonen . . ."

" I wish," I said, gulping, " that you'd given it back to them"

" Oh, but we did—the plans, I mean, and the Greeonat who taught us his language. A charming fellow in many ways if you were prepared to overlook his non-human form. But come with me. The . . . the . . ." Once again he had to consult his book. " The Committee is waiting for you."

He led me along a passage. Like everything else manmade on this planet it was all straight lines. A section of wall slid aside and we found ourselves in the inevitable cubical room. Around a square table sat four men. Their chairs swivelled noiselessly as they swung to face us. One of them got up, walked to where Gelob and I were standing, said a few words to him in the unknown language. Meanwhile, the greenclad guards were busy. One of them did something to the table, so that it extended into a rectangle. The other shifted the unoccupied chair before the table was adjusted, then brought two more chairs.

I'll say this for these people—they gave me a drink before the questioning started. It was payment in advance, and I earned it. It was rather flavourless, and would have passed for an exceptionally smooth gin.

But the questioning?

Who was I?

What was I?

So I was a sailor, a navigator . . . What were the principles of navigation on my world?

The magnetic compas they had already, and the sextant, and a method of obtaining Position Lines that was, essentially, Marc St. Hilaire. The marine chronometer they had, and radio time signals for rating it. They were, I could see, rather doubting my usefulness until I mentioned radar and the gyro compass. I told them all that I could of these two inventions, and they assured me that their technicians would be able to work them out from my information.

There was a lull in the questioning. I decided to ask one or two of my own.

"How do you know English?" I asked.

"You aren't the first," replied Gelob. "Others have come to us, as you came—although the machine is set most carefully not to drag in anything large. If a man is brought in, he must have been moving, of his own volition, in the right direction . ."

"So others have come . . . Where are they?"

"Some we sent back," replied the old man. "Some elected to stay here—after all, there is a certain amount of risk involved in the return and, too, one such as yourself could lead a happy and useful life as a member of our community. I am sure that there is much more that you could teach us . . ."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but there is my duty to my ship, and to my wife . . ."

"The last man of your race who stayed said that he was glad to get away from her . . ."

"I'm not him. Anyhow—just put me in the picture, will you? I think I'm entitled to know just what *is* happening, and why."

So the committee decided to put me in the picture, that it was only fair exchange for what I had told them. They were members of a very honest race, after all.

They were unable to tell me just where their world was in relation to Earth. It was, they said, like this. Imagine a two-dimensional universe—Flatland. Imagine that this universe is *crumpled.* Then, obviously, various points which should be far apart may be, instead, in close contiguity. Our Universe, they said, is like that—the crumpling of its three dimensions through a fourth being due to the stresses set up by large con-

glomerations of matter. Certain worlds, they told me, may be light years apart in three dimensional space and almost touching in the fourth dimension. It is, they maintained this same crumpling that makes possible the phenomenon of teleportation even over short ranges on a single world.

The one great invention made by these people was a machine that could do, reliably and predictably, what the possessors of wild talents could do only by fits and starts . . .

" But we came here by helicopter," I objected. " And we saw all sorts of road traffic on the way here, and one freight train . . ."

They explained that. The machine wasn't quite so reliable and predictable as they had thought. Things were getting lost in transit. Things *and* people. It was discovered, then, that this dimensional crumpling was on a galactic scale and not merely a planet wide one, and that merchandise and passengers stood the chance of being cast away on alien worlds or into empty Space.

And I remembered those queer books by Charles Fort, and his stories of the occasional rains of all sorts of odd, impossible things from the sky . . .

So they improved upon the teleport machine and, as it were, fished for odds and ends from the half dozen worlds, including Earth, with which they were in contact. Books, they said, were the most valuable find, especially illustrated ones. Now and again some gadget, some small tool or instrument, would prove very useful to them. But nothing was kept longer than was necessary for them to gain sufficient knowledge to make a copy or, in the case of books, to make a photostat. They were honest. They insisted on that. They were very honest.

I agreed with them. The inexplicably lost article almost invariably turns up. But what, I asked, of the missing person?

They were frank with me. There was, they admitted, a large element of risk in the teleportation of living organisms. (I remembered Charles Fort's showers of blood and shredded meat, and shivered). Quite a few beings from the worlds with which they were in contact had blundered, as I had done, into their world. Of these, most of them had survived intact. Some of them had elected to remain, and had lived honoured lives as language teachers and as instructors in the technologies of their own planets—as I could do. If I wished, I could meet Grickegen, who came from a world that his people called Maanish. He had been invaluable as a source of information

on weaving techniques. If I wished I could see his photograph . . .

I did wish. I looked in horror at the thing that could have been either a cockroach or a crayfish. with the worst features of both.

Were there, I asked, any other beings like myself?

It appeared that there weren't, the last one having died some years ago. I should have asked his name, but it never occurred to me.

There was silence while I considered matters. It was, really, all very ironical—like most sailors I'd been trying for some years to get a shore job—and here was one handed to me on a silver tray. Would Judith mind coming across? How could I ask her? As far as I could gather there was rather less risk involved in being brought here than in being put back—but there was still risk.

"Could you bring my wife here?" I asked. "If you do, I might think of staying."

But this, it appeared. was quite impossible. All intradimensional "fishing" was a matter of sheer, blind chance. The replacing of objects was different. If I cared to take the risk, I could be set down—together with my precious pencil and eraser—just where I had come from, provided, that is, that I did not return to Earth as a rain of blood or raw hamburger . . . Furthermore, too much time would not have elapsed—the dimensional transfer did odd things to time.

I agreed. My own watch had supplied the evidence in support of that statement.

So we had one last drink—a sort of stirrup cup, as it were. I was sorry to be leaving in a way—there was so much that I should have liked to have seen of this world, so much that I could have learned. Had I been in the shore job that I'm still trying to get I might have taken the risk—after all, a note for Judith could have been sent through to explain my absence. But, so long as I was at sea, it couldn't be done. By desertion, even if only for a few days, I should blot my copy book and ruin my career. Too—and again I shuddered—the implications of my being returned to the same point in Earthly space after my ship's departure were rather horrid.

So we had one last drink, and then we shook hands all round, and then Gelob led me to that fearsome elevator—going up wasn't so bad as coming down—and, in a matter of seconds,

to the roof. The helicopter was still waiting—the local aeronautical engineers, I was told, had worked out the design from photographs in an American aviation magazine. We got inside the brute, one of the green uniformed men coming as pilot. It was not long before the city was no more than a diffuse glow in the sky astern. The earth was in darkness, so I looked to the sky, trying to make sense of the strange, misshapen constellations. Only one thing was certain—I was a long way from home.

"Just one more thing," I said to Gelob, when I was tired of looking at the sky, "this teleportation business . . . Could *we* build the machine?"

"You could," he said, "if you knew how. But I do not think that you will find anybody with the necessary knowledge, or who will believe your story. That is just as well. From what we have learned from your newspapers you are a bloodthirsty race—although the few individuals we have met have been decent people. But if you had the machine—sooner or later somebody would send a hydrogen bomb through . . ."

"How about teleportation without the machine?"

"You know the answer to that question better than we do. Even so, there must be members of your race who have the talent, just as there are members of ours. It has been suggested that the field emanated by such persons is one of the causes of the . . . misplacing of things—and beings—on their return to their home world . . ."

"I don't think that we have any teleportation specialists aboard the ship," I said. "Anyhow, I hope not . . ."

We were coming down at last. As before, the helicopter landed on the lawn in front of the teleportation station. We clambered out, walked across the grass to the main door. It opened as we approached it—was the photo-electric control ours I wondered, or did it come from one of the other worlds? But it didn't matter much. We walked along the corridor to the room with the machine. The man in attendance may have been the same one who was on duty when I arrived—in any case, he was wearing an orange smock.

The table was empty of the earthly articles that I had seen—instead there was an array of the oddest looking junk that I've ever seen outside one of those furniture shops specialising in ultra modern lampshades and such. There was a thing

like a pronged pipecleaner, and another thing like a four-bladed comb with a long handle . . .

" Toilet articles from Maanish," said Goleb. " The Maanishera are a very vain people . . ."

I remembered the photograph of the cockroach-crayfish, and wondered what they had to be so vain about.

I was still trying to make out the functions of the odd devices when Goleb finished his talk with the technician.

He said to me, " All is ready. You can return now. But I must warn you once again of the slight element of risk."

I said, " I've already told you that there's nobody around the ship who practises teleportation."

The technician addressed Goleb again.

" Wellin says," Goleb told me, " that there are four articles missing from among those brought from your world. Their non-return would be a base breach of ethics."

I thought for a minute.

" The wrist-watch is mine," I said, showing it. " And the pencil and the eraser are mine too—or, at least, they are the property of my employer, and I am responsible for them . . ."

" What about the . . . the scissors ?" he asked.

I remembered then, put my hand in my pocket and felt them.

" That's all right," I said. " I've got them."

" But are they *yours* ?" he asked seriously.

" No," I said, producing them.

" This is a pity," said Goleb. " Wellin assures me that only one article can be sent back to your world tonight. As far as the pencil, the eraser and the wrist-watch are concerned, it doesn't matter—you are their owner and you have reclaimed your property. So we shall have to send the scissors." He made the grimace that passed for a smile on this world. " No matter. We can drink and talk until the time comes to return *you*."

" But you *must* return me first !" I protested. " The ship is shifting first thing tomorrow morning, and when you send me back tomorrow night you'll drop me into the harbour, or down an open hatch of whatever ship has taken our berth. You must return me first !"

But it was out of the question. " Borrowed " articles were always returned in strict order—those first taken were always first returned. I was last through, so I had to be last back, and that was the end of it.

" Look," I said at last. " I'll return those scissors to the rightful owner."

I didn't think it would work—it was rather like being asked by some clot in Sydney, Australia, if one knows Mr. Smith of London. But one is asked that question so many times that I felt a faint hope that the same sort of thing might work in reverse. When it actually did work I had to struggle hard to conceal my amazement.

" All right," said Goleb, " you will return the scissors."

He shook hands with me again, and the technician made a funny sort of many jointed bow that looked like a carpenter's rule folding up, and the pair of them stood me in front of the machine, in front of the face of it from which the metal tentacles emerged. Goleb stood to one side, the technician went to the opposite face to operate the controls. I didn't see what he was doing ; all I saw was six tentacles snaking out towards me.

They gripped me with surprising gentleness—two at each shoulder, two around the waist, two at each knee. They lifted me, pushed me away from the machine. I wanted to wave to Goleb, but before I could do so the nothingness engulfed me.

