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★ REASON FOR LIVING by KENNETH BULMER ★

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REASON FOR LIVING

Dick Janvrin, modern-age jet pilot, occasionally found himself in a fantastic dream world—a world he always entered through a violet mist, and always arriving at the same 'place,' wherever that was. His adventures on the other side of the veil were vivid enough until they began to spill over into his everyday life—that's when he met Ysanne, who also had the same dreams, but from a different viewpoint.

By KENNETH BULMER

I.

The violet room was secret and mysterious. Situated somewhere on the face of the Earth, its surrounding labyrinth of passageways attracted no attention from outsiders. The woman who sat poised and severely erect, from the waist upward veiled in white diaphanous gauze with the rest of her body all hidden and swathed in shadow, looked young and sweet and fresh and glowed like a pure flame in an alcove of darkness.

She smiled compassionately upon the middle-aged man standing before her. Her gaze picked out the wrinkles in his flesh and the yellow in his eyes.

"You have been living well, Alfred." Her melodious voice filled the violet room with silvery sound and set small gilded bells tinkling along the tapestries.

He appeared embarrassed. "But, mother, that is the reason for living, surely? That's what you always told me when I was a youngster here."

" And you learned the lesson well, my boy. Now, what's this latest scrape you've got yourself into ?"

He scuffled his feet. " It is not important. I wouldn't have bothered you personally except that I happened to be near." He spoke as though discussing the weather ; what he had to say next didn't bother him, what was on his mind was the reaction his mother might take. " There's a girl. Young, daughter of very rich parents. Sir William Alberforce."

" Ah. I have heard of him. He distinguished himself in the Crimea and was wounded in the Mutiny."

" Yes. Virginia was born just after he returned from India." Alfred directed his gaze towards his mother. " She's going to have a child. Ours."

Her only reaction was to breathe a little more deeply and to still the vagrant smile on her lips. " Not so unimportant, then, Alfred, after all. You know the inflexible Laws of the Family."

" I know."

She seemed to ponder, her exquisite neck arched and her flesh taking on the transparent beauty of alabaster in the roseate lighting. Her slumbrous eyes of unplumbed violet, that no living man had seen blaze forth in their wrath, were veiled, contemplative and it seemed to Alfred that a light somewhere in the room had gone out. Then the coral of her lips curved, smiled ; white pointed teeth gleamed for a tiny fragment of time and Alfred caught the miniscule flick of a pink-tipped tongue.

" I think this is business which requires Erech."

Alfred shivered. He tried not to think of Virginia. When Erech entered, smiling his blasphemous smile, the woman said dispassionately : " Erech, there is work. A brat to be dealt with. Alfred will advise you of the details." She waved them away. As they turned to go, she said roguishly : " You were always hot blooded and with a wicked roving eye, Alfred. But you were a good boy to come and tell me so soon."

Alfred never could explain the odd lightening effect he felt whenever he left his mother or broke contact with her. On his way back to England by paddle steamer he was contacted by his mother and Erech. She was in an icy rage. Her thoughts brought a sweat out on Alfred's brow. As she

explained, Erech's thoughts mumbled abashed confirmations in Alfred's mind.

"Only once before has the Family missed a brat born unwanted and outside. Now, again, it has happened, and this time we have to thank the growing science of these people."

The story was simple. For all Sir William Alberforce's great reputation as a soldier and administrator and his exceptional record in India, he had been broken in the marts of the world and the Stock Exchange wanted no more of him. He could, of course, have blown his brains out. Instead, he had packed himself and his family off, the telegraph giving him ample warning and time for preparation, and the churning wheels of the paddle steamers taking his family—under a new name and with a salvaged wreck of their fortunes—to some unknown destination which might have been anywhere in the expanding commercial empire of Great Bitain. He was not traced ; either by his creditors or by Alfred's mother and Erech.

But Victorian morality could not be flouted. He might have run out on his business associates ; he could not condone his daughter's flagrant bringing forth of a child born out of wedlock and to a father no-one knew. And so, in June of the year 1880, Virginia Alberforce—who was no longer Alberforce—made her own way into a cold and indifferent world carrying her infant whom she had called Alfred.

Dick Janvrin pulled the jet fighter delicately over on her back, dropped a wing and began the plunge down the greased chute of gravity towards the ground six miles beneath his flashing wings. He sat relaxed and comfortable. This was old stuff now, routine, with the sound-barrier a very ragged and shredded curtain. He had no premonition this time that the run was going to be different.

He was watching his machmeter with one eye and the rest of the necessary equipment with the other without consciously seeing them. It was a trick of the high-speed trade and left his mind free to grasp what was going on from the mass of information flowing in.

Control came in briefly, a quick : "We've got you spotted, Dick. Bring her out over towards Abingdon way."

"Have one lined up on the bar for me," Janvrin said cheerfully. "Thirsty work. Out."

Beneath him England was the familiar patchwork of green and russet and winding roads and streams. Details began to open out, crawl away as the ground rushed up.

A nice pleasant afternoon doodle round.

And then the violet veil encompassed him. It came swiftly this time, thickening in clouds round his sight, dulling the brightness of his instruments, slowing the sweep of pointers. It was as though someone had sprayed his visor with purple paint.

He shut his eyes tightly, squeezing them until the blood bulged against the lids, then he blinked four or five times, quickly, desperately. He knew it was no use. The veil this time was thick. Thick and pressing and calling.

Clear above the shriek of air past him and the shock waves of his own descent, thrust inwards—his exterior sound was still trailing him down somewhere above—and the roaring whine of his engine, resounded the sonorous clangour of the bronze gong. Three times that great clarion called.

The outlines of his cockpit faded. His ranked instruments vanished in the violet haze. All noise was centred on the last rippling echoes of the gong.

And then he was standing in the stone-walled corridor again, feeling the warm humid breeze and staring at the languorously swaying violet curtains. They were cunningly made from some heavy yet feathery material and little lights glinted as they swayed and tiny gilded bells tinkled.

He was still wearing his flying kit, heavy and cumbersome and making him sweat. The power lines and phone cable and oxy lines led off somewhere, just where, he could not tell. There he was, a fighter pilot in full flying kit, standing in an underground stone corridor with the warmth of a tropic breeze playing round him staring at a violet curtain.

He felt furiously angy.

It had to happen now. He stamped clumsily forward, feeling wet and sticky, and snatched from the wall the curved and shining sword with the ivory hilt and blazing ruby, buckled the diamond-studded scabbard about him and then cursed aloud.

" Not even a blasted shield this time ! Oh, hell !"

He thrust his left arm into the partition dividing the curtains, swept them apart, stepped over the headless man he had killed when he was sixteen, and clumped angrily into the room beyond. He would have to hurry. There was very little

time to do anything when you were diving down at Mach one and a half, least of all run the length of a carpeted room, insufferably hot and with incense burners pouring out their heady and sour smells.

He dismissed the notion of opening his face mask at once. You just didn't do that in a jet fighter, even if the stink of incense was foul in your nostrils.

He skirted the brass lion in the centre of the room, careful to avoid the trap door with the sharks foaming beneath and kept a watchful eye on the screen just beyond. From the screen, a wooden, red painted affair, ten long slender lances thrust forth. If he went too close there might be an eleventh, and he had no wish to be on the receiving end of that keen point.

Just how far had he to progress this time before he could get back to his fighter and pull her out of that Mach plus dive ?

The four snakes he had killed when he was eighteen still lay, all gold and glittery, on the edge of the patch of blood, shining red and unclotted yet, from the kneeling man with his hands to his stomach. He'd been despatched when Janvrin was seventeen and a half and he still recalled the gasp of horror that had forced itself past his blue lips when the great sword had gone into that soft flesh. One of these times he meant to push the fellow over so that he could lie comfortably at ease in death ; but now there very pointedly was not time. Janvrin, panting in his flying gear, began to run.

Only the faint preliminary whir saved him.

He saw the stone in the grey wall pivot on its axis, the shadow beyond with two liquid eyes gleaming, the flash and scuffle of furtive movement. With purely reflex action, he ducked. As his flying-booted feet skidded on a loose rug scattered on the carpet, a long arrow whistled over his shoulder and buried itself audibly in the kneeling corpse.

Before he could turn his mind to the assassin hidden behind the wall—a new one, that !—he was frantically trying to prevent the skid turning into a catastrophic slide towards the cavernous hole which yawned, suddenly, at his feet.

His trampling feet were pounding as though he were trying to run up an escalator the wrong way. The rug went on moving forward. He gave a huge gasp and flung himself backwards. The instant that he landed on the carpet, safe,

for the moment, from falling down the hole, the rug he had trodden reached its mid point, and slid the rest of the way into darkness beneath his feet.

The sounds that reached him were not pleasant.

A smile touched his face. Damn them all to hell ! He had a fighter to pull out. This must be the brennschluss point this time ; the arrow attack allied with the abruptly appearing trap. Now perhaps he could get back. He could never remember before feeling such anger for the violet veil. Levering himself up onto hands and knees, he stared towards the far end of the chamber.

Down there, past the dangling noose which had nearly got him when he was nineteen, and the liger with the broken lance in its belly—the splintered butt was further along where he had kicked it when he was nineteen and a half—the shimmering violet mist still writhed and beckoned. He felt the same insatiable longing to pass through that veil. He could feel the pangs of superhuman desire tearing at his entrails. If there was one thing in the world—or out of it—that he wanted it was to pass that violet mist and drink of the pleasures beyond.

And, after that, to deal with the devils who called him away from the world he knew to this madhouse of death and terror. That blasted jet fighter ! He'd be into the ground like a smashed tomato can with a dynamite charge under it if he didn't hurry. To hell with the violet mist !

Janvrin pushed himself up all the way, taking a quick but careful note of the particular stone that had turned so treacherously on its axis—he'd deal with that fellow next time—and retraced his steps. He had just reached the violet curtain when he paused, held by some emotion he could not define.

He turned, still holding the curtain, and stared back into the room.

It was a strange, eerie, familiar place to him. He could see and catalogue events that had happened over the years and yet, there they all were, as fresh and new as though but just occurred. The low roof of gilded timber screening off the rock of the subterranean chamber seemed to press in on him. Wreaths of incense smoke curled. The bright brassy lion gleamed. He shook the mood of nostalgia off and swung back to the curtain, stepping over the headless man.

As the curtains rose, creasing in his gloved hands, he turned swiftly once more, aware of a prickling in his back that did not come from the accumulated sweat.

For a fraction ; for an instant of time so short that if he had blinked he would have missed it, an oval pearly light gleamed in the room. The oval of radiance lay against the right-hand wall, covering and blotting out the glass case with the bamboo legs which normally stood there. Janvrin stared for a heartbeat into that pearly light as though peering into a window.

He saw her, her figure filled his eyes, and then the light faded, ripened to peach, and died.

She had been real ; he was sure of that. Her golden hair—golden ? Surely, auburn ? Her naked flesh, the wide full sympathy of her smile, the softness of her bosom, her arms upraised, emphasising, entreating, yearning, demanding—demanding what ? Him ?

Janvrin took one hesitant step towards the bamboo and glass case. Then a mental image of a machmeter and an altimeter flitted into his consciousness. Hell ! Abingdon must be down there somewhere and he didn't want to smear a few family's houses all over the landscape.

He ripped the violet veil aside and unbuckled the sword that he had not, this time, needed to use. As the veil parted sunlight blanched into his eyes. A tremendous roaring and buffetting shook him. His hands on the stick were gentle, firm, coaxing and yet moving back inexorably.

Slowly, reluctantly at first, and then with a smooth precision, the fighter came out of her dive. Her platform swept low over houses and woods, streams and bridges and brought white faces staring upwards like daisies in a field.

" Red One ! Red One ! Are you all right !" Control, frantic. " Dick ! Answer ! Answer ! Over."

Shakily, he said : " I'm okay, Pete. Don't fret."

" Thank God you came to. Blackout ?"

" Tell you when I've sunk that one on the bar."

And Dick Janvrin drove his jet across the sky towards the airfield. He could still taste that damned incense.

II.

Most young men dressed in flying suits and with their faces and heads obscured by the globulous swelling of crash helments look, apart from details of height, very much alike. Dick Janvrin could always be picked out. His parachute, any equipment, anything at all, that he carried was like a feather in his grasp. He'd had fun poked at him at school because of his great strength and until he'd learned to control it he'd never understood why men wanted to be strong.

At times, it still bothered him. He was just an ordinary, tough young English fighter pilot and it had never occurred to him that his strength gave him power over others ; he was always at pains to conceal it, as though it were a weakness of character.

He stood holding the nuthouse door-knob in his hand and took three deep breaths. The interview with the C.O. had not been as friendly as it might and this call for a special check-up annoyed more than alarmed him. He'd finished by telling the C.O., rather foolishly, that, anyway, manned jet fighters were obsolete and they'd all be pressing buttons soon. The C.O., who had flown Spitfires, hadn't taken kindly to that.

Janvrin opened the door and went in.

Doctor Merridew was wise in the ways of young men under strain. He'd helped them as they'd screamed out their fears and then, apologetically, climbed aboard the Lancs to see about Berlin and Hamburg and Ploesti. Now he had the jetty-boys to deal with. His thin fingers and thin face belied the strength of body and purpose within him.

" Blackout, was it, Janvrin ?" Merridew smiled across the cluttered table. " Nothing unusual in that. Perhaps we ought to find out just why it happened, though. Don't you agree ?"

" It was just one of those things," Janvrin said. He was used to all this. This trick psyclist could prod and probe and he'd find out that Flying Officer Richard Janvrin was a hundred percent efficient, category A 1 A. And then he could go back on the squadron and get on with the job. Any mention of violet veils would get him locked in the looney bin good and fast, that was a cert, too.

Merridew went about his job deftly and methodically. All the usual tests. Janvrin took them all with philosophic calm,

well aware that his whole attitude was coming in for just as sharp a scrutiny. He held the mercury column steady until he became bored.

" Very good." Merridew gave him a shrewd look. " Just try it with the other hand whilst I couple in—"

Janvrin lost the rest of that. Up in the angle of wall and ceiling a little haze was thickening, growing, sprouting tendrils and spilling down towards him. Violet. It flowed down over his head and shoulders, blotting out the world. He remembered something about mercury and held out his hand. He took the cool tube.

The objects in the room were blurred by the violet haze. Janvrin kept all his personality locked to his hand holding the mercury tube and tried to urge his lungs to keep up the pressure as steadily as possible, as he always could ; the immense lung capacity he possessed never failed—never until the violet haze blocked his ears and eyes and made him tremble and tense, awaiting what might stalk towards him from the fog.

This was the sudden one. This was the one when he had to poise himself, ready for that last minute, split-second leap aside. But, equally, this was the one that he could drive off ; by ignoring, rout. He shut his eyes. Something clattered past like a Conqueror with a loose track.

Doctor Merridew said : " What is the matter, Janvrin ? Are you ill ?"

Janvrin kept his eyes closed. It was no use trying to keep the mercury steady any longer and he let his breath out in a great sigh.

" I'm all right, sir. Nothing to worry about."

But, in Doctor Merridew's book, there was something to worry about, as Janvrin found out. He chanced opening his eyes. The room was normal. Merridew was bending over him, concern turning his face into the visage of a preternaturally aged monkey. " What is it, Janvrin ?"

" A dizzy spell," Janvrin said, cursing inside, knowing it was the wrong thing to say. But what else could he say ? That he was being chased by monsters springing from a purple-peril type hallucination ? " I'm all right."