The light was dazzling and the sound—was it thunder, was it breakers on the beach ?—was deafening. I shut my eyes, opened them cautiously. There was a row of dazzling lights in front of me, another light, even more dazzling, was directed upon me from somewhere above. A searchlight ?

I looked to one side. I saw a man, dressed in rather shabby full evening dress. He had a white face, black, patent-leather hair with a matching beard and moustache. His eyes, as he looked sideways at me, were badly frightened. But he was smiling, and bowing towards the direction from which the thunderous noise was coming. I saw his mouth move. I heard, barely above a whisper, " Bow, damn you ! Smile !"

I tried to smile. I bowed. I saw that I was standing on bare boards and that there was some sort of black wreckage around my feet. Enough remained intact of it for me to realise, with a start of comprehension,that it was a top hat.

" I'm getting out of here !" I said.

" Stop !" hissed the conjuror. " How did you do it ?"

I didn't answer. I realised where I was. I ran out to the wings of the stage, found myself in a grimy passage. More by luck than judgment I found the Stage Door, staggered out into

the night. On my way back to the ship I read one of the posters advertising MYSTO THE GREAT. It was after I was back on board, smoking a much needed cigarette, that I remembered Gelob's warning about the distorting field generated by those with the wild talent of teleportation. I remembered, too, that Charles Fort had made the claim that many stage magicians are *real* magicians, but know that a display of *real* magic billed as such would either scare audiences away or arouse derision, unbelief and hostility. Just as I should do, I thought, if I ever told my story.

I removed the recovered articles from my pockets, put them in the top drawer of my desk. I put the scissors there with them. I undressed, hung up my clothes, went through to the bathroom to shower and brush my teeth. I was relieved to find that *they* hadn't purloined the soap from the dish . . .

I turned in.

A few evenings later my wife, who had come down to the ship to meet me in, was sitting in my cabin.

She asked suddenly, " Do *you* ever have any trouble with *them* ?" Before I could answer, she went on, " It's my nail scissors. I can't find them anywhere. *They* must have taken them."

" I've got a spare pair here," I answered, trying to make my voice very matter of fact. " You're welcome to them."

I pulled open the drawer, got them out, gave them to her. She looked at them curiously.

" But these *are* mine. See—the tip of a blade is broken ; that was done when I used them to lever the lid off a jam jar . . ." Her face clouded. " But I could have sworn that I used them *after* you sailed last time. Anyhow, here am I, blaming *them* all the time, when really it was *you* !"

" It was *them*," I said.

When I finished telling her the story all that she would say was that it was an absurdly elaborate lie just to cover up such a minor piece of thoughtlessness on my part. Furthermore, she went on, everybody knows who *they* are, and she'd sooner believe in fairies, elves, goblins or gremlins than *my* rubbish.

Next time—if there is a next time—I bring only my own property back with me.

—Bertram Chandler

THE MAN WITH TALENT

Poetry is a dying art (but don't let a poet hear you make that statement). In a world where his talent is no longer of any worth, the only recourse would be for him to emigrate to another planet. Where, possibly, his talent will be recognised for what it is worth.

By ROBERT SILVERBERG

There was a little clipping that Emil Vilar carried about with him, a review of his first and only volume of poetry. Now, on this new world, he drew it out and read it for the ten-thousandth time.

It was yellow with age, and the print was getting blurred, but that didn't matter; the words were inscribed on Emil Vilar's brain in perpetuity.

"*Emil Vilar understands the world as few poets ever have,*" the clipping said. "*Tragically, the world will never understand him. His talent is too great.*"

Vilar had blushed when that review appeared; he had known, inwardly, that it was the truth, but he had neither dared to admit it to himself nor welcomed another's saying it.

He had tried. For twenty years after, he had continued to write and to try. And finally, he had admitted the truth of what the anonymous reviewer had said—and he had left Earth forever.

He looked up from the clipping at the landscape of his new world. He had selected it at random, from the thick volume

of catalogued worlds in the library. Which world it was, did not matter to him ; all that mattered was that it was not Earth.

" Rigel Seven," he said aloud. The words were strange in his mouth, and he savoured the interplay of the not-quite-assonant vowels of the two mild trochees that named his new home.

He was faintly disappointed, now that he was here, that he had picked a Terraformed planet. His motives had been clear enough at the start : he wanted a world as much like and as far from Earth as possible, where he could work in peace, unknown and undisturbed—where people would not plague him with their well-meant misinterpretations of his work, sting him with accusations of ivory-towerism or artistic irresponsibility, or call Vilar any of the other names they had called him because he insisted on writing his poetry for himself and himself alone.

Earth didn't understand. Earth wanted him to be a rhymer, not a poet—and so Emil Vilar had quietly removed himself from the Terran scene. He had chosen a Terraformed planet as his new home. But as he looked at the gently sloping green hills and the familiar-seeming puffs of white fleece in the soft blue sky, he realised he had made one of his rare mistakes. How much richer his imagination would have been, he thought sadly, had he selected an alien-form world—one which had not yet been converted into a carbon copy of the mother planet. Here, he had the same sky and the same clouds as on Earth ; only the sun was different.

Well, he was here, and here he would stay. Carefully, he folded his clipping and slid it into his wallet. Rigel Seven was as good a place as any, and any would be better than Earth.

The robot in the Earthside routing office had told him, with a smirk on its mirrored face, that he was the first emigrant to Rigel Seven in over eight hundred years. That had been all right, too.

The planet had been settled, a thousand years earlier, by sixteen wealthy Terran families ; they had purchased it jointly as a private estate. The conditions of the sale, of course, had been that the planet remain open to all comers of emigration, but that was a safe risk. The sky was full of stars, and each had its cluster of worlds. Who would cross five hundred light-years to settle on Rigel Seven, when Sirius and Vega and

Procyon and the Centauri stars beckoned just a few light-years from Earth?

Who but Emil Vilar, fleeing quietly from the world that would never understand him?

He had saved some five thousand dollars, in his fifty years. That had nearly covered the transit fee; the rest had been supplied by his friends.

There had been six of them, men with faith in Emil Vilar. They had fought against his going, but when they saw he was determined to go they helped him. They contributed the needed thousand to see him through the journey; they established a trust fund that would provide a monthly remittance for him for the rest of his life.

He took a deep breath. Rigel Seven was Terraformed, but they had left out the stink of Earth's air and the filth of her cities. The air was fresh and clear here. He smiled at the sight of his shadow, stretched mightily ahead of him over the grass.

For the first time in his memory, he felt happy.

The Rigel Seven spaceport was at the edge of a broad field that swept up the side of the hill in the distance like a green carpet. Further back, on the hill, Vilar could see the shimmering paleness of a domed house. Someone was coming down the brown, winding path that led from the hill to the field.

He hefted his small suitcase and started to walk forward rapidly. The man met him in the middle of the field. He was tall and bronzed, shirtless, with long, rippling muscles lying flat and firm on his arms and chest. Vilar felt suddenly ashamed of his own dumpy body.

"You're the emigrant, aren't you?"

"I am Emil Vilar. The ship has just left me here."

"I know," the tall man said, grinning affably. "We saw it come down. It was quite a novelty for us; we don't get much traffic here, you know."

"I can imagine," Vilar said quietly. "Well, I shan't bother you much. I keep to myself most of the time."

"We have a place all ready for you. My name's Carpenter, by the way—Melbourne Hadley Carpenter. Come: I'll show you to your shack, and then you can come visit us later. We'll tell you how things work here."

"Work? But—I do not plan to participate in any communal activ—"

He paused, frowning, and shook his head gently : this was no time to spout a declaration of principles. " Never mind," he said. " Show me where I stay."

Carpenter led him back up the path to the foot of the hill, where there was a small shack looking upward at the great domed house.

" This is ideal," said Vilar. It was just what he had envisioned when he had made arrangements to live here.

" See you later," Carpenter told him, waved cheerily, and left. Vilar put a hand on the door-opener, broke the photonic circuit, and stepped in.

One bookcase, one bed, one closet, one desk, one dresser. Ideal.

Vilar unpacked his single suitcase rapidly. It had been no struggle for him to break away from his Earthly possessions ; he had been able to bring everything he owned, and still make the fifty-pound mass limit of the subspace liner with ease.

First came the books, just eight of them. There was the slim blue-bound copy of *Poems*, by Emil Vilar (London, 2643, 61 pp.). After that, Pound's *Cantos*, the complete hundred and eight. Next came the King James Bible, *Swann's Way*, the complete Yeats, Davis' *On Historical Analysis* (both volumes in one), the plays of Cyril Tourneur, and the Greek Anthology. These were all Vilar had kept from a lifetime of reading, and he had added the most recent—the single volume of Proust—sixteen years before. Now, he considered his library closed.

His meagre wardrobe followed, and he arrayed it in the closet and dresser with customary methodical precision. After that, his linens and other household goods. Next, the thin file envelope containing his poetic output since 2643 volume. It was all unpublished, and the world had seen little of it.

Those works which had somehow passed muster and been shown to a few friends—those poems Vilar now regarded as tainted, though he kept them. Each seemed stained by the muddleheaded comment it had inspired.

" A wonderful thing, Emil—but isn't it a shade too long ?"

" Marvellous imagery, but I don't understand the applicability of the reference to Dido in line 11."

" Magnificent, but—"

" Splendid, but—"

Or : " It's worthless, Emil, but I have an idea for fixing it. Why don't you—"

He had listened patiently to each of them, digested their often-conflicting critical views with dignity, and, finally, turned his back on the lot of them. Retreating to Rigel Seven was the easiest solution for all; there had been no other way.

Had he remained on Earth, he would have spent the rest of his days unchangingly plagued by the cultists, the centre of a well-meaning circle of admirers and worshippers who longed to share his gift—though they had no notion of the anguish they brought to its possessor.

Forget them, Emil, he ordered himself sternly. He continued unpacking. He drew out a package of paper : two reams, all he would need for the rest of his life. His pen. His notebook.

He looked around. Everything was where it should be. The room was complete.

Vilar sat down at his desk and reached for a book. His hand lingered momentarily over his own little volume, quivered involuntarily, and moved on. He drew forth Yeats, then reconsidered and put him back. Fugitive lines from Eliot, whom he had long since memorized and so had not needed to bring with him, flickered through his mind :

. . . What will the spider do,
Suspend its operations, will the weevil
Delay? De Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel, whirled
Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear
In fractured atoms. Gull against the wind, in the
windy straits
Of Belle Isle, or running on the Horn,
White feathers in the snow, the Gulf claims,
And an old man driven by the Trades
To a sleepy corner.
Tenants of the house,
Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season.

He worked, for most of that night, on a free fantasy based on the opening lines of *The Revenger'd Tragedy.* Toward dawn, Vilar rose, tore up the sheet, and blotted what he had written from his mind. He went outside on his tiny porch to watch the bloated sun creep above the horizon of Rigel Seven.

Shortly after sunrise, Melbourne Hadley Carpenter returned. "Have a good night?"

Vilar, rumpled-looking and red-eyed, nodded, "Excellent."

"Glad to hear it. Suppose you come up to the house, now. My Dad's waiting to meet you, and so are all the others."

Vilar frowned suspiciously. "Why do they want to meet me?"

"Oh, just curiosity, I guess. You're the only one here who's not one of the Families, you know."

"I know," Vilar said, relieved. "You're sure you've never heard of me then?"

Carpenter shrugged. "How would we ever hear of you? We're completely out of touch with things, you know."

"True." One major worry was thereby avoided—he would be a complete stranger here, as he had hoped. A fresh start would be possible. The old man's brain was *not* dry; here in this sleepy corner, he could scale the greatest heights, without attracting the attention that was so fatal to artistic endeavour.

He followed the tall young man up the hill and into the domed house. The lines of the building were clear and simple; in his amateur's way, Vilar approved of the architecture wholeheartedly. It had none of the falseness of Earth's current pseudo-archaism.

In the spacious central hall, an immense table had been set, and at least fifty people sat around it. A tall man—looking much like Melbourne Hadley Carpenter, but much older—with iron-grey hair and faintly stooping shoulders, rose from his seat at the head of the table.

"You're Emil Vilar," he said ringingly. "We're very happy to see you. I'm Theodore Hadley Carpenter, and this is my family."

Awed, Vilar nodded hesitantly. With a sweeping gesture of his hand, Theodore Hadley Carpenter indicated six almost identical younger men sitting to his right.

"My sons," he said.

Further down the table were still younger men—this was the generation of Melbourne Hadley Carpenter, Vilar decided.

"My grandsons," the patriarch said, confirming this.

"You have a very fine family, Mr. Carpenter," Vilar said.

"One of the best, sir," Carpenter replied blandly. "Will you join us now for breakfast? We can talk afterward."

Vilar had no objections, and took a vacant seat at the table. Breakfast proceeded—served, he noted, by pretty young girls who were probably Carpenter's granddaughters. There were no outsiders on this planet, no servants, no one who was not part of a Family.

Except me, he thought with wry amusement. *Always the outsider.*

Breakfast had been as efficiently Terraformed as the planet itself. Bacon and eggs, warm rolls, coffee—why it was ludicrous to travel—what was it, five hundred forty-five light years, untold trillions of miles?—and have warm rolls and coffee for breakfast. But people tend to cling, Vilar thought. What was the entire Terraforming project but a mighty whimper, a galaxy-shaking yawp of puny defiance (*barbaric* yawp, his poet's mind footnoted automatically)? Man was progressively carving the worlds of space into the image of Earth, and eating rolls for breakfast.

Vilar considered the thought. Later, he knew, it would emerge concealed in the web-work of one of his poems; still later he would see it there, and destroy the poem as a silly, timebound polemic.

He sat back in his chair when he had finished eating. The table was cleared. Then to his astonishment, old Carpenter clapped his hands and one of his look-alike sons fetched a musical instrument. It was stringed, the strings stretched tight over a graven sounding-board. *A dulcimer*, Vilar thought in wonderment as the patriarch began to play, striking the strings with two carved ivory sticks.

The melody was a strange and complex one; the poet, who had a sound but far from detailed knowledge of musical theory, listened carefully. The short piece ended plaintively in the minor, coming to an abrupt halt with three descending thirds.

"My own composition," the old man said, in the silence that followed. "It's sometimes hard to get used to our music at first, but—"

"I thought it was fine," Vilar said shortly. He was anxious to finish his meal and return to work, and hoped there would be no further talk or performing.

He rose from his chair.

"Leaving so soon?" the old man asked. "Why we haven't even talked."

" Talked ? About what ?"

Carpenter knotted his fingers together. " About your contribution to our group, of course. We can't happily let you stay with us and eat our food if you're not going to offer us anything, stranger. Come now—what do you do ?"

" I'm a poet," Vilar said uneasily.

The old man chuckled. " A poet ? Indeed, yes—but what do you *do* ? "

" I don't understand you. If you mean, what is my trade, I have none. I'm merely a poet."

" Grandfather means, can you do anything else," whispered one of the younger Carpenters near him. " Of course you're a poet—who ever said you wouldn't be ?"

Vilar shook his head. " Nothing but a poet." It sounded like an indictment, self-spoken.

" We had hoped you were a medical man, or a bookbinder, or perhaps a blacksmith. Coming from Earth, as you were—who would have expected a *poet* ? Why, we have poets aplenty here ! Of all things for Earth to give us !"

Emil Vilar moistened his lips and fidgeted nervously. " I'm sorry to disappoint you," he said weakly, turning up the palms of his hands. " Terribly sorry."

The joke was on them, he thought later that morning. No wonder they had been so anxious to have him come. To them, Earth meant something rugged and harsh, strange and jagged. They had hoped to have the smooth rhythm of their life disrupted by the man from Earth.

Yes, the joke's on them, he decided. Instead of a blacksmith, they got Earth's last poet—her one and only poet. And Rigel Seven had plenty of those.

Emil Vilar looked up from his seat in the arboretum outside of the domed house. One of the tall grandsons—was it Melbourne Hadley Carpenter, or Theodore Hadley III, or one of the others ?—stood near him.

" Grandfather would like to know if you would come inside now, Emil Vilar. He would like to see you alone."

" Very well," Vilar said. He rose and followed the tall young man inside, and up the stairs to a richly panelled room in which sat the eldest of the Carpenter clan.

" Come in, please," the old man said gently.

Vilar took the seat offered him and waited tensely for old Carpenter to speak. At close range, he could see that the

old man was ancient, but well preserved even at a probable age of a hundred fifty.

"You say you're a *poet*," Carpenter said, hitting the plosive sound fiercely. "Would you mind reading this, and giving me your honest opinion of it?"

Vilar took the proffered sheet of paper, as he had taken so many other amateur poetic attempts back on Earth, and read the poem very carefully. It was a villanelle, smoothly accomplished, except for a slip in scansion in the third line of the quatrain. It was also shallow and completely lacking in poetic vision; for once, Vilar determined to be absolutely unsparing in his criticism.

"A pretty exercise," he said casually. "Neatly handled, except for this blunder in the next line to last." He indicated the blemish, and added, "Other than that, the work's totally devoid of value. It doesn't even have the virtue of being entertaining; its emptiness is merely offensive. Have I made myself clear?"

"You have," Carpenter said stiffly. "The verses were mine."

"You asked for honest criticism," Vilar reminded him.

"So I did—and I received it, perhaps. What of those paintings on the wall?"

They were abstracts, strikingly handled. "I'm not a painter, you realise," Vilar said haltingly. "But I'd say they were excellent—quite good, certainly."

"Those are mine too," Carpenter said.

Vilar blinked surprisedly. "You're very versatile, Mr. Carpenter. Musician, composer, poet, painter—you hold all the arts at your command."

"Ah—yes," Carpenter said, somewhat testily. "It is not at all unusual here. In fact, it's customary. We pride ourselves on our artistic ability. We are *all* poets, Mr. Vilar. We all paint, we all play instruments, we all compose."

"Whereas I'm limited to my one paltry art, is that it? I'm merely a poet."

A sudden feeling of inferiority swept over him for the first time within his memory. He had felt humble before—humble before Milton or Aeschylus, before Yeats or Shakespeare, as he struggled to surpass their accomplishments. But there was a shade of difference between humility and inferiority. What he felt now was inadequacy, not merely as a poet, but as a person. For a man as self-assured as Vilar, it was a painful thing.

He looked up at old Carpenter. "Will you excuse me?" he said, his voice strangely harsh and edgy.

Alone in his shack, he stared at the sheet of paper regretfully, and read the lines he had written :

Slippery shadows of daylight stand
Between each man and himself; each cries out,
But—

That was where they ended. He had just composed them—or so he had thought, at the moment. Now, five minutes later, he recognised them for what they were : lines from a poem he had composed in his youth and rightfully burned for the adolescent twaddle it was.

Where was his technique, his vaunted vowel sense, his intricate rhythms and subtle verbal conflicts? He looked sadly at the clumsy nonsense his fear-numbed brain had dictated, and swept the sheet contemptuously to the floor.

Have I lost the gift?

It was a cold, soul-withering question, but it was followed hastily by another even more deadly : *Did I ever have the gift?*

But that was an easily-answered question. There was the slim blue-bound volume, right over here—

The book was gone.

He stared at the quarter inch left vacant in the bookcase for a moment. The book had been taken. One of the Carpenters was evidently curious about his poetry.

Well, never mind, he thought. *I still carry the poems with me.*

To prove it, he recited *The Apples of Idun*, one of the longest, and, to his mind, the best. When he was finished, his old confidence had returned ; his gift had been no illusion.

But neither was the Carpenter family. And he could no longer stay here in their presence.

Dejectedly, he recalled the performance of the patriarch : with astonishing versatility, the old man flitted from one art form to the next—as did the others. There wasn't a man in the family who couldn't turn a verse, set his own song to music, perform the piece on one of a dozen instruments, and render a nonobjective interpretation of it in oils to boot. Beside formidable talent of this sort, Vilar felt his own paltry gift fade into insignificance. Art was as natural to these people as breathing. They had been *bred* to it ; no one wore

the label " artist " on Rigel Seven, no specialist lurked in his private nook or category.

And Emil Vilar was aware that there was no place for him in a world of this sort. His talent was too ephemeral to survive among these genial philistines—for philistines they were, despite or perhaps because of their great range of abilities.

They were omniartistic—and omnivorous, too ; they would devour Emil Vilar.

He took his suitcase from the closet and calmly began to pack. Returning to Earth was out of the question, but he would go somewhere, somewhere where life was more complex and art a more highly valued skill.

" Why are you packing ?" a resonant voice asked.

Vilar whirled. It was old Carpenter, standing in the doorway.

" I've decided to go. That's reason enough."

Carpenter smiled pleasantly. " Go ? Where could you go ? Back to Earth ?"

" No—but anywhere away from here."

" You'll find the other fifteen Families much the same," the old man said. " Take my advice ; stay here. We like you, Vilar. We don't want to lose you so soon."

Vilar was silent and motionless for a while. Then, without saying a word, he resumed packing.

Carpenter crossed the cabin quickly and put his hand on Vilar's arm. The old man's grip was surprisingly strong. " Please," he said urgently. " Don't go."

Vilar loosened the grip and stepped away. " I can't stay here. I have to leave."