The check-up proceeded again, with Meridew watchful and quiet. Janvrin was glad to escape. He went across to the Mess and was just putting his abdominal tissues around their second beer when the C.O. called for him.

The interview was short and to the point. That night Janvrin caught the last train to London with orders to report to a Doctor Dyce, of whom he'd never heard, sharp and early the following morning. There was talk in the wind that he might lose his commission ; because, of course, he could never become a penguin and take a desk job.

Standing undecided on the platform he realised that the prospect of a lonely night did not appeal. On an impulse he entered a phone booth and called up Nigel Simmons.

" Dick Janvrin ? By all my blood-sucking aunts, Dick ! Where are you ?"

Janvrin told him. He suggested a few beers.

" You'll have to come round to my place, Dick. Too late, really for gadding about."

The taxi was still in sight when Nigel Simmons appeared at the top of the flight of steps bordered by iron railings and took Janvrin's bag in one hand and shook him heartily with the other. They went into Simmon's flat, the usual bachelor snuggery in a turning off Piccadilly. With beers in their fists, they got down to comparing notes.

" Two years, Dick. Two whole years."

" Been busy, Nigel. Jets."

" So I heard," There was a touch of the wistful about Simmons as he said that. His daily attire was a bowler hat, a white paper collar fresh each day, a silver and grey silk tie, an impeccable dark grey pepper-and-salt suit, almost but not quite from Saville Row, and an umbrella that would not be unrolled in a typhoon. He sat in a bank during the day and attempted to imbibe the traditions of business. Janvrin, knowing him, knew that that was where he belonged. But he was a capital fellow and a devil in a scrum.

Janvrin told him, between storing the dead man under the sink, why he was in town.

" So you're going psycho, eh, Dick ?"

" No. Of course not. Just a check-up. Have them all the time on the squadron."

" Not with old Dyce you don't."

" You know him ?"

" Know his daughter. At least," Simmons heaved the mother and father of comic-Romeo sighs, " I wish I knew her better. A doll, I think, might be one way of expressing it."

" What would the bank say if they heard you expressing yourself like that ? Tut, tut, Nigel."

" Ah, but you haven't seen her, old boy !"

" What about Dyce ?"

Simmons blew the froth from a beer. " Biggest nut mechanic in the business. He'll have you telling him about the time you and the girl-next-door went picking daisies when you were five years old. Then he'll tell you why your left eyelid twitches when you see a daisy." Simmons looked at Janvrin over the rim of the glass. " Things *are* all right with you, Dick ? I mean, flying those damn jets, and—well, you know. You were always a bit secretive at school."

" Yep, I was." Janvrin remembered his mental struggles as he had encountered the violet veil. " Characters, I'm told, old man, vary from person to person. What a dull world we'd have if they didn't."

" All the same, Dyce is Dyce."

" Just a check up."

" Promise to call me, anytime, Dick. I'll come running. You know that."

Janvrin raised his glass. " You're a funny sort of so-and-so, Nigel. This is a celebration, not a funeral. But, I promise. Now, come on, drink up. There are still some unopened yet."

Which explained the way Janvrin felt when he entered Doctor Dyce's reception room and stared politely but through slitted lids at the charming young lady whose head appeared to sprout from a bowl of daffodils. She smiled at him.

" Flying Officer Janvrin ? Good-morning. Doctor Dyce won't keep you. He's just seeing someone out."

" Miss, please," Janvrin said hollowly. " Don't shout."

She looked at him and then her smile curved into the glory of a subdued but mischevious chuckle. Her eyes were bright. " I understand. Seltzer ?"

" No thanks. Just peace and quiet."

A door banged. Janvrin winced. A man bustled into the reception room, darted a keen look at Janvrin, who was wearing civilian clothes, and crossed to the desk. He was of middle-height, vigorous, upright, with a thick mane of blue-black hair, and a face which at first sight did not appear to possess a single wrinkle, line or sign of age or experience.

Even his eyes were hooded. He said a few low-toned words to the girl, and then turned with a smile.

" Richard Janvrin ? I'm Doctor Dyce. Come in, please."

They went into the surgery. The den. The couch room. There was a couch there, too. Janvrin felt himself tense up as he saw it. It was a perfectly automatic reflex. If the violet veil story got out there'd be hell to pay.

Dyce began with pleasant small talk. He walked over and sat on the couch, denting the brown leather and sending a radiating pattern of shining curves spreading over the upholstery. Janvrin found himself sitting at the desk, refusing a cigarette, and answering politely. His head ached abominably. When Dyce discovered—after the briefest of time—that his patient had a hangover, he clucked and prescribed. Janvrin drank the concoction, grimaced, and at once began to feel better. Spurious psychology, he told himself, and then chuckled. The right man had given him it !

The first session was merely a question of integrating his personality with that of Dyce's ; in other words, the psychoanalyst sized up his man and began tentatively to chart some general regimen for subsequent sessions. Janvrin had had some experience of head shrinkers and now, despite his reservations and mental barriers, he found himself warming to this quiet-spoken, dark, intense man.

Dyce indicated a thick folder. " The Duke of York, I think it was, who instituted personal records of officers. Met with terrible opposition. I don't care what use the military make of the information in there, to me it is the first hazy map of a man. What I want to know is far more pleasant and informal than that."

" Why was I sent to you ?"

Dyce lolled back in his chair and stared down his nose at Janvrin. He was to come to recognise the gesture as a defence mechanism, a gimmick created because of Dyce's reluctance to lift his eyelids ; but this first time it struck him as arrogant. He bristled.

Then, gently, Dyce said : " You blacked out, Dick—" he was on first name terms already. " The Royal Air Force don't seem to like it when expensively-trained top-line pilots blackout for no apparent reason."

" Is that all ?"

Dyce knew what he meant. " Not quite. You blacked out again, in Doctor Merridew's office."

" I did not !"

Dyce brought his head down and began to doodle on his knee with his thumbs, making houses. Unable to prevent himself, Janvrin watched the white, supple hands.

" I'm afraid, Dick, that you did. I know Merridew. He's a good man. Got any worries ?"

The machinegun question didn't faze Janvrin.

" No."

" That's good. Most people have, you know. Like to tell me why you joined the Air Force ?"

Janvrin told him. Because flying had gripped him and he couldn't tear free. He answered other casual, general questions, realising that the psychoanalyst was building up a mental picture of his patient. Patient ! Well, he supposed he was. But he knew he hadn't blacked-out in Merridew's place ; he couldn't have, he'd been too busy dealing with that damned violet fog.

" That's right," he said in answer to a question. " I just missed the war, and Korea, too. I was still training. My father ? Oh, he lives in a pile of ruins in the Isles of Scilly and leads the life of Riley—or is it Reilly ? Mother ? Dead. I never really knew her. The old man's been a brick."

" How old is your father, Dick ?"

Janvrin had his stock answer. " Oh, the old boy's getting on now. But he's as spry as a sparrow. Rides a bike up and down the lanes, and the locals think he's dotty—" Janvrin stopped. *That* wasn't the right thing to say here, at all. " I mean," he said self-consciously, " it takes muscle and guts to get a bike up some of the lanes."

" How old is he, Dick ?"

Janvrin uncrossed and re-crossed his legs. He looked at the walls. He looked at the floor. " He's seventy-eight."

" And you're twenty-five. I see."

" What about de Lesseps ?"

" Take it easy, Dick. I'm helping you. You know as well as I do that this blackout wasn't quite, well, let's say quite on the level, shall we ? You know and I know. I'm here to help."

That set the pattern for many of the succeeding days. Dyce probing, prying, making innocuous things like how old his father and he were sound important. Dyce thrusting his enquiring tentacles into Janvrin's mind. And Janvrin fighting

desperately to keep those fingers away from the central fact of the violet veil. Panic swept him when he tried to reckon the cost of exposure. They'd take his wings. As surely as the reality of the violet mist—they'd take his wings.

It took him a fortnight before he realised that Dyce *was* trying to help. He saw that when that information got over to Dyce the psychoanalyst looked discouraged.

"Look, doc. I know you're trying to help me, so—"

"So why should I take it hard? Good Lord, Dick, I should have had you with that knowledge in your mind within the first hour! And a simple technique like that has taken this long."

"I thought the hard part was getting the patient's confidence?"

"That's different. You have confidence in me. But you only know now, you only *feel* now, that I want to help you."

It made Janvrin feel two emotions. A guilt feeling that he couldn't play square, couldn't, daren't, tell about his other world. And a revulsion against the treatment. Although Dyce so far had commenced no treatment, had begun no hypnotics or drugs. He smiled as he said: "If you put a patient under hypnosis and dredge up what's in his mind before he's ready to face it, Dick, you rather tend to sink him in his own muck. There's nothing in a man he need be ashamed of. But he's got to know that before he faces the reality of self awareness."

III.

Going back to his hotel that evening, Janvrin felt the first idea touch his mind that perhaps he could tell Dyce. The psychoanalyst would pounce on it and work his way through until he found the root causes. Then he'd mumble his mumbo-jumbo and the world beyond the violet curtain would disappear. And that, indubitably, would be a good thing. Janvrin had not had an attack, as he'd come to call the times when he went into the other world, since coming to London. It was usual after a move to experience a hiatus in the attacks. And he felt a little restless because of it. He remembered the man with the bow behind the trick wall.. And he remembered the oval of pearly light and the girl . . .

Oh, yes, it would be good thing if Dyce rid him of the world beyond the veil, wouldn't it? Or would it?

He felt pleased when Nigel Simmons called up and instructed him to anoint himself for a blind date. " She's a peach, old boy. And, here's the triumph. I've talked Carol Dyce into pairing it with men. Tra-la-la ! We're in the big-time, old boy !"

Janvrin's first reaction was to call it off. He felt reluctant to meet Dyce's daughter. It might so easily be part of a deep-laid scheme to 'observe him in his natural haunts.' And old Nigel would play up for all he was worth.

In the event he dressed with care and joined the party. Simmons was sitting at a round table in the bar, looking as though he'd changed places with a tailor's dummy.

" The girls are due here any minute, Dick."

" You got me into this, Nigel. If she's wall-eyed—"

" Cross my heart, old boy. A peach." He leaned forward and lowered his voice. " I dunno whether or not I should tell you this, Dick. But I think it'll help things if I do. This girl—Ysanne Temple—needs just a wee bit of gentling. She's attending at Dyce's, nothing serious, I understand, just a few troubled dreams. Carol's quite taken with her."

" Like you are with Carol. Mug."

" Can't help biology, old son. Anyway, I'm serious about this, Dick. You're level-headed enough. Take it easy with her."

" Sure enough. What's her problem ?"

Simmons laughed and beckoned, standing up. From the corner of his mouth, he said : " Here they are. Smile, man ! Oh, she dreams about violet rooms and mists and things."

Janvrin rose in a dream. One thought dominated his mind, roared in his ears, crescendoed in the inner recesses of his brain.

Someone else shared his world beyond the veil !

He could see nothing. He didn't know whether he was frightened, jealously angry at another's intrusion into his private dream-world, or glad that another was there to support him. But, most of all, frightened. Scared. Panic-stricken.

The violet world must be real !

He'd never before cared to face the problem.

And then the second idea hit him. The girl ! It must be the golden, auburn haired girl in the pearly oval. It must ! It must !

He painted a smile over his face and brought the hotel bar back into focus, swirling as he blinked his eyes. Blood pounded in his veins. He very much wanted to sit down.

Two girls threaded their way between chairs and tables. Both slim, both beautiful, both immaculately dressed and coiffeured, both superbly turned out by their cosmetician. Masculine heads rippled in a turning wave behind them. Simmons was bursting with pride and eagerness.

Two young ladies, straight from the pages of the glossy magazines. One, Carol, with dark hair that matched her father's black crop. The other, Ysanne, with brunette hair that caught the light and threw it back in reflected gleams.

Neither with flowing golden or auburn locks.

In a daze, Janvrin acknowledged the introductions and despite his fuzzy awareness, the thoughts clamouring for admittance into his overloaded brain, he was thrillingly conscious of Ysanne's magnetism. In that second, gold hair or no gold hair, he knew that this was his mate torn from destiny and shaped only for him. Then they were sitting down and chattering gaily and sipping the drinks hovering waiters had rushed over at Simmons' imperious call.

Trivialities flowed with the wine. Lights blazed and scents titillated their nostrils. They ate the food of emperors and gods. The talk flowed on, deeper now, with undercurrents of wisdom. They talked, Janvrin realised dimly, as any young foursome must talk when life is young and hearts are gay and food and wine and music fill the world with gaiety. And the fact that he was in love came as a most inconvenient nuisance.

Because of that, he bridled his tongue. Mindful of Simmons' warning, he treated the girl as though she were glass encased. And Ysanne laughed and her eyes shone and the world became, for Janvrin, a wondrous place. But he could not talk to her of the violet mist. He perceived that she was conquering a fear, a remnant, perhaps, of haunted nights fighting against the world he knew so well.

Why, then, had he never seen her in that world ?

Had there been horror for her in that violet world beyond the limits of the known ? He wanted hungrily to know. But he bridled his tongue and chattered and chaffed and drank of her beauty and vivacity and loveliness.

The glowing stars that one day he or his pals would reach when their jets were transformed into space-conquering

ships sprinkled the sky above them as they tumbled laughing onto the pavement. They were flushed with wine and dancing, with good conversation and the full life. In the taxi it seemed natural, when they had seen Carol home, to go on and all together see Ysanne home to her hotel. And then it was the most natural thing in the world for them all to see Simmons home to his bachelor flat off Piccadilly. So then, of course, they decided they'd all better see Janvrin home.

And so there they all were again, outside his hotel, laughing and giggling and thinking that they'd better see Carol home—all together, of course.

They might, with the friendly assistance of the cabby have kept it up all night.

On the second round, as the taxi swirled round a deserted Eros standing poised with his cunning bow which had loosed four shafts true that night, Janvrin looked out of the cab window and saw the familiar violet mist cloud down over him.

The bronze gong struck its three great clarion notes. The earthly world faded, slowed, disappeared.

The sword was where he had dropped it, the ruby-studded hilt projecting from the foot of the curtains. Gilded bells tinkled. He stood there in the stone corridor, swaying slightly from the champagne, his hair disarranged, staring in frowning concentration at the curtain. Then he remembered and thrust through, stepping over the headless man. The brass lion winked at him in the hidden lighting. The red-painted wooden roof pressed down, concentrating the musk of the incense. He could hear the thrashing of the sharks. As never before he was struck by the silence, the eerieness the other-worldly atmosphere of this place.

Nothing was changed. The kneeling, disembowelled man sprouted now the long arrow that had come from the hidden archer in the wall. The trap that had swallowed the rug gaped open and black. Even the splintered wood of the lance embedded in the liger shone yellow and fresh.

Confused thoughts struggled in his mind. Thoughts that he had filed away and forgotten when first he had begun to visit this place. No fear touched him. The bubbles of champagne deafened his sensory equipment and he staggered rather than walked across the carpeted floor. Caution hit him as he saw the gold and glittering snakes. He was in no condition to tackle any serious opposition.

He kept his eyes firmly away from the violet veil down at the bottom of the apartment. He could feel traceless fingers plucking at his mind from the second curtain, calling him, imploring him, cajoling him. He fought grimly to keep his mind away from that siren call and in that struggle his sobriety returned.

The girl !

Swiftly, he turned to the glass and bamboo case.

No pearly light glowed there now. He strode across. The case might have come from some museum. Innocuous, placid, it stood against the wall. He groped carefully along the sides, the top, the legs, seeking some hidden button which might release the energy needed to trigger open the portal in the oval of light. His fingers found nothing but glass, slightly warm, and the smooth, oily feel of bamboo.

He looked down into the case.

The first quick shock of revulsion was followed by a calmer appraisal of the mud-filled skull, with its wired-on lower jaw—the wire ran under the jaw and up through the gaping nostril hole—and the few straggling wisps of black hair still lankly lying on the cranium. He'd seen similar ancestor fetishes in museums. But those had usually been given a shell, pressed into the mud, to form a blank, staring eye from the empty socket. This skull had two oval mirrors fitted into the eye sockets.

He bent over, staring with fascination. A link sprang into being, chaining him to the eyes. In the instant that he stopped, an arrow rustled past above his head and splintered against the wall. It fell clanging on the glass.

Janvrin did not move. The second arrow passed through the sleeve of his jacket. He remained motionless.

He stared at—in—through—those glass eyes. The skull exploded outwards, engulfing him. He saw, volleying towards him like the circle of light at the end of a tunnel, bright in the encircling darkness, a woman's face.

And of the face he saw only the eyes. They were deep, mysterious, violet and filled with unholy wisdom. They sucked the soul from his body ; they took his being and filtered it through a sieve that promised untold delights and then, tauntingly, mischievously, refused the consummation and left him pale and gasping and empty.

He knew he would never forget those violet eyes.

The darkness around him that was purely a personal phenomenon was pierced excruciatingly by fire. A line of scarlet flame ran along his left arm and danced gleefully upon

his shoulder. And the leaping flames took on the semblance of dripping blood.

The darkness whirled around him with the beat of unseen wings and closed in suffocatingly, pressing the breath from his body and clamping his lungs in a vice of fire. His brain was at once ice and flame. He was falling. He was pitching head over heels down into some violet-luminous world of hidden shapes and keening sound. And then all the lights and all the noises faded and died and he slid away with only the remembrance of those calm, wise, compelling and promising violet eyes.

IV.

Voices. Bed. Smell of flowers. Doctor Dyce's incisive words.

" He's coming round now."

A vagrant fluttering of breath on his cheeks. Someone bending over him. He raised his eyelids.

It was like stumbling into the beginning of a nightmare that you'd just finished dreaming.

The twin depths of violet caught and engulfed his mind. He had not the strength to complete the scream that he wanted to fling past those eyes, to warn the world, to drag himself away like a crippled creature of the fields and yet, with just as strong and insistent a desire, to fling himself forward and let his whole ego sink into the promised bliss. A little whimper bubbled past his lips.

Doctor Dyce : " All right. Everything is all right now, Dick. You can relax." And then, with deliberate meaning : " You're with us now. You're with friends."

The violet eyes had vanished, maddeningly disappearing in the instant he had blinked as Dyce had spoken. He thought the real world was conspiring to cheat him of the mystery and its solution. He rolled his head over on his left ear, weakly. Dyce and Nigel Simmons were smiling at him.

The light over his bed hurt his eyes as he turned his head onto his right ear. Carol Dyce and Ysanne Temple were staring at him, smiling uncertainly, their white fingers meshed.

He hunched himself up in the bed and winced as pain flowed along his left arm. He felt his shoulder tenderly with his right hand. As he pressed tentatively, he felt pain.

" Those damned arrows. The fellow winged me."

" What was that, Dick ?"

He jerked his hand down. " Nothing, doc."

Dyce pulled down his shirt collar—he was coatless in the bed—and said : " Can you see this ?"

Janvrin looked. There was a purple splotch about the size of a half-crown in the pit of his shoulder. It was slightly tumescent and shone.

" You've another on the back, just like it. Any idea what might have caused them ?"

Janvrin licked his lips. " No idea at all."

Simmons gave a little exclamation. " Come off it, Dick ! What was all that jabber about violet eyes ?"

Janvrin caught the quick gesture with which Dyce silenced Simmons. So he'd been rambling in his sleep ! Or, maybe, there'd been hypnosis wrapped up in it, hypnosis from a place beyond the confines of the everyday world.

" Take no notice of my future son-in-law, Dick. At least—take no notice yet."

" I say—" Simmons protested ; but Carol Dyce laughed him down and somehow, with that short tinkle of laughter, sanity came back to the room. As he had guessed, he was lying on the leather-covered couch in Dyce's surgery. The clock said something about half-past seven ; but that couldn't be right. He sat up, levering his body with his right arm.

" I'm hungry," he said. " And that clock's wrong."

" Uh, huh." Simmons shook his head. " We were scared out of our wits when you keeled over, Dick. Best thing was to drag your body straight back here. You've been laying there, white as a sheet, for five hours."

He must have been unconscious. He'd never been in the world beyond the violet curtain for more than ten minutes of Earth time, however long the events had lasted there. He smiled. " I'll take your word for it. But I'm okay now."

He looked at Ysanne. She had not spoken ; yet he was vitally conscious of questions bubbling in her mind that only he could answer. Her face was in shadow. He could not read her expression. But her whole figure and poise betokened a tensed unhappiness, an apprehension of the future.

That impression was heightened when he met her again later that morning in Dyce's reception room. Janvrin was shaved and immaculate, without any left-over feelings from

the night before except his determination to make Ysanne a permanent part of his future life. And yet here she was, pinched and white, alone and miserable.

" Sorry about last night, Ysanne," Janvrin said, pitching it easily. " Made an utter fool of myself and upset you into the bargain."

" It's not that, Dick. It's—" she would not look at him. " Never mind."

" Was it something I was rambling about ?"

" Yes."

Janvrin realised he had come to a decision-point. He could smile sweetly and laugh the whole thing off, following Ysanne's obvious desires. Or—he could probe and dig and turn up God-knew-what dark secrets. Being himself, he could not shirk an unpleasant task because it was unpleasant. He could only go on and hope he was doing the right thing.

" I was babbling about violet eyes," he spoke as casually as he could and yet there was a quiver of anticipatory excitement in his voice. " So Nigel said. Deuced queer."

" I—I wouldn't worry about it, Dick."

Janvrin knew that Dyce would be out in a moment to call for Ysanne. He had turned up here early, for just such a chance to talk. He said : " There are many things in the world that we don't understand, Ysanne. We can't decipher all the writing that Nature has been patiently setting-up over the past few million years. But there's absolutely nothing to be scared of."

" Isn't there ? Dick, you've got to be careful. If I told you some of the thoughts seething in my head—I've a real headache that pills can't touch—I'm frantic—and yet—and yet—Dick, I know you're in terrible danger."

" Maybe. Maybe not. You always take a chance when you go up in a jet, you know."

" I didn't mean that."

" I know you didn't."

" Which," interrupted Doctor Dyce, " is an apposite place for an interested observer to abridge your conversation."

They both jumped and then, sheepishly followed him into the surgery. When they were comfortable, Dyce said : " Both of you have heart-searching truths trembling on your tongues, I know. But I think it would be best if you heard them from an outsider, who is not prejudiced and whose viewpoint is not distorted."

" I'll listen," Janvrin said, with a glance at Ysanne. She nodded. " Go on."

" Very well, then. We have here an example of two people suffering from the same hallucination." He raised a finger suddenly, cutting off their startled protests. " Wait. Hallucination is the right word. It does not mean that there is anything seriously wrong with either of you. What it does mean is that some physiological effects are having similar results in your bodies and minds. Tests have been carried out with various drugs—L.S.D., mescalin and so on—and volunteers have reported similar experiences. Opium addicts expect a similar level of experience. The problem is to find out what is causing this violent hallucination in you two." When they displayed no surprise at this revelation, Dyce chuckled and sat back in his chair. " Dick. You must have realised that Merridew didn't send you to me merely because you'd had a black-out. You'd been mumbling about a violet mist groping towards you. In his office, which I believe is remarkably clean and sunshine filled, that wouldn't do at all. He checked with me—we're old friends—and I at once connected your experience with Ysanne's."

" I'm not surprised," Janvrin said flatly.

" Fine. Well. Our job now is to track down the chemical which your body—and Ysanne's—is pumping into your bloodstream which gives you these hallucinations. Simple."

" I wish it were."

" You make it sound very ordinary," Ysanne said. " So matter-of-fact. Yet, when I'm dreaming—" She shivered.

" Well, you must see that as you both have the same experiences, the problem does not arise in your minds alone. Neither of you can think of yourself as insane, believe me."

" I never did !" Janvrin exclaimed, the words jerked out by astonished reaction. " I know the room is real !"

" Why didn't you wish to confide in me, Dick ?"

" Obvious. You'd think I was round the bend and—oh, I see. If I thought that, then I must have accepted the possibility that I really was. You psycho chaps don't use the word ' insane ' normally. Was this a shock treatment ?"

Dyce chuckled unrepentantly. " You reacted about as expected, Dick." He went on seriously : " But I was in no sense attempting to trick you. I want you to work with me, not to be tricked into finding your own salvation."

" Ysanne," Dick swung the thread of thought. " What did you mean by saying I was in danger ?"

She was visibly distressed by the question and her thoughts. Janvrin wished he could get over to her some of his feelings ; maybe they wouldn't help much, but they'd show her she wasn't alone.

She said quietly : " I sometimes dream of this violet mist. It swirls towards me, like a fog, and I imagine hands groping out from it. Horrible, obscene hands." She was sitting very straight, her eyes closed. " I know that if whatever is hidden in that purple fog gets out, if its outlines harden and thicken and push through—I'll—" Without a sound, she toppled from her chair.

After they had put her on the couch and fetched water and Dyce's receptionist had fussed and gone away, Ysanne pushed her hand through her hair and smiled and said : " I'm sorry. We're having a big day, emoting all over the place."

Janvrin was stooping forward, staring at her. She raised her face, returning his gaze with candour. He stared at her eyes. He had not noticed them before. A trick, one doesn't always notice a person's eyes. He looked, feeling the sick fascinated revulsion churning in his guts.

He said : " Were you standing over me when I woke up, Ysanne ? As I am standing over you now ?"

" Yes. You seemed upset."

He stared into her eyes. " I was. Very. Did you know, Ysanne, that you have violet eyes ?"

As he watched the soft warm flesh seemed to shred away from her skull and all that was left was a bare yellowed bone with the jaw wired on by a loop through the nostril hole and two glittering mirrors where violet eyes should be . . .

He shuddered violently, as though gripped by cold.

" Hold it !" Doctor Dyce's command was harsh, staccato, blunt. " What did you say, Dick ?"

A sweet, anxious, red-lipped, wide-eyed face was before him, with a faint dusting of powder along the upper lip. She breathed lightly and he caught the fragrance.

He brushed a hand across his eyes and stepped back. " I said I wondered if Ysanne knew she had violet eyes. But, of course, she must know. Stupid of me."

" I meant after that, Dick."

" After ? I didn't say anything else."

Ysanne smiled tiredly. " You said something about a skull, Dick. A skull with mirrors for eyes."

" Must have been dreaming sorry." He felt annoyed, angry even. And frightened. He seemed to be saying a lot when he was temporarily disconnected from this world. Had he always done so ? He might very well have done so. Before, not solely by chance but by machination, he had been alone when the violet veil attacked. He had been a lonely child. Secretive, Simmons called it.

Dyce stood up briskly. " That's enough for today, children. Can't rush the hurdles. Oh, Ysanne, hang on a moment, will you my dear ?"

Janvrin shook hands and left them together. He went out into the sunshine, wandering down to Oxford Street relishing the rush and throb of life, the cheerful grumbling growl of red omnibuses, the impudent, sparrow-like dashings of taxis, the colours in shop windows and all the agitated swirlings and streamings of the crowds. This was life and this was the real world and some infernal chemical outfit in his body was pumping confusing alchemic concoctions into his bloodstream so that his poor old think-tank was at a loss to know if this was the real world, after all. Perhaps, his bedevilled brain cells thought, the violet world beyond the veil was real. Janvrin threw his shoulders back and took a deep breath, thinking of walking through the Park, and saw the fog of violet well from a department shop front and roll along the pavement towards him.

He had no time to analyse his reactions. This was the same sort of cloud that surged evilly over Ysanne, frightening her, placing that lurking fear in her wonderful violet eyes, eyes that he knew held no menace for him.

V.

A plump woman with two shopping baskets and an unruly small child vanished in the fog. A man, walking fast in a neat, fancy path through the crowds approached Janvrin, dodged around him and sailed on. In the gutter a cloth-capped man balanced placards and supported the weight of his walrus moustach. They all vanished together. Now Janvrin was alone in a globe of violet, with writhing tendrils reaching out like smoke kept at bay by electric fans. Sounds muted and died. He bared his teeth. Now was the time to ignore

the fog. Now was the time to do his usual routine and let whatever came out thunder past, demolished by denial.

He kept his eyes opened and leaned forward on his toes.

He felt ready for anything. Before he'd learned the trick of willing the apparitions away all manner of animals, monsters and weapons of war had rumbled out at him. He'd dodged them all without a graze. He hadn't done this in a long while ; he began to feel like a matador—he began to feel good. " Come on, then !" he shouted. His voice rang as though he was in a vault of stone.

The golden haired girl walked out of the fog.

Even then, Janvrin didn't know if her hair was auburn. She was quite naked. She walked down Oxford Street under cover of the violet fog and her eyes and face were filled with unholy promise.

She raised her arms. Her voice cooed. " Alfred ! Darling Alfred ! So you've come back at last. Mother will be pleased."

Janvrin remained perfectly still. Chemicals ! Acids and alkalies, cunningly blended, washing round his bloodstream ! " All right, brain," he said joyfully. " The lady's only an hallucination. Don't get all het up."

" Oh, Alfred," the girl sang. " How could you ?"

She was very near now and Janvrin's nostrils caught the faint tang of musk, of violet scent, of odours from some flowerbed over the horizon.

" Hallucination," he said again, strongly.

The girl was so near that he could see she had no navel. Fleetingly, he thought he could see a long narrow white tube running from the small of her back into the distant fog. He shook his head, still watching her. She smiled.

She was very near now. Within arm's reach. She was still there, solid, warm, vibrant with life, a naked girl in Oxford Street. Janvrin held himself steady, quivering, wanting to run, to shut his eyes—the girl changed.

Her soft pink body flowed and became lean and hard and brown. Her bosoms spread to become a mat of black hair. Her golden curls shrivelled to a black cap. Her face became angular, masculine, hate-distorted, thin-lipped, frightening.

Sinewy arms wrapped around his neck. A knee gouged upwards. Teeth clenched in his shoulder. Pain—real pain—hit him.

Janvrin forgot to control his great strength, forgot what a thoughtless gesture could do. He took the man around the waist and flung him from him. He felt teeth tear in his shoulder. Arms dragged away from his neck and the man went head over heels away into the fog. No white cord stretched from his back—he had been a man in every sense.

Panting, dishevelled, he stood suddenly isolated in Oxford Street and the crowd around shouted and ran and a police whistle shrilled and he was staring at a department store window of glass that had shattered into a great black star. Sunshine was warm on his head. He was trembling in every cell of his body. Motor roar whined in his ears.

Even as the policeman's hand closed on his arm, kindly, firmly, holding him just so ; he had to admit that he must be going mad. Hallucination ? When the teeth in his shoulder had brought bright blood and torn the cloth ? Hallucination when the man's body had catapaulted through the window ? He wrenched forward out of the officer's grasp and stared in the window, over wrecked dummies and draggled dresses. No strange man lay in there. No-one had gone through the window. And yet it was smashed, like a great black star.