" But why ?"

" *Because you're driving me crazy, dammit* !" Vilar shouted suddenly. It was the first time he had lost his temper in more than thirty years.

Quivering, he turned toward the older man. " You paint, you sing, you write, you compose. You do everything ! And what of me ? I'm a poet, nothing more. A *mere* poet. In this world, that's like being a man with only one arm—someone to be pitied."

" But—"

" Let me finish," Vilar said. A new thought had struck him, and he wanted to get it out. " Let me pass this informa-

tion along to you : you're not artists, any one of you. You're artists-*manque*, would-be artists, not-quite artists.

" Art's an ennobling thing—a gift, a talent. If everyone's got it, it's no talent. When gold lines the street, it's worth no more than dross. And so you people who are so proud of yourselves for many talents—why, you have none at all !"

Carpenter seemed to ignore Vilar's tirade. " Is that why you're leaving ?"

" I'm—I'm—" Vilar paused, confused. " I'm leaving because I want to leave. Because I'm a real artist, and I *know* I am. I don't want to be polluted by the pretended art I see here. I have something real and wonderful, and I don't want to lose it. And I *will* lose it here."

" How wrong you are," Carpenter said. " In just that last, I mean. You do have a gift—and we need it ; we want you to stay. Will you ?"

" But you said this morning that I couldn't stay, not unless I brought something new to this place. And I haven't. What good is one more poet, in a town full of them ? Even," he added belligerently, " if that poet's worth all the rest in one ?"

" You misunderstand," Carpenter said. " True we need no more poets. But we need you. Vilar, *we need an audience* !"

Suddenly, Emil Vilar understood. The joke was on him after all. They needed him, all right : what kind of army was it that had a thousand generals and no foot-soldiers ?

He started to laugh, slowly at first, then a violent upheaving gasp that brought tears to his eyes. After nearly a minute, he grew silent again. " I see," he said softly. " Very well, then. I'll be your audience."

It was ideal, after all. So far as they were concerned, he had but a single talent : that of being an audience. Privately, he knew he was a poet, not an audience. But one had to pay a price in services rendered, in order to be a poet for one's self alone.

He saw how the days to come would be. His value to them would be as a non-painter, a non-composer, an onlooker and critic. His private poetic endeavours would seem beneath contempt to them—which was as he wanted it. Alone in the midst of a crowd, he could work out his artistic destiny on this strange and familiar planet, without fear of watchers. The Carpenters longed for spectators : Vilar had long since outgrown the need for them.

" By the way," the old man said, smiling guiltily. " While you were in the park this morning, I took the liberty of borrowing *this*." He reached inside his jacket and drew forth Vilar's collected poems.

" Oh ? What did you think of them ?" Vilar asked.

The patriarch frowned, fidgeted, coughed. " Ah—"

" An honest opinion," Vilar said. " As I gave this morning"

" Well, to be frank—two of my sons looked at them with me. And none of us could see any meaning or value in the lot of them, Vilar. I don't know where you got the idea you had any talent for poetry. You really don't, you know."

" I've often suspected that myself," Vilar said happily. He took the book and fondled it with satisfaction. Already, he was envisioning a second volume—a volume that would appear in an edition of one, for his eyes alone.

—Robert Silverberg

Margaret Lowe's first story in Science Fantasy *was "The Shimmering Tree" in May* 1954, *which had delightful overtones of fantasy in its descriptive passages. Now she returns with another equally forceful plot dealing with the problem between humans and androids—in a community where the androids outnumber the humans seven-to-one what chances are there for understanding between the two groups?*

BLIND CHANCE

By MARGARET LOWE

"It is time to go—sir."

Clave went on combing his hair, but the significance of the added "sir" had not escaped him. It meant that Castor was emphasising his android status, saying, in effect, 'I am Android and bound to carry out my duty, irrespective of bonds of friendship.' Clave's lips gave a wry twist. That was the trouble. Androids were so nearly human you expected normal human responses from them. They looked like men and women—so much so that were it not for the "A" ineradically branded on their foreheads, the higher grades could almost pass as human. But behind the handsome, chiselled features was no warmth, no love and, conversely of couse, no hate. Only sense of duty, obedience, self-sacrifice. All the dull virtues. And the moment one started asking from them anything which conflicted with their android conditioning, one came up against a stone wall.

Clave glanced at the face reflected behind him in the mirror but could make nothing of it. Android faces were never easy

to read, for it is emotion which give life to a face, and they rarely showed emotion, their eyes met yours with cool detachment which gave no hint of what they were thinking. How much did Castor know or guess? Obviously, he was aware that young men about to face the Examiners for the first time, were liable to be on edge and capable of sudden acts of folly. Some tried to run away, but they were usually found in the end and brought ignominiously to heel.

And after all, what was there to fear? You presented yourself at the City Hall, together with others of your age group, and waited your turn to go before a panel of three anonymous behind their plastic masks. You were asked to sit down, have a drink, made to feel at home, and presently perhaps what it was in the drink lessened the fear of those masks and you began to talk. About anything and everything. What you wanted to do, what you thought of your parents and friends, of the State, of the android system—especially the android system. If you had any secret doubts you were free to air your views, without fear of reprisal, for after all it was recognised that youth was a time of difficulty, of frustration, neurosis, inhibition, rebellion against authority. And the panel was there to help not judge.

It was recognised too, that however sincerely you might wish to co-operate yet often the root of the trouble lay deep in the subconscious mind, and the subconscious mind was a cunning wary animal that couldn't be pinned down by mere talk. So after the interview was over, you were taken to a white painted cubicle, told to lie down on a couch, electronodes were connected to your head and . . . and the next thing you knew you were shaking hands with the Principal and walking out of the Hall, done the fine flight of marble steps, with your android at your heels. Feeling suddenly adult with all the former doubts and neurosis gone from you, thinking what a fool you were ever to have wanted to interfere with matters that didn't concern you, and the android system, obviously it was perfectly humane and the only solution to the labour problem. Androids didn't suffer, capacity to suffer wasn't built into their nervous system, their reaction to pain was purely reflex, as in the lowest forms of life.

"How many of you are there, Cas?" Clave asked suddenly. And when the android did not immediately answer, added impatiently. "Androids. How many compared to humans?"

Castor gave the matter his consideration. "You mean in the city, sir?"

"City. State. It doesn't matter. What's the ratio—nine to one?"

Castor shook his head. "Not so much. I have not seen the figures recently but I would say seven to one was a more accurate estimate."

"Even so. Seven to one. And you never ask yourselves why?" And then Clave stopped abruptly for it had occurred to him that, if androids never questioned the justice of their lot, few humans, after facing the Examiners, questioned anything.

His own father, for instance. Mayor of the city, and a widower for eighteen years, his wife dying in childbirth. For a time after that disaster, Clave gathered he had been inconsolable, embittered and unaccountably hostile to the regime he had hitherto so warmly supported. Eventually, persuaded to talk the matter over with the Examiners, he came back serene and untroubled, content to occupy himself with his unexacting mayoral duties and live out his life in his riverside home with his art collection and his android women.

"Sir!" A hand touched his arm. "If we do not pass through the gates by half past eight your father's androids will come to escort you to the Hall. It will be a humiliation."

"Oh, don't fuss, Cas," said Clave irritably. "There's time enough." He flung his comb on the table and picked up the cloak which lay ready on the chair back. But he still did not go towards the door.

"There's nothing to fear, sir. I can assure you that when you return, you will be a much happier individual than you are now."

"I don't want to be happy," objected Clave. "I like my frustrations. I enjoy being maladjusted."

Clave had turned away to look out of the wide polarised glass wall that overlooked the river. Morning mist still covered the water and there was no traffic yet. Later in the day, when the sun had dispersed the mist, there would be a constant flow of pleasure barges and the highspeed launches of yet undisciplined youngsters. In the far distance the higher stories of the city buildings shone above the mist, like mountain peaks. One of the peaks, though which one Clave could not be sure from so great a distance, was the City Hall, and another the Android Corporation building. Here, it was believed, the

appalling business of growing flesh and blood was carried on, mass production lines of mindless animal tissue and the special laboratories where brains were moulded like clay balls in the hands of the scientific staff.

Cool android fingers briefly touched his wrist. Jerking his hand away he saw to his amazement a metal band about his wrist, linked by a short chain, to Castor's.

" Your father's orders, sir," said the android calmly. " He left it to my discretion and my opinion is that you are anxious to avoid the Examinations. I cannot allow that to happen."

Clave found his voice. " Take it off, Castor, do you hear ? Take it off or I'll have you flogged."

" I am sorry if it distresses you, sir," the android went on, checking with apparent ease Clave's attempts to break free. " but your cloak will effectively hide the fact that our hands are linked together. And," he continued levelly, " it is useless to attack me because I do not have the key. It awaits us at the City Hall. Shall we go, sir ?"

" Where's my father," shouted Clave. " We'll see who gives orders here."

" Your father is already in the city, sir. He set off early, wishing not to witness any such scene as is taking place now. He left word that he would expect you to dine with him to-night at the Fountain."

As they walked along the polished corridors and down flight after flight of stairs, for it was his father's affectation to have no lifts in the building, they passed two of the dogs which were part of the Clave establishment, and appeared on the family arms. Great lanky brutes as high as a man's waist, with brass-studded collars. They stared at Clave and his escort with unwinking yellow eyes and padded after them, their nails clicking hollowly on the parquet floor. Though none of the pack had ever harmed a member of the family, to Clave they had been one of the regular nightmares of his childhood, and he was glad when a door gave him the excuse to leave them behind.

The river lay a stone's throw away through well-kept gardens down to a private landing stage. Castor kept close at his side. Usually he walked a pace behind his master but, because of the linking chain, he now walked abreast. Clave noticed and resented the familiarity but there was nothing he could do about it.

The mayoral launch was waiting for them, manned by three androids dressed in the Clave livery, silver and black. Silently Clave took his place in the stern, Castor beside him, and the crew pushed off. The launch slid easily through the reeds out into open water.

Withdrawn into his own thoughts, Clave brooded silently. He had left it too late, he thought. A year ago it might still have been possible to make a break for it, and yet, looking back, he recollected that he had never been left alone ; when there were not the customary pre-examination festivities, Castor was always with him, suggesting things to do, an endless round of merrymaking which left one little time in which to think. Some of the younger and prettiest of the android women had even been put at his disposal, but fastidiousness had caused him to send them away.