A confused space later, shot through with people and movement and voices talking, talking, talking, of hands that guided his elbow, of hands that pushed and pulled and hands that adjusted his clothing like a child, Janvrin came back to his consciousness in his own body sitting with hanging head in his hotel room. His friends sat around, grave-faced. His mouth felt dry. He licked his lips.

He lifted his head and looked long and hard at Dyce. Then he laughed, shortly, a harsh bark of sound.

" Hallucination, eh, doc ?"

" Thank God you're all right, Dick."

" What happened, Dick ?" Simmons looked like a bank clerk presented with a dud cheque when the manager's away.

Ysanne pressed his hand. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks flushed.

" What happened ?" Janvrin rolled the words round his tongue. " Suppose you tell me what those people in Oxford Street saw. Or thought they saw."

" Very well," Doctor Dyce said. " You started to scream and shout. Naturally, people gave you a wide berth. Then you picked up a passer by and threw him through a window."

" Just like that ?"

" That's what the police officer reported."

" I see. Is there a witness who actually saw me grab this passer-by and throw him ?"

" Well, no. Not exactly. You know what a crowd report is like. Everyone hears the crash and turns and sees the final results and their implications. So each persons's brain reconstructs what happened. And they're not all the same. No-one actually saw you pick up the passer-by—"

" Did anyone *see* this convenient person ? Or did they just see a hole appear in the window ?"

" No, Dick. You threw a man through the window. I ought to mention that some witnesses said he had no clothes on."

" Passer by," Janvrin said scornfully. He was beginning to feel more annoyed about the violet veil than he had ever been in his life. It was something to do with Ysanne ; he was sage enough to realise that. " A person strolling along Oxford Street with no clothes on. Sounds likely, doesn't it ?" He threw off the clincher. " And where is he now ? Still lying in the storefront ?"

" No-one could find him, Dick. But you did throw him."

" All right. Now I'll tell you what did happen. That damned violet fog rolled up again and a beautiful naked golden haired girl strolled out as though it were the Folies Bergiere. She said something about mother not being pleased. Then she turned into a man who tried to kill me. His teeth would have ruptured my jugular if I hadn't jerked my head. He chewed up my shoulder—here, look." Janvrin jerked his shirt down. Dyce looked, mouth tightly pursed.

" More of those purple tumescences, Dick. Yes—they do look like teeth marks. But I don't think you need put too much credence on that. Both they and the so-called arrow wound are probably psychosomatic. Your mind undergoes the experience of being struck and your body reproduces the symptoms. It can't make a hole clean through your shoulder, so it brings up these painful lumps."

" I don't believe that, doc."

" Psychosomatic illnesses account for a surprisingly large percentage of doctors' duties."

" Maybe. I've come to a decision." He turned forcefully on Ysanne. " Look, Ysanne, tell us about this violet room you visit every now and again. Please."

Her hesitation was brief. She had told this story before to Dyce. Janvrin listened. " Sometimes I have a bad dream. There are two sorts. One is the rolling violet fog you know about. The other is when I think I've woken up ; but really I'm still dreaming. I'm in a stone corridor with a violet curtain across one end. There is a warm breeze. Little bells are ringing and I can smell a musky odour. This dream is quite rare. That's all."

Janvrin said : " And you've never gone through the curtain ?"

She shivered. " No. Somehow, I am repelled by it."

"And all this only in dreams ?"

" Yes."

" I never dream. I suppose, really, the repulsion and the attraction can be equated with male and female magnetism."

Doctor Dyce took out a thick fountain pen and rolled it between his palms. His face was very grave and the expression of solemnity was heightened by the absence of deep lines in his skin. " I am very serious now, Dick. I suggest to you that you can best serve all our ends if you tell me exactly what it is that you undergo, or experience or imagine. You can tell me privately, if you wish—"

" I'd decided to, doc. No, let all of us hear this. I have a feeling that we need allies, Ysanne and I. Right, here goes." He was quite calm, collected, marshalling his thoughts. " I do not clearly recall when I first had the experience. I always seem to have known the stone corridor Ysanne has just described. I must have been about fourteen when I first parted the curtains and peered in. I have no hesitation in admitting that I was scared stiff. The place was weird. Eerie. There was an atmosphere, a shut-in secrecy about it, a silent, lost, tomb-like quality where you expected dust to lie thick and centuries to pass between one heart beat and the next"

He told them about the room. The tapestried walls like panelling, the low oppressive roof of red and gilded timber, the great brass lion winking in the centre. The glass and bamboo cases ranged along the walls. The arms racks. The incense burners sending up their sour odours.

" Something Oriental, mysterious, hinting at things better left undisturbed. At the far end was a deep violet curtain that shimmered as though woven from light. I felt a deeply compelling compulsion to dash for that veil and plunge through. There was a great curved sword in the corridor, a

ruby in the hilt and with a diamond-studded scabbard. Did you see that, Ysanne?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes it was gone and sometimes it was on the floor."

"That," Janvrin said with conviction, "is a clue." He drank some water from the cold tap, and stood with the glass in his hand. "When I was sixteen I decided it was time to go through into the room. I took down the sword, drew it from the scabbard, and stepped over the threshold. A man tried to stab me with a dagger. I slashed at him with the sword. His head came off. I was sick. I spent a fortnight in the school hospital."

"I remember that," Simmons said. His voice was inconsequential. "You missed the Old Boys' match and we lost by an innings and seventy five runs."

Janvrin went on speaking as though he were a gramophone record. "After that as I went nearer and nearer the veil, the attempts to kill me continued. Different things. A wooden screen which, when you stood on a loose spot, shot out spears. A trap opening onto a pool of sharks. Glittery snakes. A man who rushed in with a tulwar—I disembowelled him. That was when I was seventeen-and-a-half or so. They all remained exactly as they had happened even though years passed in this world. There were other attempts, clumsy, ineffectual. The attraction of the violet veil changed for me. I no longer wished to rush down and pass through. I felt more interest in exploring the room. It's difficult to explain. I was young, adventure called—all that sort of thing. But I always knew that if I did go through the veil something would have been accomplished, something not to my benefit. Then I went training to Africa and did a tour in the Middle East and environs. Each time I moved there was a lapse before the violet veil attacked and when I was out of the country nothing happened at all."

"And you returned last year—"

"And the attacks began again. I had one which caused the so-called blackout when Merridew saw me. The attack in his office was the fog type." Janvrin put the glass down and crossed to the bed and sat down. "In the taxi I tried to find out the reason for an oval light containing a girl I'd seen the last time. I saw a skull in a case, mud-filled, you know the usual ancestor fetish, and the mirror-eyes turned into violet eyes which dragged me down. I'd have been sunk

if that archer chap hidden behind the wall hadn't winged me. I'd say that was bad co-operation on their part."

"On whose part, Dick?"

"Why—why the people behind the veil, of course."

"We'll try to examine this logically. Now, Dick, why haven't you been killed in this violet world? Surely, if they wanted to dispose of you they need only set up a machine-gun and plug you as you stepped through the curtain. Well?"

"I was out shooting rabbits once. The gun wouldn't fire in the violet room."

"Do you think they really want to kill you?"

"No." Javrin paused. "No. I don't think they do."

"Have you any idea what they do want?"

"They want to get me to walk beyond that second veil."

"And then what?"

Janvrin lifted his shoulders helplessly. "I don't know. Look, this may sound more insane than the rest. But I feel absolutely certain that somewhere that room exists. And also that the golden-haired girl talking about mother holds the key. If I could find that room—"

"One at night and one during the day," Dyce was saying. "Mmm. It might work."

"Look," Simmons said diffidently. "A thought occurs to me. Dick, you say you visit this room and then the fog rolls up soon after. Couldn't they be finding you and then really trying to kill you on your home ground?"

"That is an acute observation, Nigel," said Dyce.

"Oh, goodness!" burst out Carol Dyce. "You're talking as though these dreams and visions were real!"

"Purely academic, my dear," said Dyce quickly.

"Academic be blowed!" Simmons was excited. "Carol darling, surely you can see Dick means it? And Ysanne? These aren't dreams or hallucinations. Someone's out to get old Dick and they don't sound pleasant people. This smacks of the occult to me, and no-one knows much about that."

"And from a banker, too," Janvrin said, pleased.

"The occult!" Ysanne put a hand to her lips.

"Don't worry, Ysanne." Janvrin rose quickly and put an arm round her shoulders. "There's nothing to be scared of. There is a rational explanation for it all. Occult or not. That room exists, and I'd very much like to find it."

"To break down a fantasy," Dyce said, "means that sometimes you have to use the fantasy's own weapons. I'd like to suggest that the next time you go into that room you go prepared. Take a camera."

VI.

Janvrin wasn't sure what Dyce thought. The psychoanalyst met a great deal of this sort of thing. Janvrin wasn't even sure if he believed it himself now. Psychosomatic illness could explain his wounds ; and Ysanne's dreams could be explained by Dyce's theory of a chemical in the blood. Aloud, following that line of thought, he said : " Ysanne and I have identical experiences with detail that would be hard to duplicate. Can you seriously claim such a place does not exist ?"

Dyce looked, for a fleeting second, worried. Then he laughed bluffly, and said : " You show me the room on film, Dick, and I'll tell you then."

" But if a gun didn't work, why should a camera ?"

" I judge that a qualitative change has overtaken you. At twenty-five people more or less set in the final mould of character. I'd say that your girl and the arrows were on a different level of attack from any previously. Maybe you'd find a gun would work now."

Ysanne said softly : " You mean that something big is going to happen soon ?"

Gently, Dyce said : " Yes, my dear. That is what I do mean."

" I'm frightened," Ysanne said, putting up a hand to grip Janvrin's arm. " I don't think you should go beyond that veil, Dick. It's all unnatural. Horrible. Evil."

" Maybe, darling, maybe," Janvrin said. " But I'd like to get to the bottom of it all now and do away with these nightmares of yours. Because what I do there will affect you, make no mistake of that."

" Promise me you'll be careful ?" Then she must have seen the fatuousness of the remark. She lifted her chin. " I mean—I mean—"

" I know, Ysanne. I know. Don't worry. I'll come helling back out of that room and the monkeys who've been playing their tricks will be feeling mighty sorry."

It had sounded fine when he'd said it. Now, loading the camera, a 35 mm. Leica, colour film with electronic flash, and keeping a sharp watch on the time, he did not feel half so heroic. It was eleven-thirty and he had no feeling of fatigue after the busy day. The police had been squared and he was going to be considerably poorer paying for the window. But

all his movements were light and forceful ; he was confident that Ysanne felt about him as he did about her. And that meant that everything was going to be all right.

The Air Force had been given a convincing story by Dyce and so now Janvrin was on extended leave. He put the black camera down on the table and then immediately snatched it up and hung it over his shoulder. Any time at all, really.

By his watch the attack came at twelve fifteen. This was the latest ever, he recognised, as he stepped over the headless man and pushed through the curtains. His first glance was for the moving stone. Shut. He raised the camera and began methodically flashing off, slowly rotating so as to cover everything. Down at the far end the violet shimmer vibrated strongly, gusts seizing it and rippling the shivering fabric into long undulating folds.

" Getting worried, are you ? he shouted. " And so you should." Deliberately, he took four exposures, rapidly, one after the other, with the lens trained directly on the veil. He had just lowered the camera when the stone grated.

Immediately, he dropped to one knee, training the camera. The opening gaped. He flashed. Then, he heard distinctly a hoarse gasp and the stone crunched closed. He laughed.

" Didn't like the flash, eh, sonny boy ?"

He walked across to the case and took a few shots of the skull and the mirror eyes. But he was finicky about not looking into them. Again that compulsion, that screaming vibration in his mind, dragged at his senses. Angrily, he shook it off and went back to the first curtain and stepped through into his hotel room. He rang Dyce.

" Carol can do it," Dyce said at once. " She has a dark room set up here. Come on over." Dyce's voice deepened. " Only watch out for the violet fog. You're due for an attack now, aren't you ?"

Janvrin reached Dyce's without incident. They all sat around, Simmons and Dyce and Ysanne, waiting while Carol played with her chemicals in the dark room. When she came in her face was grey. She held out the wet prints.

Janvrin looked casually at them. He'd seen the room many times. But the others looked and looked and time seemed to stand still. Finally, Dyce said : " Can you get away to your father, Dick ? And can he put us all up ?"

" Why, I expect so. It's a pile. But he'll cope."

"Oh, and Dick. Bring your service revolver. I'll scrounge a Sterling machine-pistol. We'll probably need them." He tapped the photographs. "I suppose you saw the face behind that moving stone?"

"Yes. The face of the man I threw through the window."

They took the train down to Penzance and then flew from St. Just Airport in a Dragon Rapide across a smooth and silky sea to St. Mary's, Isles of Scilly. From Hugh Town a bobbing launch wended skilfully across to Bryher, making the passage at the flood. The tumbled blocks of the jetty were warm under their feet. A very tall, spare man with a thick thatch of grey hair and a teak face like a church ornament, greeted them.

"Hi, Dad," Janvrin said. He made the introductions.

"Glad to see you," the elder Janvrin said, meaning it. "Mrs. Jenkins has everything ship-shape, started in as soon as your wire came over. This is quite an occasion."

Janvrin wondered just what sort of occasion it might turn out to be.

The house was really an old fortress, situated just south of Hell Bay on the north west coast of the island. "We get weather directly exported from the Atlantic here," Janvrin said. "When there's a storm in Hell Bay, well—well, think of its name. All wild country up here; but south and east the island is fat with luxury. Of a sort."

That evening, when the meal had been cleared away, pipes were produced and the elder Janvrin told them stories of the smugglers and wreckers and Sir Cloudesly Shovel and all the others who had made landfall unintentionally on the Scillies. It was a warm, snug evening and Janvrin went to bed only half conscious of the reasons he had come here. The others didn't seem to have forgotten and Ysanne and Carol had both been pensive and even Simmons had had the edge rubbed off his bonhomie. Only Dyce seemed keyed up, as if expecting black forces from the netherworld to crowd into the room.

The whole world had changed drastically for Janvrin in the past couple of weeks. From being a flaunting jet-fighter pilot he had turned into a man creeping away to hide from occult forces from beyond the edge of time. Although that was not strictly true. Dyce had suggested they leave London and Janvrin knew the suddenness of it might be explained by Dyce's very real fears that unfortunate things might happen

to his patients. He had left his practice to a locum and bolted. That he had chosen Bryher meant that he thought he could learn more facts from Janvrin's father.

And on that thought the words the woman had said, walking naked from the violet veil in Oxford Street, hit Janvrin between the eyes. " Darling Alfred !" she'd cooed.

Dick Janvrin jumped out of bed, belted his dressing gown around him and, opening his door carefully, padded out to the landing. A low hum of voices drifted up from the lounge. He cocked an ear. Dyce and his father. Perfect. He walked in on them with their heads together like conspirators. Balloon glasses stood on a low table by the settee and two cigars sent straight untrammelled smoke plumes to mist and join near the ceiling.

" May I join you ?" Janvrin asked.

They did not start guiltily. Instead, his father smiled and indicated an easy chair. " Brandy and cigars there, Dick. We were talking about you."

He sat down but remained alert, not relaxing. " Listen Doc, you know that girl in Oxford Street ? Well, she said something about ' Darling Alfred.' I just remembered. And she mentioned mother." He looked at his father. " Your name's Alfred, Dad. Perhaps this lovely girl was after you."

Dyce said swiftly : " I've been telling your father, Dick. He's very interested."

Alfred Dyce stood up without the stiffness of an old man and went to the sideboard. He came back with a photograph. " Your mother, Dick. You know the photo. Wonderful woman. Was the girl anything like that ?"

Janvrin shook his head. " No."

Alfred Janvrin sighed softly. " I don't believe in spiritualism. But, well, one never knows in this world."

Outside the wind sighed keeningly across the weathered stones, pouring in an unchecked tide from its birthplace out in the open Atlantic. The electric light quivered as the generator laboured. The sounds of the wind served to emphasize the silence as the tinkling gilded bells threw up the silence in that violet underground room.

" Doctor Dyce was asking me about your grandfather, Dick. I've not talked about the family to you much, well, you know how it is with us, Dick. Briefly, I can only remember my mother, your grandmother. She was a woman

of steel and whalebone and my first memories are of India. She was working as a governess. She died when I was about ten or so and I was sent back to England." He laughed unpleasantly. "That would have been about 1890. Well, I decided that I wanted none of the orphanages, and signed on as a cabin boy; went round the Horn three times before I was fifteen. Had a bit of luck in Burma, gold, and, what with this and that, bought my own ship. Called her the *Virginia*, after my mother. Sweet little ship; topsail schooner. Trim. From then on it was a matter of adding to a mounting fortune. Then, in 1926, I met your mother, Dick. I was forty six, she was twenty. Plain Lucy Smith. When she died after you were born in 1933, I reckoned I'd had enough of the world. Came to the Scillies. And here I am, with my dogs and my bicycle and my brandy and my cigars. What do you get out of that, Doctor Dyce?"

"Only that you are an exceptional man, Janvrin."

"Mebbe. But I'll tell you something else. And the brandy's nothing to do with it, either. Name's not Janvrin." At Janvrin's start, he smiled and wagged his finger. "Oh, it is now, all right, all legal and tight. But I was illegitimate; mother told me, plain and frank. When she died she left me papers, which I opened when I was twenty one, as instructed. She was the daughter of Sir William Alberforce, a great India sahib type. Very out of date today, more's the pity. I went to the Alberforce family and not very unnaturally they didn't want to know of me."

"And who was your father, Dad? Did you find out?"

"No. Apart from his name being Alfred—"

"Perhaps he was the Alfred they were after," Dyce said quietly.

"He must be dead by now. Mother didn't seem bitter—"

A scream spiralled crazily down from the upper floor. Janvrin was the first to react. "Ysanne!" he shouted and rushed from the room, went flying in leaping bounds up the stairs to burst into Ysanne's room. He switched on the light. People murmered and craned behind him in the doorway.

Ysanne lay in the wide bed, twisting and turning, one rounded arm flung across her face, the other gripped into a constricted knot and beating at the sheets. As they watched, she screamed again, on a lower, more penetrating key, and her body convulsed. Wind rattled the windows and spray

sling-shotted the windows. Carol pushed Janvrin aside and ran to Ysanne.

"Ysanne! It's all right! Ysanne!" Despite Carol's entreaties, Ysanne remained asleep, turning and writhing and dragging all the bedclothes into a rumpled knot. Dyce took her pulse.

"High," he said. "A sedative—"

"Wait," Janvrin rasped. "If she's dreaming, then she's in that damned violet hell. Maybe she can't get out."

"Oh, no!" Carol gasped. "That's horrible!"

"What can medicine or science do now, Doctor Dyce?" came Alfred Janvrin's quiet tones. "Can you help this girl?"

Dyce wiped his forehead. "Ordinary techniques and procedures are capable of handling this; but, I don't know. Perhaps Dick is right. I just don't know."

Janvrin leaned over Ysanne. Her mouth was rounded and little splutters of froth spilled from it. He took her arm gently and tried to move it away from her face. At the touch he experienced a tingling like an electric shock. He managed with some difficulty to prise her arm away from her face. "Hold her," her said curtly. Dyce complied. Her eyes were shut. Moving without any conscious reason, working purely from some inherent command that lay in his germ cells, the genes and chromosomes he had inherited from some ancestor his father had never known, Janvrin delicately pulled her eyelids up. He used both hands, rolling the lids up together. He gazed deeply into her eyes.

It happened like the snapping on of a light.

Ysanne was crouched on the floor by the brass lion, perilously near the open trap where the sharks raged.

Advancing towards her, warily seeking to skirt the shark trap, was a liger, the sister or brother of the one killed by Janvrin further into the room. In that moment of gathering of consciousness, Janvrin saw that it was not a liger, after all, but a tigron. Just as bad, if not worse.

And no lance, this time!

He crouched on the balls of his feet, felt the dressing-gown was impeding him and carefully slid out of it. It was red silk. He held it like a cloak and the humourless thought came that he was acting like a real matador now. A matador without the weapon for the final moment of truth.

The tigron charged. Ysanne let out a scream of terror and hunched back. Janvrin hurdled the shark pit and flung the

red silk dressing-gown in a clouding flurry over the tigron's head. The beast crashed to the floor, spitting and snarling.

"Dick!" Ysanne, wild-eyed, panting, frantic. "Dick!"

"No time now, sweetheart. Get up and run for that violet curtain—and ignore the gentleman minus a headpiece. Jump over him and—" Time for no more; the tigron had shredded the dressing gown. Saliva dripped from its mouth. It pawed the air. Janvrin saw the flexing of the hindlegs, the twitching of the tail. The tail stiffened—the world revolved on its axis—he plunged forward, upside down, the tigron raking forward with its razor-sharp hind legs.

He avoided that deadly onslaught and fixed his fingers into the neck, scrambling with a hitch and jump over onto the beast's back. Ysanne, hand to her bosom, was standing by the curtain. She didn't seem to see the headless man at her feet. Her eyes were fixed hypnotically on Janvrin.

He felt like a cowboy with a hippo for a bronc. The tigron lashed itself this way and that, rolled, tried to brush him off against the wall. He sprang clear, leapt in again and dealt it a blow with his fist on its nose.

He was gasping with effort now and yet he felt the surge of triumph as the tigron's eyes glazed. He jumped recklessly forward, took its jaw in one hand and the upper jaw in the other. As Ysanne's scream rang in his ears, he planted both feet solidly on the floor, flexed the muscles across his back, and opened the beast's mouth.

Sweat runnelled down his face. The big jaws felt like red hot steel under his fingers. His feet trembled in palpitations against the floor, and yet they were anchored there like the roots of the tree of knowledge. He could hear the tigron's bellowings for breath. Its panting was like a blast furnace. It grunted and gurgled. Its rear claws hooked viciously forward.

In that second the scene wavered, distorted like flawed glass. Janvrin felt Dyce's hands slide over his own, rolling Ysanne's eyelids back up and the scene in the violet room became crystal clear—and the raking claws screamed down his side like branding irons.

From that moment on there was the ghostly presence of Dyce in the room with him as he fought and heaved to open the beast's mouth. Blood covered them both, beast and man. And the blood that surged in his head and turned his vision scarlet made him no less beast-like than the tigron he fought.

His sinews cracked with the strain. His fingers felt as though they were being flayed, dessicated, dipped in molten steel and cut through with a ripsaw. He heaved back. The sharp, distinct, sickly crack was like the report of a starter's gun. Janvrin relaxed and let the lower jaw lie slack. The beast was whining and howling, making a snuffling gurgling dripping noise.

He kicked it heavily in the ribs. It slunk away.

Without a thought to the rest of the room, he whirled towards Ysanne and caught her in his arms, thrust them both through the curtain.

VII.

Ysanne struggled up on the bed. Dyce stood back. Janvrin, gasping, levered himself off the bed and stood up, swaying. Red devils danced in his vision, maddeningly out of direct sight. He felt as though he'd fallen in a mincer.

"Dick! Dick! Are you all right?"

"Sure," he croaked. "Sure." His side was ribbed with purple tumescences. They were tigron claw marks. "You?"

"I'm all right, I think. You—you killed—"

"Save it. Ysanne, you darned little fool! I can guess what happened. You had the dream and you decided to go exploring in the room. You imbecile!"

"I know. But I wanted to go behind that other veil, to find out what was drawing you there. I wanted—"

"Yes. You wanted to do my job for me." Angrily, he told Dyce and the others what had happened. "And I sensed you were in the room, doc. Did you see anything?"

Dyce handed Janvrin a shot of whisky which his father had produced. The doctor's hands were not quite steady. "I looked into Ysanne's eyes. It was like looking into a TV screen, or through a lighted window. I saw it all."

Janvrin pulled at the shreds of dressing gown around him. "The others must have seen this ripped up before their eyes. Is this hallucination?"

"Dick," Dyce said deliberately, emphasising each word and urging him from the room as he spoke. "This means they know where you are. There will be no delay until they find you. Get some strong clothes on. Wear your revolver. I'll fetch the Sterling. We'll all meet in the lounge. And hurry!"

Running along the corridor, with Simmons at his heels, Janvrin felt the pit of his stomach congeal as a purple light flashed across the wall Then he relaxed. A lampshade. He dressed quickly, putting on slacks and shirt and a battle-dress blouse. He belted on the revolver. Then he and Simmons went down stairs. Dyce met him and handed over the machine-pistol, or carbine, neat, compact, deadly. Spare magazines went into the pockets of his slacks. He looked up with a smile.

" Who's coming on safari ? Big Bwana Nigel ?"

" If only I could, Dick, old man. But this is something you have to go alone. No-one else can go with you. Except, that is—"

" You keep Ysanne here, and out of mischief. Feed her benzedrine, if necessary. But keep her awake !"

Janvrin checked the sub-machinegun was fully loaded with 9 mm. shells and pulled out the butt and locked it. He did not feel confident that it would operate in that other-worldly dimension ; but it was worth a try. The camera had.

Anticlimatically, then, they sat and waited.

Simmons was standing with his arm around Carol's shoulders, behind Ysanne's chair. Alfred Janvrin sat quietly in his wing chair by the empty fireplace. Dyce prowled edgily. Janvrin sat in an armchair, Sterling hooked across his knees, waiting. Wind slammed at the windows and spray rattled like hail. A dark oppression sifted down over them.

Then Ysanne was kneeling by Janvrin's chair, her arms around him. " I can feel it coming, Dick ! They're coming ! Don't go ! Don't go !"

" If the violet veil comes, darling, there's nothing I can do but obey the call. When the clarion rings out thrice, I must go."

And as he spoke the violet mists swirled about him and the brazen gong clamoured. *Bongg. Bonggg. Bongg-gg.*

He wasted no time on the curtain or the headless man. He jumped across, looking swiftly first for the wounded tigron, then at the moving stone and then at the glass and bamboo case. This time was it, his mind said confidently. This time he'd find out what it was all about and what dark secret of his ancestry had led him since childhood to this oppressive, silent room of violet light beneath the ground.

A voice shrilled in his inner ear : " Dick ! Dick ! My darling !"

He saw the moving stone was shut, the case quiescent. The tigron stalked, moving its head from side to side, jaw flapping. Out of mercy, Janvrin took the great curved sword from beside the case and despatched the brute. As he was straightening up the stone squealed. He caught again the glimmer of movement. He laughed nastily, raised the sub-machinegun and sent a stream of bullets into the slot.

The sound was like an express train hammering through a tunnell. Acrid fumes hung and blended with the incense.

A scream blatted from the hole. He stalked on, warily.

What happened now, was anyone's guess. He had met perils in this room since he was sixteen. Now, nine years later, he was about to challenge the supreme peril of all.

Six men stepped from the curtain, short reflex compound bows tightly drawn, arrows feathered to ears. Before the first string was released, Janvrin hosed them with bullets, jumping like a cat sideways to avoid the last shaft. The men went down like shooting targets. Armour clashed on the floor. Then he was springing over them, thrusting the curtain aside with the muzzle of the Sterling, peering through.

It was in some ways a fitting style to open up the inner mystery.

A violet haze of mystery. Darkness. A white, roseate-tinted radiance in an alcove of blankness. A white form, straight and upright and gleaming.

A voice, clamouring in his thoughts, mocking, compelling, deriding.

" At last, my dear Alfred. At last you have come to pay your respect to your dear old mother. How nice."

A vice had clamped all his limbs. The sub-machinegun fell to the floor ; he scarcely noticed it. He stood like a lout before a cathedral shrine, tongue-tied, body mesmerised by a brain chained in links of biting fire.

" Of course, they don't call you Alfred in the world my dear boy. That I know. And poor Erech has had such a time with you. Come closer. You need not be afraid."

Step by unwilling step, Janvrin moved towards the roseate glow. Revulsion and fascination blended in him. The woman who sat poised and severely erect, was from the waist up veiled in white diaphanous gauze with the rest of her body

hidden and swathed in shadow. She looked young and sweet and fresh and glowed like a pure flame in the alcove of darkness. She smiled compassionately upon Janvrin.

He caught the pervasive scent of violets and musk.

"Your grandfather was hot blooded, and so, I suppose, was your father. And you are, too. But you've all been very naughty boys."

The setting and the terminology were at ludicrous variance. She looked like a woman beautiful from the womb of time and spoke like an indulgent mother chastising little children.

And was it so ludicrous when Janvrin remembered the blood and the agony, the sharks and the spears, the liger and tigron, the dead men? There was a mystery here that he must solve for the good of his soul. Not the mystery of the fact of the room; that he had accepted long ago. The mystery that included Ysanne, the man and the woman in Oxford Street; they were phenomena outside his own personal sphere of the mind. Music sweet with a piercing beauty drifted in the room and gilded bells tinkled like angels laughing.

"But of course," the syrupy voice in his mind said. "You don't understand, do you, Alfred?" The tones sharpened. "You think you are a member of *Homo sapiens*, I suppose, and how superior you are to all other life on this planet. But you are wrong, ah, yes, so wrong. You see, Alfred, not only *Homo sapiens* came to maturity in the world, another race, a far superior race, evolved with these others of the outside. Half your blood is theirs, which is why it is so difficult to join my mind with yours and why you wouldn't come to see your old mother."

Janvrin, the veins bulging on his forehead, managed to say: "You're—not—my—mother!"

"Ah, but yes, I am. Your great-grandmother, true; but your mother in the Family. And that is what is so obscene! Only I can be the mother; I will not bear female children! Only males. For fifty thousand years I have sat here, bearing men children to go out into the world, and for fifty thousand years before me, my mother sat here until I was born and killed her! We are the great race of the world! Your poor fools that you see around you, working, striving, struggling, in eternal misery, for what? For a pittance. And my children inherit the earth. They do not work; why should they when I take heed of their every want.? We can talk to

each other from one end of the world to the other ; we can arrange deals that skim the cream from the work the stupid *Homo sapiens* creatures perform. We are the Great Ones of the Earth !"

" Parasites."

" You blaspheme, my son. Before Erech comes to kill you—Erech ?" Her voice broke off in his mind. It went away and came back. " I cannot call Erech. But he will be here. And he will deal with you, as he dealt with your grandfather—evil word !" She laughed. Janvrin quivered with reflected horror. " He could not find the child my poor foolish Alfred had brought into the world, so Alfred himself had to be killed. You saw his skull, with the mirrors, did you not, Alfred ? Your grandfather's skull, drawing you like a magnet."

Janvrin felt sick. He could not move. His arms and legs were rivetted to the floor. " Why could you not kill me, then, in that room outside ?" The words were agony.

" I wanted to talk to you, my child. I wanted to tell you exactly what it was that your grandfather had done before I, personally, slew you."