" Cas," he began, but meeting the unemotional android eyes he knew it was useless to expect of Castor what it was not in his power to give. Castor had entered the family service when Clave was twelve and for six years had been his constant companion. Never seeing much of his father, who had openly confessed that his only interest in children was to secure an heir, the young Jon Clave had poured out all his affection on the android, and he remembered the bitterness that had come with the knowledge that love, to an android, was a meaningless term. And yet, looking at the wide, high cheek-boned face, the fair hair springing back from the branded forehead, he felt a sudden uprush of feeling that blurred his eyes.

" I'm sorry, Cas," he said, gripping the android's arm, " I'm sorry."

It was a mistake. To apologise to an android in front of other androids—especially if there was no apparent reason for apology—was a breach of etiquette and Castor at his most wooden began to enlarge upon the position of androids in society.

Clave was thinking of the stories whispered from mouth to mouth when the wine was running and guardian androids forgotten of the men—and women too—who had managed to avoid the Examiners. Not the scum who lived in the warrens below the city, flushed out periodically by the police but never completely exterminated. Not the thieves, and cut-throats and the dope-sodden, who were a running sore in the city's self-esteem. But the others who, it was said

were planning to break away from Earth altogether and make for the stars, as men once dreamed of doing before the Atomic Wars drained their spirit and made them malleable to authority. Clave remembered once being issued by error with a film on the secret list and seeing, before it was taken from him, part of the great atomic plants at Harwell which, though destroyed during the wars, were now believed to be the headquarters of the Starmen. But no one had been able to tell him where Harwell was, none of the official surveys showed it, and Castor had at last persuaded him to drop the subject.

It had been the Starmen whom Perdens had tried to find—now why must he think of Perdens at a time like this ! Perdens, the riotous, rebellious student, three years Clave's senior, who had damned all authority to hell and flaunted his preference for android rather than human society. He had run and been caught and had come back from the Examiners with the mentality of a child of four.

" Are my toys put out," Clave asked aloud, breaking in upon the android's monologue. " My rocking horse and woolly bears ?"

There was a pause. " You are thinking of your friend Perdens ?"

That was quick, thought Clave. Too quick. Androids shouldn't add two and two and get five.

" Of him and the other fish who got away," he answered smoothly. " How many do, Cas ?"

" I do not know, sir. Very few I imagine. Why should anyone want to throw away their chance of happiness ?" Clave didn't answer and he continued : " Isn't it true that most of the young men who run away do so not because they really want to but because it is expected of them. Few, I dare say, are sorry to be caught. It is a sort of youthful bravado that no one takes seriously, least of all the Examiners."

" They took Perdens seriously enough."

" Ah, yes, but he was in a different category, he was in earnest, and he knew what to expect if he failed. But there is no need for you to worry, sir. You are no Perdens."

At the landing stage, Castor, still assuming command, dismissed the launch and led the way up the ramp towards the line of jet cars which waited for passengers, but Clave stopped him.

" Let's take the strips, Cas," he said, and when the android hesitated, " Why not ? There's time enough."

"That is true, sir, but—" Clave met the scrutiny of android eyes without wavering, "but clipper would be more convenient. You would be less likely to be observed."

"There aren't many people about yet, Cas." And that was true too because when men have little work to do, what is the use of early rising? The android squads whose duty it was to clean and make the city ready for another day, had already done their job and few were to be seen. Only an occasional personal android on his master's business and they would not concern themselves with anything but their immediate duty. It was doubtful whether they would even remember having seen Clave pass.

For a moment it was touch and go. If Castor decided they would go by clipper, then everything was lost, but unexpectedly he suddenly acceded and together they walked towards one of the subway entrances which gaped like ravening jaws at regular intervals down the wide deserted thoroughfares.

He moved with deliberation from strip to strip, giving the android plenty of time to follow. Since the journey was short, there was no need to reach the faster belts, but now Clave was not thinking so much about the strips themselves as about a certain inspection tunnel he had noticed previously in the subway they must pass through to reach the City Hall. It was no doubt used by the android engineers servicing the strips. Where it went he had no idea, nor, which was more important, whether the round door would be open. It sometimes was, sometimes not. Clave shut his eyes and gave a quick prayer.

They left the strips at the City Hall station and started up the ramp towards the street, and Clave saw with a sudden lurch of his heart that the door was open. His ears told him that no one had left the strips with them and he knew that it had to be now or never.

With a quick twist of his body he brought his left arm round and hit Castor with all his force on the jaw. The android, taken by surprise, went down like a log, dragging Clave with him. Picking himself up Clave dragged him inside the tunnel and pushed the door shut. As it swung home lights went on and Clave saw that the tunnel extended steadily downwards for as far as he could see. Dragging Castor behind him he made his way along, wondering what he would do if he met one of the android engineers because, even if he

did not actively interfere—and he might well if he saw a human doing something he shouldn't—he would most certainly report what he had seen and the hunt would be on.

At length the tunnel opened into a series of storerooms, all of which seemed to be deserted, and Clave dragged his unconscious burden into the nearest and sat down to consider his next move. By the light which came from rows of fluorescent strips overhead, he examined the manacles. They were of a metal he didn't recognise and looked immensely strong; he could see no join in either. How they came apart he had no idea. Without much hope he searched Castor's clothing but he had obviously been speaking the truth when he said he had no key. Naturally. Androids never lied.

He was struggling desperately to force his hand out of the link when he became aware of a pair of feet standing not a yard away. Looking up he saw an extraordinary figure, round as a barrel, with shining plump face out of which beady eyes stared unblinkingly into Clave's.

"They call me the Cat," the apparition informed him in a husky penetrating whisper. "You seem to be in trouble, Chico."

Clave didn't like the look of the newcomer but told himself he was in no position to be fastidious. At least the Cat was human, for he had no A on his forehead.

"Can you get this off?" asked Clave, indicating the metal band.

The Cat, never taking his eyes off Clave, gave a rumbling laugh. "Can I get the pretty bracelet off, he says. Well now, I might but then again, why should I?"

"I'll pay," began Clave, then stopped, for how could he pay? He had no money with him, except a crown or two, and he had no means of getting any. His bank account would be sealed the moment his escape was made known. He looked at his watch. It was a quarter to eleven. At eleven, if he was not at the Hall, the alarm would be given and the search begin. The Mayor's son would warrant a full scale turn out of the city police. There was not much time.

"All I have are my rings," he said, holding out his hands.

"My rings, he says, little pieces of coloured glass. Pretty. Pretty. But you can't eat coloured glass and what should I do with toys like that?" He held out his enormous hands, puffed up like balloons. "But the fancy boy's father would be glad to have him back, I dare say, and would be willing to pay a fair price."

Clave fought back repulsion and tried to reason with the creature. " Look, you're human, you never faced the Examiners."

" Oh lordy, no. I never saw their ugly faces."

" Well, give me a chance too—listen !"

In the distance a door clanged and there were echoes. Sounds, footsteps, voices. The Cat listened, his head upturned ; had his ears been visible beneath the mat of hair Clave felt sure they would have been pricked. Then, moving with astonishing speed for one so fat, he bent down and ripped the rings from Clave's fingers.

" The bracelet, the bracelet," cried Clave desperately.

The Cat turned and looked at him, rumbling laughter in his stomach. " Why bless the Chico, go free he shall." Something flashed in his hand and swept downwards and Clave felt his wrist jerk and swing free. He looked down and saw that it dripped with blood. Then he saw the severed android hand on the ground, its fingers curling in the muscular contraction of death. Blood was pouring from the wrist stump, and he seemed to hear the Cat's laughter roaring in his ears as the floor rose up to meet him and he knew no more.

He found himself lying face downwards on a thick pile carpet. As memory returned, his fingers clutched spasmodically at the woollen strands, and raising his head he looked about him, but there was no severed hand, no blood, no android moaning like a hurt dog at his side.

The first thing he noticed as he climbed slowly to his feet were the book-lined walls. That in itself was unusual for nowadays men rarely bothered with books, knowledge being more easily absorbed through the media of hypnotic film and tape.

Then he saw he wasn't alone. Silently regarding him, their eyes glinting through slits in their plastic masks, were five men and, there was no mistaking it in spite of the loosely cut trousers and shirt, a girl. Her red-gold hair shone in the lamplight and he thought that with hair like that she had to be beautiful. But the mask stared back at him, seeming to say, how do you know ? What makes you so sure ? All that glitters is not necessarily gold.

" What have you done with him ?" he asked.

No one answered, nor moved a muscle and the odd fancy took him that they were all dead, or wax figures, that he was

suddenly living in a nightmare surrealistic world, and to break the spell he moved forward and attempted to snatch the mask away from the nearest watcher. But a foot shot out and he fell sprawling.

" No use losing your temper, Clave, you're in enough trouble as it is." One of them had spoken, an oldish grey-haired man whose voice had the ring of authority.

" I've not lost my temper," snapped Clave as he got up, " but I want to know what you've done with my android. If he doesn't get attention, he'll die."

" And that matters to you ?"

" Yes, strange as it may seem, it does."

" Yet," the grey-haired man went on, " you didn't mind sacrificing him for your own ends."

" I didn't cut his wrist off, if that's what you mean."

" Then how else did you expect to get free ? He told you he had no key."

" How do you know ?"

" We know quite a lot about you, Clave, more than you think."

They couldn't be the Examiners, thought Clave, and if they weren't, why were they masked ? Because they didn't want him to recognise them again, and there was only one organisation that wouldn't want recognition.

" You're the Starmen," he said flatly.

They neither confirmed or denied it. The atmosphere was hostile and he didn't understand why.

" I came to find you," he said.

" Indeed," came the cold reply. " And what made you think you would be welcome ?"

" Because you are few and the enemy many . . . I wanted to help, to go with you . . ." His words dried up for the thought had come to him that perhaps he had made the break for nothing, that these cold watchers had nothing to offer him, and that he had sacrificed Castor needlessly. The remembrance of that amputation returned with a rush of nausea and he would have fallen had not a hand reached out and guided him to a chair. A glass was put to his lips but he struck it violently away.

" We're not the Examiners, fool," said a voice. " It is ordinary brandy."

" All right," he said, " for some reason you don't like me, you don't want me with you. Do you mind telling me why ?"

The tension seemed to ease a little. The old man went to his desk and sat down, folding his hands in front of him. One of the Starmen pulled up a chair and sat astride. The red-head perched herself on the arm of another's chair and put her arm round his shoulders.

"Yes," replied the leader, "we owe you an explanation. It is true men call us Starmen and eventually we hope to go into space, but not yet. We are not ready, and as you rightly put it, our numbers are few and the enemy strong, but in an organisation such as ours, every member plays a vital part, is an essential cog in the mechanism. We have no room for passengers. What have you to offer us, Clave? Not technical knowledge. Nor a stout heart. It wasn't guts that made you run this morning, it was yellow panic."