" Considerate." Janvrin wheezed. " I belong to my own race. Not a gang of murderers hiding in a hole in the ground fed by some super ant queen—"

Her rage was icy, flaying the tissues of his mind. He groaned with the agony and then set his teeth—pitiful gesture —and tried to fight it off. It was like a fly trying to beat back the swatter with the beat of its wings.

" I think you're old fashioned, out of date. You couldn't kill me !" He deliberately taunted her.

" Erech ! Where is Erech ?"

If Erech was the man in the hole in the wall, the man he had thrown through the window, she'd have a long wait. " Erech's your chopper, hey ? Well—" And then Janvrin paused. Keep that one hidden. The vice around his mind was clamping down. He toppled to the floor, eyes glazing. Everything was distorted, confused. He heard her words as from a long distance.

" Every ten years I bear a child. Each man child lives one hundred years and the girl children are slain at once. I can brook no rivals. If a man child lives longer than a hundred years—as they do—they must be eliminated. We live off the backs of the outsiders ; it is all worked out. Erech ! Erech ? Where is Erech ?"

Janvrin managed to say : " How can your kind mate with us ?"

" Us ? Us ! You are one of the Family, Alfred. Evolution of Man branched from a common stem. Your genes and chromosomes fit very well with the common herd's. Where is Erech ?"

He thought there was a touch of fear, the first titillation of impending disaster in her thoughts. She was like the gambler who suddenly begins to realise that his opponent's hand is better than his own. " Erech !" It was a wailing cry.

She moved for the first time since he had seen her ; it might have been the first time in years. Violet scent overwhelmed him. " Erech !"

She hunched forward, moving her lissom body with smooth grace and with the suggestion of ponderous agony of effort down below, like some great fat slug. Janvrin pushed to his knees, the bonds relaxing around him. His head felt like an apiary.

" Erech ! Erech ! Erech !"

" Listen, woman," he said, forcing the words out through a red-hot violet mist of pain. " I promise you that I will not harm you. Will you do the same for me ? Will you give me your solemn promise as the Matriarch, that you will cease trying to kill Ysanne and me ? Will you cease to send the violet mist ?"

Her eyes were coming forward from the light, now, they were becoming part of a face that could be seen and read.

" Ysanne ? Ah, yes. She must be the daughter down the line of descent of that other child who escaped from us. Only once before it happened and the two must meet. Oh, fate, fate, you are cruel."

" It's not fate," Janvrin said rudely. " I'd say you were more old-fashioned than I'd thought. Have you no science ? Swords and bows and arrows. This dump. Well ?"

She was breathing like a stepped on cat, now. Harsh, bitter, pitiful. " Science !" the words screamed in his mind. " Your people and their science ! That was what let Alberforce out of our clutches. And now you come here, without fear, without shame ! Science! It is killing the Family."

" What about that promise ? "

" If Erech cannot come then I must slay you myself."

" I want your promise that you will let us alone. After all, you've lived for thousands of years. Why can't you let us live our lives in peace ? And my father, what about him ?"

" It is not the child but the children's children. One day a girl will be born and will supplant me as I supplanted my mother."

" Nonsense. *Homo sapiens* doesn't work like that." Janvrin fell into his own trap and became too confident. The spell of the room with its violet scents and mystery and sense of oppression had spiralled in his mind past the point where he could accept new sensations. Now he sat up, fighting the mental bonds, and stared at the woman. " We'll let you and your family alone if you'll let us alone. A bargain."

" No ! No ! Erech ! Where is Erech ? He will deal with you. I cannot—cannot—reach—" She was gasping.

Savagely, Janvrin said : " Erech is dead."

Her wailing cry split his brain into spinning fragments. As he stared at her, her face came completely out of the sphere of light, took on features. A sick tight feeling clawed Janvrin's guts.

" Ysanne !" He stared, horrified. The sweet features of Ysanne glared at him in demoniac fury from the body of this ages-old woman of some parallel evolution. " Ysanne !"

And the fear and pain struck. He doubled up, yelling, feeling white hot pincers of agony in his brain. She was trying to kill him ; using all her mental powers on him, shrivelling his brain up in his skull. The world disappeared in shards of molten torment. Her high cackle of triumph penetrated and violet musk stank in his nostrils.

Then a low, level, pure voice rang in his mind.

" Dick ! Hold on. Dick, I'm here, with you, helping, praying, suffering. Dick, I love you ! Dick—hold on !"

Ysanne ! Ysanne speaking to him from some place out there in the Scillies whilst he was grovelling on the floor of an evil-smelling, foetid, underground room somewhere on the face of the Earth. His pride flagellated him. The pain was still there, like millions of ants biting at his tissues.

But he thrust it back, taking a firm hold on the memory of Ysanne and very conscious of her nearness, her presence, here, in this room. He stared from bloodshot eyes at the ancient woman.

She had half-crawled from her alcove. Drapes tore away. Janvrin saw—and felt sick to the core of his being.

With Ysanne standing shoulder to shoulder; her living being a flame in his mind, a flame that beat out and utterly consumed the black fires from this old hag, Janvrin stood up slowly. He backed away, step by step, and the woman half as old as time crawled and dragged herself after him, her hands like claws and her violet eyes insane with anger and jealousy and pitiful in their wrath.

Janvrin spoke, decisively. He took the revolver out.

"I could kill you, here and now. But I won't. You have no need to die. Too many men have died already through your greed and hatred of supersession. Go back to your pit and wallow there. Bring your men children into the world every ten years. But *Homo sapiens*' science will very soon make you obsolete, if you are not already. I feel very sorry for you, old woman. Very sorry. But if you worry Ysanne or me any more, if you send the violet mist, then I will come through here with all men's science and blast you back to the hell you should have found a hundred thousand years ago."

"Alfred! Erech! Oh, my children, my children—" she babbled on, lying there on the floor with her gorgeous face and torso limp along the stone and the rest of her—

Janvrin swallowed and turned away. Tramped through the violet room and then, on an impulse, took the skull of his grandfather from the glass and bamboo case. He swung the curtains open and stepped through and looked at the ring of anxious faces in the room of the old fortress in the Scillies.

"Oh, Dick!" And Ysanne was in his arms.

"We saw it all, in your eyes, Dick," said Dyce.

"All?" he asked over Ysanne's shoulders.

"Nearly all. The woman who looked like Ysanne wouldn't come clear."

Janvrin shivered. He put Ysanne gently into a chair.

"No wonder," he said grimly. "She's been sitting there for fifty thousand years, turning out children every ten years without the aid of modern medical science. It wasn't pretty."

"A parallel species," breathed Dyce. "Some of the anthropology boys are going to throw fits—"

"No." Janvrin was firm. "I made a bargain. We let that poor deluded woman and her brood go their own sweet ways. They're obsolescent. They cannot compete with the modern world. For all their telepathy and family bonds. They've got some fine tricks, like that woman-dummy thing

which was a cloak for Erech. But she knew she was licked. She couldn't stop me going. All her killers had failed ; the things which would have been deadly a few years ago. I know I'm strong—"

" Deuced strong, old boy," Simmons put in.

" Yes, maybe ; but any man with brains would have got around them. Guns seemed to scare them silly. And if they couldn't adapt from men's achievements through the years, as they couldn't, then they just aren't an adaptable race and will therefore die out in due time."

" A sort of queen bee arrangement," said Carol. She laughed in a shivery way. " Horrible."

" Not horrible, really, my dear," said Dyce. " Just different."

Old Alfred Janvrin picked up the skull of his father. He sat looking at it, into the mirror eyes, and saw there only his own reflection. The muscles of his jaw worked.

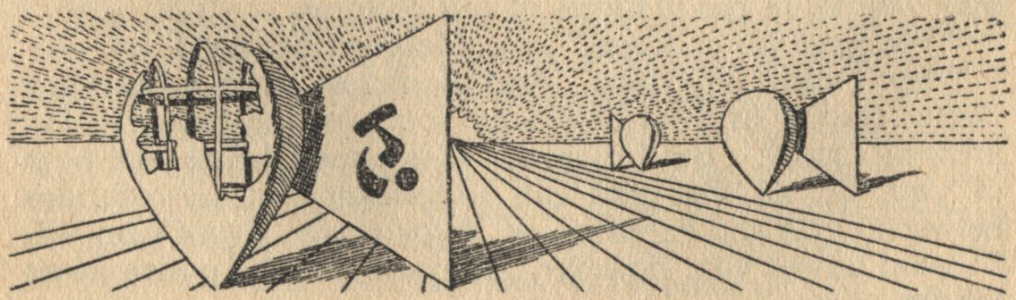
Janvrin was still holding Ysanne. He pressed her gently. " You saved me," he said. " You gave me the strength and courage I really needed when all my own was useless."

She smiled. " We share the same blood ; but the blood that is of ordinary men is the better of the two. I know."

" And so our children will be *Homo sapiens.* I don't think we need fear that poor woman and her violet mists any more. Any more at all."

And Alfred Janvrin, holding the skull, said peacefully : " And Virginia Alberforce, I think, is at last at rest."

—**Kenneth Bulmer**



During recent years author Bertram Chandler has considerably changed his approach to story writing, mainly tending towards fantasy, in which category he is now producing some fascinating plot ideas. Herewith one such example.

HOW TO WIN FRIENDS

By BERTRAM CHANDLER

" I have no need to tell, you," said the Minister for Extra-Terran Affairs " that your task will be of the highest-importance. Officially, Mr. Macleod, you will be merely the Trade Commissioner—and you, Mrs. Macleod, will be the clerical aide. Unofficially, you will hold ambassadorial status. You will be the only representatives of Earth on Beta Cygni VII. As you know, our culture faces an impending famine of radioactives—oh, it won't be in our lifetime, but it may well be in the lifetimes of our children . . ."

" We have no children," said Maureen Macleod.

" But I have, my dear. And, doubtless, such a charming young couple as yourselves will soon be the parents of a growing family. But I digress. It is essential that you, both of you, do all that you can to cement friendly relations between Earth and Paradin—or, if you prefer, Beta Cygni VII. I would advise you, however, always to use the native name for the planet."

"Why are you sending a mere Trade Commissioner?" asked Rewi Macleod. "Why aren't you sending a *real* Ambassador, complete with staff?"

The Minister smiled—a smile that did nothing to enhance what little beauty there was in his heavy features.

"A good question," he said, "and one that deserves a frank answer. Firstly, we have found, very often, that young, fresh minds are better able to cope with the often outlandish *mores* of newly contacted races than are those that have grown old in the Diplomatic Service. Secondly—the demand for Ambassadors exceeds the supply."

"You mean," replied the woman, "that *we* are expendable, and that real Ambassadors are not."

"We are all expendable," said the Minister stiffly. "We are all expendable in the service of Man. Of course, if you wish to resign . . ."

"We don't," said Macleod. His face, under the sandy hair, was that of a stubborn Scot, intent on getting the best of a bargain, and yet the broad nose, the dark complexion, did more than merely hint at the admixture of Polynesian blood. His ancestors—Highlanders and Maoris—blended well, made him an ideal recruit for the Extra-Terran Service.

"We don't," he said again, "but we would like to be assured that success in this mission will be the stepping stone to better things."

"It will be," said the Minister. "I can promise you that. Furthermore, you already know of the *very* generous compensation that will be paid to the surviving partner if either one of you falls in the line of duty. You may be, as Mrs. Macleod rather bluntly pointed out, expendable—but the Ministry will do everything in its power to soften the blow to the surviving partner."

"If there is a surviving partner," said Maureen Mcleod.

The Minister glared at her and allowed himself to wonder why the geneticists had not yet succeeded in breeding red hair out of the human race, especially the female half of it. He thought how good it must have been to have lived in the days before Security-for-All became a practical political and economic proposition. In those times it was the accepted thing for employees to be polite to their employers. It was the accepted thing for everybody to be polite to everybody—and that reminded him of the book.

He said, " You have plenty of time for study on the way to Paradin. The *Star Lady* is fitted with the improved Ehrenhaft Drive, as you know, but the voyage will still take all of six weeks."

" The films and tapes are already loaded aboard the ship," said Macleod.

" I want you to read this book." said the Minister. " Both of you. It's an old book—it was written way back in the Twentieth Century. You, brought up as you have been in this age of Security, will find much of it laughable. But you will find the advice it gives invaluable in dealing with people of other, less advanced—or are they ?—cultures. Your task, your main task, will be to make friends. It should not be hard—the Paradini are a humanoid race—so long as you work according to the book.

" I'll give you an example. Not so long ago, our relations with Yalala were in a very bad way. No less than three Trade Commissioners were expelled in quick succession. They all told the same story—which was that the Yalalan Manager of Aliens (a rough, but reasonably accurate, translation) was quite impossible to deal with. We couldn't spare an Ambassador . . ."

" You mean that you were afraid of losing one," said Mrs. Macleod.

" We couldn't spare an Ambassador," went on the Minister, " but, luckily, one of my secretaries, who collects old books, suggested that *this* volume be made required reading for all Commissioners. The next Commissioner we sent to Yalala read the book en route. On arrival, he lost no time in reporting to the Manager of Aliens to present his credentials. There was a clock on the Manager's desk—by Earth standards a *revolting* piece of ironmongery, utterly lacking in grace, symmetry and anything else you can think of. It chimed—and the chimes, apparently, were like rusty tin cans and broken bottles being dropped from a considerable height on to concrete.

" Our man winced. Then, in fluent Yalalan, he said, ' What *beautiful* chimes !' He's still on Yalala, and doing a good job. Anyhow, here's the book—HOW TO WIN FRIENDS AND INFLUENCE PEOPLE. Our experience with Yalala shows that it's as effective on other worlds as it once was on Earth . . ."

" And do you supply a special detergent with it ?" asked Maureen Macleod.

" A special detergent ? I don't understand . . ."

" For getting the boot polish off our tongues," she said.

" Old Carnegie had something," said Rewi Macleod.

He sprawled at ease on the bed in the comfortable cabin that had been booked for them aboard the *Star Lady*, watching his wife as she ran the brush over her gleaming hair.

" Such as ?" she asked, with elaborate disinterest.

" Well," he said, " this business about realising that other people might think as badly of you as you do of them. For example, when the book was written people still got all hot and bothered about the colour of other people's skins, and so forth. A Scot would look down on a Maori, and a Maori would look down on a Scot, just as we, today, look down on a Paradini. It's this looking down on people that we've got to get rid of. The more I read Carnegie, the more I wonder that we've been able to expand the way that we have done in the Galaxy."

" We've been able to expand," she said, " because, so far, we haven't run up against any race that's been our technological equal—let alone superior. We've been lucky—and I hope we stay that way. Why should we be polite to . . . to *things* ?"

" We have to be polite on Paradin," he insisted. " Apart from anything else, there'll be only the two of us against a planetful of natives. And if we get ourselves scragged, it's extremely unlikely that Earth will send a battleship. Remember the public outcry that there was over the expedition against Gromi ?"

" All right," she said, " be polite on Paradin. But don't be too polite at dinner tonight. If you practice turning your charm on the Captain much more he'll think that you're queer. He probably thinks so already."

" But he's had an interesting life," pointed out Macleod, " full of interesting experiences . . ."

" Rubbish," she said. " He's only an intersteller bus driver, for all his gold braid and brass buttons and God Almighty attitude. He's just the hired help, and we're the customers . . ."

" And he's convinced that the customer is always wrong, anyhow. The officers must think that we're a bunch of clots."

" Of course they do. And we think that they're the same. This is the world we live in, the culture that's grown with Security for All. And *I* wouldn't change it."

" Is it such a good world ?" asked Macleod. " Is it such a good world ?"

What would my ancestors have made of it ? he wondered. On both sides, Scot and Maori, there was a certain punctiliousness. Outlaws and cannibals they may have been—but they had manners.

" Of course it is," she said. " None better. If other people don't like it, it's just too bad. *When in Rome do as Rome does* had some validity when Rome was mistress of the world —in those days you did as Rome did, or else."

" And when on Paradin," he continued, " we do as the Paradini do . . ."

"All right. Suppose we do. Just suppose that we do. How do we start ? Tell me that. We've been able to learn the language—luckily whoever did the packing got the right tapes into the right boxes. But what about local customs ? All we have is a fine collection of films dealing with the lives and loves of those arthropoidal horrors on Polaris III—and, doubtless, some new Trade Commissioner and his wife in some Polaris-bound starship are complaining bitterly that data concerning Paradin is of no earthly, or unearthly, use to them. The Captain has never been to Paradin before. The Second Navigator was there once, for a six hour stop, and never got beyond the spaceport bar. None of the ship's staff have a clue, neither do any of the passengers. As far as they're concerned the ship will touch down for half and hour or so, disembark passengers—us—discharge a handful of cargo and a couple of bags of mail, pick up a ton of isotopes and then continue her voyage.

" Tell me, Rewi Macleod, just *how* do you propose to do as the Paradini do ?"

" We'll have to make up the rules as we go along," he said. " No—that's not quite it. We'll have to find out the rules as we go along. After all, we both of us speak the language fluently."

" I shall need a nail brush," she said.

" Why ?"

" To scrub your tongue after all the bootlicking."

They could have sent us to a worse world for our first assignment, thought Macleod, staring out through the lounge viewports. From up here it looks not too unlike Earth—the same clouds, the same seas, the same Polar ice caps, roughly the same distribution of land and water. But any world would have looked good after this voyage. If there's any hint of incompatibility in a marriage, it takes Space to bring it out. Perhaps things will be better once we get out of this blasted ship and back on to solid ground.

Lower settled the ship, lower, a huge gleaming fly tangled in the magnetic web of the planet. The beginnings of atmosphere were outside the ports now, the first filmy veils of cirrus. Macleod could make out features of the land mass to which they were dropping ; roads, and railways, cities and rivers. Dark specks on the green-blue sea must be, he decided, shipping.

Abruptly, almost with the effect of a conjuring trick, the horizon lifted—the *Star Lady* was no longer dropping to the surface of a huge sphere, but was falling into an enormous bowl. The clouds were more frequent now, and denser. There was little to be seen from the ports but white, drifting mist.

Macleod left the Lounge then, walked back through the alleyways to his cabin. Maureen was there already, having preferred to watch the landing at second hand on the television screen. She said, as her husband entered, " Thanks for leaving all the last packing for me to do."

" It was a pleasure," he replied, taking a childish delight in the rejoinder. He moved over to look into the screen. The ship, he saw, had now dropped below the cloud base. " Anyhow, the place looks quite civilised. A big enough spaceport. Six rockets—I suppose they'll be native owned, for intra-system trading—and another starship . . ."

" I don't see any red carpets," she said.

" Why should there be ? Just because these Paradini don't have the interstellar drive they aren't going to think that we're all that wonderful. As I've been saying all along, we'll manage better if we try to convey the impression that *they're* wonderful."

" All right," she said, " I'll try—but not very hard . . ."

There was no red carpet. There were three bored officials—Immigration, Customs and Quarantine. They were all far

more human in appearance than the Macleods had expected—the grey-green skin, the opaque eyes, the crest of spines that grew on the pointed skulls in lieu of hair would take some getting used to, but not much.

The landing formalities completed, the Macleods were told that a car awaited them outside the Examination Shed. They asked if there were any porters to lend them a hand with their baggage, were told that there were not. It was a warm day, and by the time that they had transferred their boxes and cases to the waiting vehicle—whose driver lolled back in his seat, watching them—they were hot and sticky and bad tempered.

The car started with a jerk, then sped swiftly, but not very silently, along a broad avenue.

"I may be wrong," said Macleod to his wife, "but this thing seems to be driven by an old-fashioned internal combustion engine."

"I don't care if it's pulled by six camels," she replied, "as long as it gets us to wherever it is we're going. I'm surprised that they didn't expect us to walk. They haven't much time for us here, have they? Why?"

"You know as much as I do. You were told, when I was, that the Greens, our predecessors, were guilty of some breach of etiquette. And you know that we have *carte blanche* to try to repair the damage they did."

"And what was the breach of etiquette?" she asked.

"I don't know. The Minister either couldn't, or wouldn't, tell us. But we'll have to watch our steps very carefully from now on—if only we'd had the films to guide us we'd be much better off."

"We didn't," she said. "We aren't. You do all the boot-licking, my dear—I'll just stand on the sidelines and barrack. I'm going to have a lot of fun watching you trying to do in Paradin as the Paradinis do . . ."

"You're doing your share," he snapped.

"Am I, duckie? You're the Big White Chief—I'm just your aide."

"Nothing very outlandish about the houses," he said, changing the subject. "I wonder if this is the city itself, or just the suburbs? But this strictly cubical style of architecture is very monotonous."

"And there," she said, pointing, "is *our* place."

It was, as were the buildings on either side of it, a cube built of a yellowish concrete. The sign, in black letters, was sprawled across the face of the house in the rather unlovely Paradini script. *TERRAN TRADE COMMISSION*, read Macleod.

The car jerked to a halt. The driver did something with his right hand, and a loud bleating noise issued from under the bonnet of the vehicle. A door opened, and two natives walked slowly down the path to the road. They were splendidly attired in crimson with gold trimmings. They must be, thought Macleod, high officers of state. He began to compose a suitable reply to whatever speech of welcome they would make.

" Greetings, Master," said the taller and more splendid of the two. " We are your servants. We hope that you will be happier and more successful than Mr. Green . . ."

Damn it, thought Macleod, *are* they servants, or is it just a figure of speech ?

" Thank you," he said.

" Get this rubbish out of my car," said the driver. " I've other work to do, and no time to waste on an Earthman and his wife."

" You don't seem to like us," said Macleod.

" I don't. All Paradin knows how the last Earthman insulted the Lord President. We're a proud people, Mister—and just because you have starships you've no right to think that you're as good as us." To the two in crimson he said, " Get a move on, you bloody useless flunkeys !"

Maureen Macleod, her face white under the flaming hair, said, in English, " We've been insulted—and in front of the servants. What are you doing about it ?"

" Nothing," said Macleod. He quoted, " ' The only way to get the best of an argument is to avoid it.' "

" All right," she said. " ' Show respect for the other man's opinion. Never tell a man he is wrong.' Out of the car, Mister Mouse, and try not to behave as though you were the representative of Imperial Earth—not that you'll have to try very hard !"

Everything inside the building was in order—the offices, the storeroom, the living quarters. Regarding the latter, luxury had been achieved rather than mere comfort. There were flowers everywhere—huge blooms, gaudy and with a

pungent aroma. These, explained the servants, had been sent by the Lord President himself. There was also, they said, a letter . . .

Macleod opened the envelope.

Inside was a stiff card, and on the card was what seemed, at first glance, to be an invitation to dinner that very night to Maureen and himself. He looked again. He thought, *More trouble.*

" Well," she asked, " what is it ?"

He read aloud, " The Lord President of Paradin takes pleasure in bidding Mr. Rewi Macleod, Trade Commissioner of Terra, to the frugalities of the presidential table at nineteen hours of the clock on the evening of the two hundred and thirtieth day . . ."

" What shall I wear ?" she asked.

" It doesn't matter," he asid. " You aren't included in the invitation."

" *What* !" She snatched the card. " Well, of all the nerve !"

" When in Rome," he said. " I'm sorry, my dear, but this is the way of it. After all, did you see any women in the streets during our drive here ? They must have something on the same lines as the Purdah they used to have in India, years ago . . ."

" Even so," she said, " it's more than a little rough. Especially since they insisted that Paradin was essentially a job for a married couple. Well, I suppose you have to go. But I want you to make it quite clear to the Lord President that when *you* entertain him I shall *insist* on being present."

" I'll try," he said. " Meanwhile, you might give me a hand to unpack my full dress . . ."

" What are the servants for ?" she asked.

Whilst the servants were unpacking, Macleod tried to gain all the information that he could from them. He discovered that on Paradin there was, as he had suspected, a system similar to the ancient Terran Purdah. He did not pursue his enquiries in that direction. Maureen, he was sure, would soon be able to learn all that there was to be learned on that subject.

Of more pressing importance was the topic of the evening's dinner. What would be served in the way of food ? What would be served in the way of drink ? It could well be that

Green, his predecessor, had contrived to drop some truly stupendous brick whilst under the influence of alcohol.

It would be possible, said the servants, for the Master to conduct a preliminary investigation into the properties of Paradini liquor. Thereafter there was a certain scuryring to and from his room, and the bearing back and forth of oddly shaped bottles and goblets.

He would be able, decided Macleod at last, to cope with anything that might be set before him. None of the local tipple seemed stronger than the average Terran wine or beer and, he had been pleased to discover, his sobriety tablets worked as well and as rapidly here on Paradin as they did on Earth. He wished, briefly, that Maureen had seen fit to help him with his experiments, but she was sulking in her own room. Oh, well, he thought, it's her loss. It's no skin off my nose.

He climbed into his dress uniform, admired his reflection in the full length mirror. He rather cared for the black and white elegance of it, the careful avoidance of any meretricious touches of colour or metallic trimmings.

After all, he thought, I'm a trader, and proud of it. Why should we dress up like the Admirals and Generals who, after all, exist only to serve *us*?

The elder of the two servants slid noiselessly into the room.

"Master," he said, "the carriage waits."

"I'm ready," said Macleod. "Oh, you might tell my wife that I've gone . . ."

Preceded by the servant, he made his way through the passages and down the stairs to the door. This was open, with the other servant standing beside it. Beyond the door Macleod could see an archaic-looking wheeled vehicle, drawn by two animals that could have been the fourteenth cousins of camels.

"I suppose it's safe," said Macleod in English.

"Master?" queried the servant.

"Oh, nothing." *But there* is *something*, he thought. "Tell me," he said, "just what *did* Mr. Green do that made him so unpopular? I meant to ask before, but we got sort of side-tracked . . ."

"He was most discourteous, Master. He refused to entertain the Lord President in the same style as that in which *he* was entertained by His Lordship."

What a clot ! thought Macleod. What's the use of having an expense account if you don't use it ?

" We rely upon you, Master," said the servant, " to uphold the honour of this household."

" I will do my best," said Macleod.

He walked out to the waiting carriage, returned the salutes of the gorgeously liveried footmen with a stiff bow. As he drove through the streets of the city he felt like the representative of Imperial Earth—not, as Maureen had so unkindly said, like a mouse.

Macleod enjoyed the dinner. He felt surprisingly at ease among the green-skinned Paradini, was able to drink with them and talk with them without embarrassment on either side. The food, too, was good. Course followed course, each with its own wine, each with a subtlety of flavour and colour and texture that made an appeal to all the senses. The Lord President, on whose right Macleod sat, obviously prided himself on the excellence of his cuisine—and this pride, thought the Earthman, was fully justified.

Finally there came what seemed to be the main course. It was carried in by four servants—a long, covered dish. Several of the guests had to leave their chairs while it was being manoeuvered on to the table. The cover was removed with a flourish.

With loving care, the Lord President carved. Macleod looked at the meat on his plate, smelled the delicious aroma of it. He was glad when everybody was served and he could begin. The flavour of the flesh was not disappointing. He thought, I must find out what this is. It's probably something hellishly expensive—but I must serve it when the Lord President dines at the Commission . . .

" This, My Lord, is excellent," he said.

But wasn't there something familiar about that carcass on the long dish ? Long dish . . . Long pig . . .

" I am so glad you like it, Mr. Macleod. It is my wife."

" You mean that your wife cooked it ?"

" No. It *is* my wife."

Maori blood has its compensations, thought Macleod, accepting a second helping.

His wife was waiting for him when he got home. He had not bothered to take any of his sobriety tablets—after all, it would have been the height of bad manners to have been the only person present at the dinner not exhibiting an alcoholic glow. He, as a result, was perfectly happy. She was not.

"Well?" she asked.

"Very well," he replied fatuously.

He flung his cloak and hat to the waiting servant.

"What did you *do*?"

"Oh, just eating, drinking, talking. The usual."

"Did you see the President's wife?"

"Yes. Oh, yes. Yes indeed. She cooks well."

"Rubbish. *She* wouldn't cook. I suppose you'll be saying next that I'm to cook when you invite him round here."

"Custom of the country," he said. "What does the book say—'Show respect for the other man's opinion'? That's just what I'm doing."

"Try to be a *man*," she said. "An Earthman. Why should you worry about hurting the feelings of these damned lizards?"

"My job," he said, speaking slowly and distinctly, "is to make friends and influence people. These damned lizards, as you call them, are people. As a matter of fact, I was thinking of asking for my recall. I *was* thinking of asking for my recall . . ."

"You're drunk," she said. "My God, what did I ever see in you? A brainless, gutless souse. A lizard lover. And now, when you have got a decent job at last, you're thinking of walking out from it."

"Please be logical," he said. "If I stay in the job I'm a lizard lover, as you so elegantly phrase it."

"Oh, go to hell?" she spat.

Macleod wondered afterwards if the force with which he struck her was altogether accidental. It was an accident that, in falling, she struck her head on the corner of a chair. The result was irrevocable.

I suppose that I loved her once, he thought. Then—How much did the Minister know about our marriage, and how much did he guess? Was it because of my mixed blood, the Maori part of it, that I was sent here? Was the mix-up over the instructional films deliberate?

To the waiting servants he said, "Put her in the deep freeze."

" Yes, Master," said the elder of the two Then, " I have never cooked an Earthwoman . . ."

" And you're not cooking this one," said Rewi Macleod. " I'll do it myself, the way that my ancestors did. When the time comes I shall want a trench in the garden, and plenty of firewood, and a supply of stones and green leaves . . ."

" You are wiser than Mr. Green was, Master. The Lord President will be your friend . . ."

" Winning friends is easy," said Macleod, " when you know how. I wonder if your planet runs to anything on the lines of the vegetable we call, on Earth, the sweet potato ?"

—**Bertram Chandler**

SOLID BEAT

For a long time jazz has been in close affinity to fantasy fiction—it is surprising the number of writers and readers we have who are keenly interested in both—and perhaps a psychologist could give good reasons why this is so. It is not surprising, therefore, that John Kippax who is himself a jazzman has chosen a theme incorporating both mediums.

By JOHN KIPPAX

Sid Farrar was a boy headed straight for the main furnace.

What a drummer.

What a louse !

This natural born turnip-head, tall fair and handsome, didn't need the chicks, or the judges at a *Melody News* band contest to tell him he was good : he knew.

George was on clarinet and all saxes, Alf played vibraphone and piano, Dan guitar and LA percussion, Sammy was on bass and Sid drummed.

No femme vocalist you notice. With Sid in the band ? Not corpuscular likeiy !

George led, so he said. Not that the other four always agreed with George Vallis, not by a long chalk. Though, he was a serious-minded individual who had his own ideas of how a band should be run. He arranged, took rehearsals seriously, and spent a lot of his time trying to tone down the

mickey-taking of the other three in relation to Sid. He always tried to Do Good and to Exert the Right Influence.