When Clave started to his feet, hands reached out and jerked him roughly back on to his chair.

"You had eighteen years to plan an escape and yet you left it to the last ten minutes. You want to go to the stars, you say, but what duty do you think you will perform on a space ship? We can afford no cooks and dishwashers. Every man and woman who goes will be a trained technician of some sort. The only exception we could make is if a man, while lacking technical knowledge, yet had some quality which seemed to us worth saving, and frankly Clave, we see none in you. Our advice to you is go back and face the Examiners. In doing so you may yet save your android. He is still alive, I can tell you that, but if you are not found by nightfall he will be killed. But there's no need to tell you that, it is the usual custom."

They didn't hurry him. They gave him plenty of time to think things out. He sat, staring at the floor, while the minutes ticked by. Finally he looked up at the five masks turned towards him. "I am free to go?"

The man at the desk nodded assent. "You're very sensible. My friends will put you within sight of the City Hall, and you'll find, I think, that the Examiners will take a lenient view of your escapade. They'll be only too glad to have you back. It would have looked bad for the Mayor's son to have absconded."

"You misunderstand me," said Clave quietly. "I've no intention of giving myself up, not even to save Castor. You think I care nothing for him, but he was the reason I didn't persist with physics which, as you know, is barred to under

eighteen's, because every time I was caught with an illegal tape or film, he got a whipping. Maybe you don't mind seeing an android whipped, but I . . . And I knew all along what would happen to him if I ran, but I also knew I could never persuade him to come with me. What I should have done was to have killed him outright but as you so rightly say, I lack guts."

"Then what made you finally decide to run, Clave?"

"I don't know . . . why do we do anything? Ask the Examiners, they are the ones to tell you what makes us dance." It was an evasion but not even to himself could Clave admit that it was the contempt in an android's voice that had finally tipped the scales.

"And just what do you intend to do when you leave us?" persisted Greyhair. "Join the rats in the lower levels? Eighteen years of soft living haven't fitted you for the jungle life outside the law."

"I'll manage," replied Clave, thinking why don't they let me go? They don't want me, what does it matter to them what I do?

There was a pause while the old man examined his clapsed hands and then looked round at the masked faces as if seeking confirmation. "Go away and live the hard way, we'll fix it so the police don't recognise you. You won't find it easy, but show us you can face hardship, learn a little about humanity, and when you are ready we'll come and fetch you."

The arrogant assumption of superiority finally snapped Clave's control. Before the guard behind him could intervene, he had swung his chair in a wild arc towards the desk, toppled the man who sat astride off his chair with a crash, and flung himself at the red-head's partner who came flying across the room. The end was never in doubt but Clave had the grim satisfaction of drawing blood before he was overpowered. The last thing he heard, as a needle was plunged into his bared arm and he blacked out, was a girl's voice crying scornfully, "Soft living, you said. And it takes four of you to hold him!"

Once more they had moved him while he lay unconscious. He opened his eyes to bare grey walls rising high around him, framed by a cold grey sky. He had been dumped on a pile of rubble in a squalid cul de sac and the stench alone was enough to tell him he was in the android quarter. Once in the past he had slipped the leash in an attempt to penetrate

this forbidden territory but the police had turned him back with a sharp warning at the outskirts. For that misdemeanour, he remembered with a wrench of the heart, Castor had received twelve strokes.

A wind came driving up the alley, stirring the dust and pieces of refuse, and he shivered in his thin clothing—his clothes ! With sudden unease he saw that the fine suit he had worn when he set out for the City Hall the day before—was it the day before ?—had been taken from him and instead he was wearing overalls—android quality. He ran a hand across the back of his neck—his hair had been cropped short—android fashion. Hesitatingly his finger traced the outlines of the fresh scar on his forehead.

A glint among the rubble caught his eye and he picked up a fragment of silvered glass. Left deliberately by the Starmen he had no doubt. He held it up and an android stared back at him. It was all there, the livid scar, cropped hair, wooden expression, naked paintless skin. He tried to smile but the muscles of his face had been subtly tampered with. The smile stopped short of the eyes, and the eyes themselves did not seem wholly human.

He flung the mirror from him and lay back on the rubble. " We'll fix it so the police don't recognise you," the old man had said. Clave doubted whether his own father would recognise him.

A hand was plucking at his shoulder, and twisting round he saw, bending over him, a decrepit android with bones sticking through his rags.

" Wake up, brother, the Tidy Squad will be along in a moment and if they see you lying there they'll sweep you up like an old sack and take you back to the vats. You wouldn't like that, would you, brother, a nice strong body like you've got. Good for many years yet."

Clave shook him off and got to his feet. The creature probably couldn't help it but he smelt like a cess pool.

" You're new, aren't you, brother. I've not seen you round here before. You're a Turnout, aren't you ? Not regular labour squad. Too well fed, eh ?" and the scarecrow poked him in the ribs. It took all Clave's control not to send him flying. I am Android, he repeated to himself over and over again. Androids do not use violence against other androids even one smelling as vilely as this.

" Why did they turn you out ?"

"I fell in love with my master's daughter," replied Clave and immediately regretted his flippancy. The android was staring at him with his toothless mouth agape and as near an expression of horror on his face as was possible to an android.

Fool that he was, he must watch his tongue otherwise he would be unmasked before he had learnt anything, and there were a lot of things he wanted to know and had never before had a chance of learning.

"My mind," he said, "my mind is going. I say things that frighten me. I forget things too. Where I worked and what my name is."

The old eyes searched his face. "You look high grade," he mused. "Wait here." And with the quickness of a lizard he disappeared between the piles of rubble.

Clave stood irresolute. If he was to live as an android he needed information badly and the old android might be a valuable ally. By the "Tidy Squad" he supposed was meant the street cleaners, although by the look of his surroundings they hadn't been cleaned up in years. Then he noticed the body huddled against a wall from which the shadows had now moved. A female android, not very old, with bright yellow hair that had been beautiful before the dust had matted it. "They die like flies in the spring," he remembered Perdens saying, "as if they suddenly couldn't bear to see it come and not feel it. They just quietly find a corner and die and the squads go round each morning collecting the bodies like they did in the plagues a dozen centuries ago."

Clave shivered and walked quickly down the alley towards the sunlit road beyond. Blindly turning to the left he had gone perhaps a couple of hundred yards when a black police vehicle slid to a stop beside him and a couple of uniformed men got out, guns in hand.

"Your papers, android."

Clave shook his head. His overalls had no pockets, he had no identification papers of any sort. The Starmen had provided him with none.

As he was pushed into the police car, he saw standing at the corner the old android watching, chewing a hunk of black bread. If his true identity had been suspected, thought Clave sourly, the old chap might have earned something better than a crust.

At the police headquarters he was stripped, examined, interrogated. Not seeing why he should do their job for them, he told them nothing, but kept up the fiction of amnesia which, incredibly, they believed, or at any rate accepted. Their attitude being, apparently, that androids found wandering the streets, carrying no deeds of ownership, became the property of the State and it was no part of police duties to go looking for the rightful owners.

They were briskly efficient. Within an hour he had been furnished with a number, papers, and assigned to a factory making plastic flowers where, by reason of his evident mental superiority, he was put in charge of one of the lines. He had twenty androids under him, male and female. All day they stood at their machines, breathing the sickly smell of oil and plastic, breaking off only long enough to eat their food, talking little, for there was nothing to talk about, and complaining never, not even when they saw their fellows drop from exhaustion at their side.

For the first six months Clave never saw the sun. He worked slept, ate—the filthy synthetic food issued to androids—in the factory. He was, like those under him, systematically ill-treated and beaten but there was no malice in it. The human management, he thought, were probably no worse than in any other factory but it was their attitude to the androids that shocked Clave most. Androids were regarded as machines just as much as the machines they tended and whereas one sort needed oil to make them run better, so androids needed beating. There was no deliberate cruelty because—and here Clave realised for the first time the necessity from the State's point of view of the Examination system—men were conditioned into thinking of androids as non-sentient working models without a trace of humanity, capable of no more feeling than inanimate objects. Though they were made of flesh and blood, they were, in every other essential, robots.

During those six months Clave was sorely tempted to throw in the sponge and go to the foreman and say, I am Jon Clave, and wait for events to take their course. But a stubborn pride kept his mouth shut. He was reluctant to give the Starmen the satisfaction of saying they knew he couldn't take it. He wondered whether they knew where he was, but if they did, they gave no sign.

When the six months was up he was taken out of the machine shop and assigned to one of the undermanagers, a thin faced.

ill-tempered man on whom the effect of the Examiners seemed to have been fanatical devotion to duty, to force production figures up and up was his obsession, and if he succeeded in raising his target, he certainly raised the android death rate as well.

Now that he had been promoted, Clave's duties sometimes took him outside the factory, even into familiar territory round the City Hall. So confident was he now in his disguise that he could pass the wide flight of marble steps and look up at the ornate facade without a tremor. But in many ways this new freedom made it harder for him to continue the masquerade, the temptation to return home increased, each time he returned to the factory, for the inevitable kicks and beatings, required more will power.

It had become a matter of holding out, day by day, and not thinking of the weeks ahead, when he met the female android Janwon. She had been in private service but her master, hitting her while in a drunken rage, had injured her spine so that she was forced to walk with one shoulder permanently hunched. Her beauty of body gone, she was of no use to her former owner, so had been traded in to the authorities and, since her fingers were still nimble, found a job putting the finishing touches to the exotic plastic flowers which were rapidly ousting growing plants in the gardens of the rich.

Clave first noticed her when he was walking through the shop on some errand and so vividly did she stand out from the workers round her that he was brought to a standstill. Crooked her body might be, but her face was that of an angel. It had the same sexless, unearthly quality he had seen in some of the paintings in his father's collection. Good-looking androids were ten a penny in his own household and that of his friends, but never had he seen anything to match the beauty of Janwon and against all reason and fully aware of his folly he fell wholeheartedly in love. It was no good telling himself that androids could not love in return, did not understand what the word meant. It made no difference. He loved her from the minute he saw her with a selfless passion that asked for nothing in return but that he might save her from some of the inevitable brutalities. He had come a long way, he observed sourly, since that day so many months ago when he had set out with Castor for the City Hall.

Unfortunately, Janwon wasn't easy to help. Having been bred for private service to be decorative and pleasing to young men of fashion, she was hopelessly out of her element in a factory among the low-grade workers. Her job was simple enough, assembling the more delicate flower heads, touching them with paint and so on, but she would not, or could not concentrate. In the middle of a piece of work she would let her hands fall to her lap and her head would go up and she would stare into space. Being android, it could not be deliberate obstinacy on her part, and yet Clave had the queer feeling that somewhere buried in android flesh and blood was a spirit rebelling, in spite of all conditioning, the real Janwon was fighting back.

It was a hopeless fight, of course, and Clave told himself that to attribute a soul to an android showed a dangerous instability in his own mind. And yet he continued to help her all he could, to cover up her mistakes, and to pass her some of his own rations—until he found that she was in turn passing them on to others.

Soon the inevitable happened and Clave discovered that the undermanager had given orders for her removal. What would happen to her? She seemed neither to know nor care, but from what Clave had learned he guessed it would be the disposal chamber—the ominous sounding "vats" of which the old android had spoken—where the android dead and useless were taken. So, knowing quite well he was insane, he decided to beat authority to it and take her away himself.

He was without money of his own, but sometimes when he was sent into the city he was given enough to cover expenses, and the next time this happened he went into a vacant vision booth and dialled his father's private number. He withheld his own image until he was sure his father was alone in his room, then made full contact.

"It is I, Father. Jon."

The bluff, easy-going features did not lose their composure, but the eyes narrowed and Clave knew instinctively that he had made a mistake. There would be no prodigal son welcome for him here.

"Who are you?" his father's voice came sharply. "How is my private number known to an android?"

"You know well who I am," Clave replied, telling himself that if his father wanted war he could have it. "I am Jon

Clave and I have only to present myself at the nearest police headquarters for my identity to be established."

" You think so ?" parried his father. And Clave wondered whether the police had been squared.

" There are plenty of others who can testify."

" Listen, android, I had a son but he disgraced his house by cowardice, and his body was fished out of the river some months ago. Anyone who comes forward now saying ' I am Clave ' is an impostor and will be shot on sight like a mad dog. If I hadn't known he was dead," he added harshly, " I should have been inclined to believe your story, for I always expected he would come running home sooner or later with his tail between his legs. He was a wishy-washy gutless creature," he cried, " why didn't they give me a son of whom I could have been proud ?"

Clave, looking at the familiar face with the weak, irresolute chin and vague faded eyes, was tempted in turn to ask why he hadn't been given a father whom he could have respected, and then he realised that his father was but the end-product of the Examination system and for all he knew might have made his own vain attempt to avoid the Examiners.

" Don't worry," Clave told him. " I've no intention of coming back." He wished he had never sought this interview but he had had a queer impulse to say goodbye to his father before setting out on the foolhardy attempt to take Janwon away. He had also been going to ask for money. But that was now out of the question he would have to get it elsewhere or go without. With his hand on the off-switch he asked one more question.

" Father, what happened to Castor ?"

The flabby jowl quivered with laughter. " My son's android? We set the dogs on him, it was a splendid show . . . upstairs and downstairs and—"

Clave flung the switch over and lent against the side of the booth feeling sick. Not for a minute did he disbelieve his father. Such sport was common, for now it was forbidden to hunt animals for sport, androids were frequently used for the purpose. More humane.

He left the booth and made his way back to the nearest subway. He had just enough money to get him back to the factory and if he hurried he would get there about the time the undermanager went for his tea, and there was no one else likely to question his movements.

As he was about to descend the ramp, he looked back to make sure he hadn't been followed. And froze in his tracks. Drawn up beside the booth he had just vacated was a familiar black and silver vehicle out of which a man was pulling two leashed hounds. He led them to the booth and let them cast about, until they had picked up the scent he wanted. Then, with the dogs pulling strongly on the leash, he began to make his way across the square towards the subway.

Passersby stopped and stared and whispered to themselves. The Clave hounds were famous for their ferocity and strength. There was a general edging away from their path.

The dog's handler suddenly looked up and saw Clave standing at the subway entrance. In a flash he had slipped the leash and urged the dogs forward—not that they needed encouragement. They, too, had seen their quarry.

Clave took to his heels down the ramp. The dogs would never harm a Clave, he had always understood, but he had no wish to put tradition to the test. Baying echoed down the tunnel after him but he gained the strips and was on the third belt before the dogs appeared. Attempting to follow him they lost their footing on the moving surface and went slithering along on their bellies, causing alarm and confusion among other travellers, especially the elderly who invariably stayed on the slowest belt.

There were a hundred or more subway exits to choose from and he did not think that the enemy had either time or forces to cover them all. Nevertheless he made sure the coast was clear before venturing into the street.

At the factory gate he showed his pass but the guard barely looked at it. He was used to Clave coming and going and anyway androids never did anything without orders ; it was the humans who had to be watched. So even when Clave returned a few minutes later with a female android by the hand, he merely shrugged and went back to the video set which he had smuggled into his office.

Clave, his pockets bulging with money from the safe which the undermanager kept in his office, knew he must work fast. Like a surf-rider on a dangerous sea, he must keep with the wave otherwise everything was lost. Not that he expected a hue and cry to be raised from the factory just yet. The guard at the gate went off duty very shortly and with luck he wouldn't be questioned until the morning, and in any case the authorities

wouldn't be looking for an android until they had exhausted all other possibilities. Androids simply didn't break open safes and run away with females of their kind.

The strips were safest, for everyone used them, humans and androids alike, so he made for the nearest subway. But Janwon, crippled as she was, could not be hurried. Clave, in his anxiety to get her out of sight of cruising police cars, felt that she was deliberately dragging, as if she knew that something was very, very wrong. "Where are you taking me?" she kept asking, and this obvious bewilderment of hers, allied to her deformity and extreme facial beauty, was enough to cause more than one human to turn and stare and appear on the point of asking what was going on. Even the idle curiosity of a street lounger, and there were several, could be a disaster.

But the subway was reached without incident and once on the belts Clave breathed a little easier. He dared not take the chance of her stumbling on the fast lines, it was difficult enough to get her on to the first belt, for she had never used the strips before in her life. And she would keep talking. Sometimes in the factory she had gone the whole day without saying more than half a dozen words, answering questions with monotonous Yes and No, but now it was as if something in her had been awakened and alarmed, as if the conditioning monitor had suddenly realised that its prisoner was slipping out of control. She kept asking where they were going, whether he had permission, when they were going back to the factory—all highly inflammable material if it reached the ears of a curious human.

The strips had many levels and at a convenient junction he took a deep, little used belt that ran under the river, and finally emerged into daylight at a quiet spot on the riverside, much used by picnickers in the summer, but now practically deserted. Yet, after the factory, it looked like paradise and he said as much to Janwon.

Her eyes were wet. No doubt the glare of spring sunlight on eyes used to the artificial light of the factory. It had to be that, it couldn't be tears, for androids never cried. They did not know unhappiness as humans knew it.

Clave led her to a hollow close to the water's edge, out of sight of strollers using the river path, and told her to wait there until he returned. But she seemed not to have heard him. She looked about her in silence, at the swift running

water, the trees, yellow and green with young leaf at the soft spring sky above, and drew the thin clothes closer to her body. This was no longer the querulous android he had hurried through the streets and on to the strips. There was a strange new dignity in her bearing, for all her crooked body, and Clave had never seen her so beautiful. It's going to work, he told himself. Give me a month, please God a month, and she'll forget she was ever android.

Some fifteen miles upriver he had a hideout, a small but well-equipped building hidden in an unfrequented thicket to which he—and necessarily, his shadow, Castor—had retreated when the burden of being the Mayor's son became too much for him. He had not been there for a couple of years but was pretty sure no one would have discovered it. Even if they had, it was well protected against intruders.

Once safely within its walls, he and Janwon could live without fear of discovery for a month at least while the food lasted. After that—after that was eternity and it was useless to look too far ahead. The immediate need was to charter a boat to get them there.

Some way downstream there was a small landing stage with a few boats moored to it, open type speedboats, but he needed a launch with at least a canopy under which Janwon could be hidden.

" Stay here," he told her again. " I shall be back as soon as I can. Here—" By the bole of an overhanging willow was a patch of primroses. " Pick some of these while I am gone. And don't speak to anyone," he warned, wishing her beauty was less obvious, her fair hair less bright.

She had picked a primrose and was examining it with far more interest than she had shown in any of the plastic flowers at the factory. She looked up and for an instant he could have sworn she smiled, then the light went out of her face and the gulf of humanity was between them again. Recklessly he took the hand that held the primrose and kissed it. Then ran swiftly downriver towards the boathouse.

He returned much later than he intended for the owner had been surly and reluctant to get a boat out of storage for an android, even one flashing a fat wad of notes in his hand, and when Clave reached the hollow where he had left Janwon, it was empty

He would never see her again. He knew it with such utter certainty that he did not bother to leave the boat and go and look for her. The subway was not far off, she was probably back at the factory by now, remembering nothing of that moment when, to him at least, it seemed that the real Janwon had smiled at him through the android mask. She had not even taken the primroses; they lay scattered on the grass where she had dropped them. He had failed her as he had failed Castor and as he would fail with every other android he tried to humanize.

And now he would have to move fast for with Janwon's evidence the police would not be long in picking up his trail and his father's agents too once they got wind of the affair. And he didn't want to be caught yet. At the back of his mind there was the beginning of understanding of the Starmen's purpose in pitching him so violently into the android problem and if he were right, then he could seek their help with the knowledge that this time it would not be withheld. But first he had to find them. He dared not return to the city; there was only one other place where they might conceivably be contacted, but no one, not even Perdens, had been able to tell him exactly where Harwell was.

He turned the bow of the launch upriver, wishing that he had been content to take one of the speedboats which would have done the journey in a fraction of the time.

But incredibly, there was no pursuit, and at dusk he came upon the spot he was looking for. He swung the bow hard round and the launch scraped over reeds into a narrow cutting, screened by thickets, and so overgrown that it was obvious no one had used it for a very long time.

The channel opened out into a pool at the far end of which stood a small building which, simulating timber, merged with the trees and was invisible except at close range. He cut the launch's engine and when leeway was lost used a boathook to punt his way to the bank. It occurred to him, as he approached the hut, that Castor who knew of its existence might well have revealed its whereabouts. Perhaps not volunteered the information but certainly, if questioned, he would have considered it his duty to speak. In that case, it was quite possible that a trap had already been laid and he was walking straight into it. But no other course was open to him. The hunted android had to disappear and for this to happen fresh

clothes were needed and something to erase or hide the telltale scar.

There was no trap, no sign of anything having been disturbed since he had locked the door behind him two years or so ago.

Making sure that all shutters were in place, he switched on the lights and set the heaters going to dispel the feeling of dampness and disuse then ran the water for a bath, a luxury which had been denied him for just on seven months. When he had bathed and put on fresh clothes he sat down in front of the mirror and studied himself. He looked more android than he had realised. The A brand was burnt right into the skin and seemed as fresh now as it had when he first saw it. And his eyes, what had they done to his eyes, and his face muscles? Whatever went on within his mind, outwardly there was no difference between him and—for instance—Castor except, he thought savagely, Castor had been a good deal more handsome.

He put a bandage round his head and painted his face in the fashion of the young men of his age. A pair of sun glasses would disguise the blankness of the eyes. His hair had been shorn and there was nothing he could do about that until it grew again ; a cap and upturned coat collar would perhaps deceive the casual observer. He had been in an accident, he would say, and had had to have his head shaved.

Before he ate he made sure that the little runabout kept for rare journeys to the nearest town was still in working order, for a quick getaway might be necessary. He knew that it would be wise to leave that night but he was dead beat, and there were things he wanted to do, maps to consult, letters to read. Although Perdens had never been to this hideout, principally because to do so would have entailed bringing his own android with him, and thus doubled the risk of betrayal, he had managed to write to Clave from time to time, giving him information which had it fallen into the hands of the authorities would have had serious consequences for both of them. Text books on physics, chemistry and astronomy, history and ethics. Even poetry of a type considered dangerous to adolescent minds. Before Perdens was due to appear before the Examiners, he had sent his one friend all his treasures for safe keeping, to be claimed later if possible. Clave, knowing the risk, but welcoming the chance to outwit authority, took

them gladly and hid them in the island hut. Not even Castor, he felt sure, had known of their existence.

Now he brought out all these books, letters and maps, and searched through them until he found what he wanted, or as much as he was likely to get. He knew roughly where to make for. He also retrieved a small but powerful handgun that he had taken from his father's armoury.

Then he flung himself on his bed and slept, but his sleep was broken by dreams of Janwon's face as she had smiled at him, and Castor's severed hand, and the Clave hounds that pursued him all through the night. And when day came, the dreams were still so much with him that he fancied he could still hear the baying of the dogs and then, with a start, he realised that he was dreaming no longer, that the baying was real, though not as yet at hand. Because he had travelled by water, the dogs would not have been able to pick up his scent unless they were actually outside the building and that obviously wasn't the case. Listening carefully he decided that they were on the other side of the river, probably boats were patrolling the water on either side, the dogs being landed from time to time to see what they could pick up.

Not waiting for food, Clave hurried to the runabout and pushed it outside. The baying had stopped which, though he had a morbid fear of the sound, was a drawback because it no longer told him how near or in what direction the pursuit had reached.

He pushed the perspex-domed vehicle through the undergrowth along the narrow track which ran between marshes for about a quarter of a mile to where it met a secondary road, not much used and consequently that much more dangerous if he was spotted. Perhaps, he thought as he pressed the starter, the enemy would not be expecting him to have access to a car and would watch the river rather than the roads . . . perhaps . . . perhaps. Resolutely he blanked his mind to probabilities and possibilities and concentrated on driving.

He reached the main highway without incident, without encountering any cars or pedestrians, and once he had joined the main stream of traffic he felt a little easier. The highway was wide and open and a police block, if any, would be seen well in time to give him warning. The gun lay on the seat beside him, the map he did not need for he had memorised as much as it could tell him.

As he finally left the main road he made sure he was not followed, but for the time being he seemed to have thrown off the pursuit.

The secondary road in turn was left for a lane and that for a track which obviously had seen no traffic for years. Here, if aircraft were used, he would instantly be spotted for no one except a mad android would use so rough a track. It became so overhung with brambles that he was finally forced to abandon the runabout. He pushed it as far under the hedge as he could, wishing that its colour was not so bright, and continued on foot, his gun held ready in his hand.

Two miles, or it may have been more, the track came to an end, the hedge on either side straggled away, and across the fields ahead of him Clave could see ruins, acres and acres of ruins, crumbling concrete and twisted girders, fantastic skeletons of steel like long dead dinosaurs.

He looked about him ; nothing moved except the cloud shadows over the fields and the grass under the wind. He walked quickly over the stubble and passed within the graveyard of the once world-famous atomic plant. If the Starmen had their headquarters here, as he had been told, there was no sign of it, no evidence of rebuilding, no footprints in the bare soil. But as he turned a corner of a gutted building, he found them waiting for him two men and a girl with red-gold hair. " Well done," said one of the Starmen, " we hoped you'd make for this place—but you moved so fast after leaving the factory that you caught us all napping."

Clave paid no attention to him, nor to the girl who was coming towards him with hands outstretched. He had seen the face of the other man who had not moved from the concrete slab on which he sat, who sat there looking at him quietly, waiting for his reaction.

" Hullo, Jon," said Castor.

But it couldn't be Castor, for Castor was dead, torn to pieces by his father's hounds and moreover Castor had had an A scarring his forehead, and nothing could remove that scar for it came from within, from the skull itself, not like his own which had been applied directly to the skin. And though the features were the same, there was a mobility about his face that no android mask was capable of, and the smile on the lips were reflected in the eyes. Then, as the man rose to his feet and walked to him, Clave saw the thin line where the artificial hand joined the wrist.

" You're human," he said flatly.

" As human as you are, Jon," came the quiet reply.

There was something not quite right about that answer and Clave, tired of riddles, cried : " What are you Starmen playing at ? What do you want of me ?"

" Come with us, Jon," said the Starman, a dark young man whom Clave thought he recognised, by the hair and build, as the redhead's partner at his interview. " We'll explain as we go. We can't stop here and talk." He stretched out and neatly relieved Clave of his gun.

Clave ignored him. " If you are human," he said to Castor, " why—"

" I didn't say I was, Jon." Castor hesitated. " You and I, all of us here are unconditioned androids."

" Oh, no !" cried Clave derisively. " You won't get anywhere with that line. You can mess my face about, scar it—"

" The scar was there before we activated it. We can render it inactive so that it will fade, as my own has faded, but the impression is still there on the temple."

" So it's blackmail," said Clave bitterly. " The Mayor's son an android ! There would be plenty of money forthcoming to keep that skeleton in the cupboard but it's not going to work. What do you take me for ?"

In his anger he struck out at Castor but this was no android passively accepting punishment and giving none in return, but a hard, well-trained fighter who knew how to land his blows where they would hurt most. In no time Clave was flat on his back, winded, and for the moment with all-fight knocked out of him.

" I expect that gave you a lot of satisfaction, Castor," said a girl's voice, edged with anger.

" None at all," came the reply, " but sometimes unpleasant facts are hammered home more easily through the body than through the mind. Believe me, the truth is going to hurt him far more than any beating I can give him."

Clave got to his knees and found himself looking into warm friendly grey eyes. " Look, Jon," said the redhead, " and you can call me Fiery like they all do. I'm android. And Fen," indicating the dark youth beside her. " We don't look so bad, do we ? Comparing us with the humans you've known, do we look any different ?"

" You're lying," he argued desperately, knowing quite well they weren't, for the evidence was slipping into place with nightmare slickness. The police had not been squared, their

tests revealed his android status ; and the eagerness of the hounds to run him down, for he was indeed no Clave ; but above all his father's words : Why didn't they give me a son of whom I could have been proud ?

He got to his feet, tucked in his shirt, and smoothed his hair. Castor took him by the arm.

" Listen, Jon, it's tough but you've got to take it, and incidentally we've got to get away from here quickly otherwise we'll all be trapped. But I'll tell you this much. Your father's own child was a monster, so because it would have been an undying shame for it to have become known, he pulled every wire he could and spent half his fortune to have an unconditioned baby android put into the Clave cradle. Chance picked on you."

" So it *is* blackmail."

" Oh, don't be a fool, Jon. Not blackmail but the compassion of one man, naturally born—you remember Exon, the old man who interviewed you ? He would not permit even one unconditioned android to go into the world alone, so—unknown of course to your father—it was arranged for me to enter the Clave household to keep an eye on you. But you've got to understand, Jon, I had to look after you within the limits of my android personality, I couldn't by any sign or hint suggest I was other than I appeared. For the sake of the others, I had to play my part."

" You would have let me face the Examiners," Clave said bitterly.

" I was ready to help if you had asked me outright, but right up to the end we couldn't be sure that your human upbringing hadn't destroyed you and that your flight from the Examiners was anything more than escapism. If you hadn't hit me so hard in the tunnel—" Clave winced, " you would have been spared a lot of unhappiness."

" And Castor a lot of pain," put in Fen. " You gave him a rough ride, Clave."

Castor silenced him with an impatient jerk of his head. " You think we've been harsh," he went on, " but think back, would you have believed us if you'd been told the truth before, would you have felt the same about the android system if you hadn't experienced it for yourself ?"

" I suppose not," said Clave wearily. " I don't know."

Fiery touched his arm. " We're human stock, Jon, you know that, don't you ? The only difference is that we were conceived in a laboratory test tube rather than in the body

of a woman—in some ways I think it less disgusting," she added meditatively, " although of course our children will have to go back to the old method." Her smile faded. "The girl you tried to save—she was very beautiful ?"

" She was—" but he couldn't go on. He was not ready to speak of Janwon yet to anyone.

Fen jumped down from the wall from which he had been scanning the surrounding countryside. " Time to go," he announced firmly. " Jon can be told the rest on the way. I'm glad you made it," he said, taking Clave's arm and urging him along, " you've certainly earned your passage to the stars."

" To hell with the stars !" cried Clave, wrenching his arm free. " I came to find you Starmen because I thought—"

" You thought what, Jon ?" prompted Castor, and suddenly they were staring at him, silent and intent.

" I thought you felt about the android system as I do. I want to make sure that Janwon never happens again, that the whole vile system is destroyed, even if it means pulling down civilisation—if that's what you call it—as well."

He broke off as a pair of arms encircled him and warm lips met his own.

" That's all we wanted to hear you say, Jon !" She hugged him and turned to the others, radiant and triumphant. "Didn't I tell you all along he was one of us ? We're not interested in the stars either, Jon, not while our brothers and sisters suffer here on earth—how could we leave them ?"

They walked on in silence towards the thicket where the Starmen had hidden their fast jet plane, then Clave said : " If I hadn't been chosen to be the Clave heir, I would have been conditioned with the rest of the batch ?"

Fen nodded. " We all owe our lives to chance—literally blind chance, for Exon is only able to smuggle a very few babies out of the Centre, so he never chooses but picks at random."

Clave shivered. " I can't put back the clock," he said. " I can't give Castor another hand or undo those years—"

" Never mind that," interrupted Castor, putting his arm round Clave's shoulders. " Hands can be replaced by workable substitutes but a conditioned mind is beyond salvation—that is the evil we are pledged to destroy. You're with us, Jon ?"

" I'm with you," Clave replied, thankful that for once his face could not show his feelings.

—Margaret Lowe