With Sid, it had to be admitted that they needed all the Good Influence they could get, except when it came to being a musician : then drink, dice, horses and women faded before the fact that Sid always played like an angel. Sometimes things weren't so angelic when her brother or her father (and once, Heaven help him, her mother) came to interview Sid at awkward moments, but that's life : no bowl of onions anyhow.

One rehearsal evening they were in the pub room, waiting for Sammy. Alf, who drove the brake, had gone to see why he hadn't showed up.

Sid was deep in his racing form and his predictions. Dan gave a little sucking in of breath, drumming his fingers on his guitar. George looked at him sharply ; was this the prelude to some more Sid baiting ? George was middle-aged and spectacled and read sciology and went to improving lectures ; Dan stuck to beer and guitars and science fiction.

" Give it up," said Dan, " you can't win."

Sid didn't answer. George wrinkled his long nose and shook his head warningly.

" You won't break even boy."

Sid grunted.

" Can I sell you a crystal ball cheap ?"

The blond beast looked up and snarled pleasantly. Nice guy.

This sort of thing worried George. He classed Sid as a dangerous bighead, true, but he knew the man's value to the quintet. A bighead : George could sigh virtuously—and frequently did—and tell himself that at any rate he (George) would never be accused of such a failing. Of course. But if they kept on ragging Sid then they might lose him . . . Sid was a fool. He remembered the occasion recently when they had learned that Sid was now a member of a clairvoyant club, designed to pick winners—and mugs like Sid. Messages from the future. They had ribbed Sid and got him angy then, and he had shouted " Well, anyway, hadn't a contest judge said that my style was futuristic ?"

Bighead !

Dan was still needling.

" Any drum kit from the future come COD yet ?"

Sid said some square-toned pre-Conquest words.

From the open door of the pub room with its dingy cases of Buffalo panoply, the sounds from below floated in. Something else floated up too. He knocked at the door, and George and Sid and Dan looked up to see a tall fellow, dark, rather good looking. He was perhaps thirty.

" Evening," he said.

They responded. A passing kibitzer, thought George, or . .

" Want any musicians ?" he asked.

" What sort have you got ?" asked Sid.

To their surprise, the obvious crack was made.

" What sort do you want ?"

" You might produce us a bass player a bit sharpish," said Dan.

" That's me," said the dark chap : he came into the room. They shook hands, exchanged names.

" I'm Stan Jones."

" Take a pew Stan," said Dan, " we have a bass player as it happens, but he's late : one of the boys has gone to fetch him."

Disappointment showed on the face of the stranger. He hitched his long frame onto a table, raised his thick eyebrows. Sid watched him, his beefy face solemn.

" No job then ?" asked Jones.

" Not at the moment," answered Sid. " You new round here ?" Stan Jones was about to reply, when there was an interruption. It came from a dark and shapely dish who stood in the doorway, hand on hip. Dan and George thought they recognised her as she addressed the drummer boy with more force and point than he had received for some time.

Sid's latest, they thought, a real lady.

" You————————louse," she said.

Correction : it was obviously Sid's latest but one.

Sid seemed to go smaller.

" You dirty, lowdown, underhanded two-timing ten-cent Lothario," she said, and you could have chopped the ends off her words and used them for handspikes.

Stan Jones was interested. Perhaps he came from a good family. He saw Sid's reaction : Romeo got a shake on like a rhumba dancer.

The Chinese have a saying that ' a woman's tongue three inches long can kill a man six feet tall.'

The Chinese are dead right.

Sid went up to this piece of dark and said coaxingly, " Now, Lu—come downstairs and we'll have a drink and talk about it quietly."

She bared her teeth. A duchess couldn't have done it with more aplomb. Sid put a restraining hand on her arm, and she shook it off like it was red hot.

" Lu," mouthed Sid, standing close to her and doing his big-hurt-boy act. It did not register. Lu had probably had some.

" Y—you mustn't get excited, my sweet."

The look she gave him should have made smoke spout from his ears. She said in an armour-plated voice, " I've got news for you, Sid Farrar."

He sagged a bit. They went downstairs. Eldritch trumpets, faint yet pursuing, blew the wedding march in slow time —and flat.

" Interesting," said Stan Jones.

" The year's understatement," said George, somewhat embarassed. " I really think Sid deserves some little consideration."

" If that's what they're calling it now," put in Dan, going rumtitum on the belly of his guitar, " I should say that he's had some. Plenty."

" Systems, inside information, peeps into the future—he'll need all he can lose with that one." George wagged his head. " This will play hell with the morale of my band."

" Our band, professor," corrected Dan. He played a large sad chord, arpeggio.

" Powder and store-made hair," misquoted Stan.

" She's poison," said George sententiously.

" What a death," murmered Dan.

Then the door opened, and in came little Alf, wearing a mournful expression. He had five bottles of beer in his arms. He stood on one short leg while he kicked the door shut, set down the beer and intoned " one each." They stared at him. He might have been passing a death sentence. Dan said so.

" Sammy ?"

Alf nodded.

" What happened ?" asked George.

" Sammy," said Alf in hollow tones, " has broken his leg. *With* complications. Did it at seven tonight—slipped on their back doorstep. In hospital." He held the beer up to the light : the corners of his mouth were turned down.

Silence, during which Sid came back, looking like two pennyworth of boiled string. No old bounce and bull from him now. If I could get another drummer, thought George. Sid took a bottle too. There were four fizzes as the bottles were undone, and followed by some close harmony guggling noises. Stan Jones stood aside, polite, unobtrusive, waiting.

" His mother says he may be off with it for months."

" That contest !" exclaimed George.

Sid supped his beer and looked at nothing. George would have loved to have questioned him.

Said Dan, " Lose a bass player in an outfit this size and the bottom drops out."

George suddenly realised how important was the tall man who stood there.

" M'm !" he spluttered, gulping and indicating Stan, " l-look—there's our dep—a bass player—he just walked in."

Alf stared at the stranger. Without taking his eyes off the face of the other, he found a bottle of beer and held it out.

" Well I'm damned," he said slowly, " have a drink."

George Vallis was a man of method, of stodgily bright sayings and aphoristic allusions. He had been heard to say, about the indiscriminately warm welcome for Stan Jones, *ne vendez pas la peau de l'ours avant de l'avoir tue.* To which Sid added don't count your moolah before you hear it rustle, and a bird in the hand is worth two out there on the dance floor.

In the succeeding weeks, he found it a bit difficult to sort out certain reservations he had about Stan Jones : not ' doubts ' or ' fear.' Reservations : that was the word. Like at one rehearsal, when he asked if Stan was playing the bass part of an arrangement as written, and Stan had looked back as blank as a jailhouse wall and had answered softly " no, but doesn't it sound *magnificent* ?"

" Where'd you get that stuff ?" asked Dan.

" Izzy Suleiman of course," answered Stan, " greatest British bass player who ever—" then he stopped.

" Izzy Suleiman," said Dan curiously, " who—"

" No, sorry," Jones had seemed anxious to put himself back into the shadows of quietness again. " I got the wrong name : sorry."

The Good Influence sometimes found Stan Jones a bit of a strain. One thing was certain however—that he could play a

bass like a wonder. He always used Sammy's bass, because he had had to sell his own, he said, and he had Sammy's permission. Sammy would not be back for some weeks yet.

And Sid. Sid was such a bighead, opined George, that he would not listen to anybody, not even to George Vallis, who couldn't stand bigheads at any price, as they all knew. The drummer's new chicken dinner had expensive tastes, and the old one was still after him, so Stan said. Stan seemed to know a lot, in a quiet way, and George thought rather acridly that there were times when the George Vallis Quintet might as well have been called the Stan Jones Five—remarkable how George's annoyances used to settle themselves upon Stan. But a Good Influence has to control such feelings.

Stan's quiet ways and subtly perky assurance narked not only George (who was not prepared to admit it openly) but also Sid, who was ready to snarl at the drop of a hat.

At the end of one rehearsal when Sid had been defending his betting, Stan cut in with " You've had two winners this week and ten losers. You put out eight quid and you got thirty-five bob back. Why don't you get a system, boy ?"

It touched Sid on the raw. He snarled and then said six dirty words in a row. Then he threw his kit in a corner and left. George was of a mind to run after him, but Stan put a gently restraining hand on his shoulder.

" He'll be back," he said. Then he went on wiping the strings of the bass.

" Can't understand why you let Sid go on like that," he said.

" Makes life more interesting," snapped Dan. He was putting the guitar away slowly, glancing at a copy of *Melody News* as he did so. " Where do you think we'd get another drummer like Sid then ?"

Alf was halfway through taking his vibes to pieces: he peered through the scaffolding like a grounded spiderman.

" He's a proper nut, that's what," said Alf. " Good drummer or not, there ought to be a limit somewhere. Look at the way he's been going on since that bloke at his clairvoyant thingummy gave them that line about training people to go into future time and to bring something back."

" Ridiculous !" said George, and wondered why Stan didn't join in the condemnation. But then, he never did. " He's not really been the same since that compliment from the contest judge about his futuristic style."

" With his women and his gambling and his looney ideas," growled Dan, " he's a hophead without the hop." He closed his instrument case with a click. " I hope," he added.

Jones was persistent.

" Then why do you let him go on like that ?"

" Because he's such a darned good—" began George, when he realised that he didn't much care for the way in which Stan spoke.

George said, very nicely, " Oh well, Stan, perhaps you would like to advise us."

Much to his surprise, the reply was positive.

" I'll cure him. I feel I owe you fellows a lot, and I'd hate to leave any feeling of discord behind me."

" Leave ?" asked Alf. " Leave behind ?"

Stan said, " Sammy's nearly fit again, and the money's been useful to me. The whole experience has been most interesting."

The doubts in George's mind stirred again. They knew so little about Stan. They had his telephone number, and his address, but they never had the occasion to call there, and he never took the bass home with him. He had drifted in—now he was drifting out : or was he ? His musings went to pieces in the noise of the other three latching on to the suggestion.

" How will you begin, Stan ?" asked Dan.

" I shall first gain his confidence by giving him some winners."

" Huh ?" This was Alf, who, as a telephone engineer, might have given himself a few tips with a tapped line here and there, if he'd wanted to be dishonest.

" You—can—pick—winners—Stan ?"

In a flash George saw that this was where he could lose control of his band. He thought he glimpsed a corner of Alf's mind where reposed a vision of a super-super-vibraphone : and it seemed that other people had their own little visions too. H'm. Well. Some people were like that, thought George loftily.

" Yes I can," said Stan, " what about it ?"

" You got friends with the gee-men ?" asked Dan.

" You could call it that," was the answer. " I'll soon have Sid eating out of my hand, even if he is wild with me now. Then, after we've built him up even further with a few little

—presents, we'll deflate that head with one big blow, and for good."

And nobody, said George Vallis to himself, questions him about it. Well, we shall see.

" Why are you moving, Stan ? asked George.

Stan shrouded the bass in its canvas cover, and stood it in the corner, where the obliging landlord let him keep it whenever he wanted. He put on his coat.

" Oh—the works have offered me a move. I've no particular roots, and I like to see around."

Stan said goodnight, and that left Alf and Dan and George. A sudden ridiculous thought occured to the latter. If, on that first evening when Stan walked in and asked them what sort of musician they were short of, they had told him, say, a trumpet player, would he have been just as ready to fill the bill ? Or did he *know* they wanted—correction, would want, a bass player ?

Alf said very thoughtfully, " Well, however crazy it sounds, I'm going to keep an open mind on it. It could work."

" It's true that Sid is at a state where he will believe a lot with little proof," said George, in his precise way, " and if he can be made to see reason, well, I must admit that I'd welcome it." He turned to where Dan was sitting looking at the *Melody News*, a puzzled expression on his face.

" Coming, Dan ?"

Dan said, " Where have we heard the name of a musician named Suleiman before ?"

" Dunno," said Alf, " have we ?"

" Why ?" asked George, " what's worrying you ?"

Dan got up, still looking at the paper.

" Oh," he replied, " I'm not worrying. There was this bit in the *Melody News* caught my eye. Look. ' Congratulations to Reuben Suleiman, first 'cello with the B.B.C Symphony orchestra, and his wife Miriam, on the birth of a son. The child will be named Isaac Daniel.' "

" Well," said Alf, " that's just fine for the Suleiman's, ain't it ? Little Izzy makes three : what of it ?"

" There !" exclaimed Dan, " I thought of *Izzy* Suleiman : why ? Do we know any Suleimans ?"

" No," said Alf, " we just got the Krzowskis next door : they're enough for me. Come on man : get that fiddle of yours and let's go."

They went.

Within a fortnight of the beginning of the Jones plan, Sid and Stan were such close buddies that they couldn't have been separated with a blow-lamp. In twelve racing days Don Juan Farrar had eight winners, and his season's losses had already disappeared under a pile of the crisp and green. The others seemed pretty pleased about something too, but George, being George, had his doubts. At first it was a something, an atmosphere, a change of outlook, upon which he couldn't put his finger. The situation became rapidly more definitive, however. A certain slackness, a couldn't-care-less, became noticeable, and the appearance of a casual attitude towards money George found nothing less than shocking. New things began to appear—a heater in the brake, some cool new gent's natty suitings that hadn't been in evidence before : Alf lashed out with a new set of vibes and a tape recorder, and Dan got himself an amplifier he didn't curse at. And they plainly indicated George's name was now Jack, and they were all right : fireproof, in fact. George wondered if he should have been more friendly with Stan.

He found himself in agreement with the band in the opinion that perhaps Sid's cure was being a bit delayed. The drummer was now built up to such a pitch, they felt, that he would believe that you could make tom-tom heads out of moondust, if Stan said so.

They told Stan what they had been thinking. They were in a pub during a dance interval : smoke, heat, and not much co-ordination in some of the laughter. Sid was with his chick, over in the far corner.

" The cure *is* on," said Stan, with all his quiet charm showing," you must believe me. The higher he gets the harder we can make him fall. We're not stopping at horses now : the next stage is to tie up with another one of his interests and to look—just look for a start, into the future."

They gaped a bit.

" Now that his financial worries are less, I have dragged out of him all these ambitions of having a really super kit, and to be the most advanced drummer that ever was. We are going to build high and dizzy on that."

" This—this looking into the future," said Alf, " give."

George sat listening with a look on his face as though he had swallowed his favourite reed.

" Right," said Stan, " you listen to his cymbal work in the second half, and to the tone of *these* cymbals."

He produced a large flat package and unwrapped it, displaying two shining discs.

They were of a near-white metal, spun, but with strange flutings radiating from a high, cone-like centre. He balanced one centrally on his tumb, and hit it gently, and a sound like the waves of a burnished sea crept round them, whispering, beating, errie.

" The first bit if kit from the future," he said, " hors d'oeuvre. Don't get alarmed : I dreamed these up with the help of a fellow at work, and the ' future ' beats and so forth I showed him I got from some records not issued here yet. You'll see how I'll have him ready before long to accept a complete kit from the future : that's where the punch will come."

" ' The education of Drusilla Strange '," said Dan suddenly.

George didn't understand him : George was irritable : Stan, Stan, Stan, he thought. Nobody thinks of me.

Stan said, " No, Dan, Sturgeon didn't create me—and Sid is the suggestible one this time."

Back at the dance the bodgies and the widgies soon reacted to the way Sid was playing : and the adoration that Sid in his turn had for Stan was quite unmistakable. And George was pleased to tell the other four that their playing backed him up very well, and didn't they think he sounded better than ever?

The replies he got made him think that he must be at the dirty or receiving end of a plot.

There was trouble that last week of Stan's tenure : when George called a rehearsal they all told him what he could do with it : did he think that they were going to spend all their sweet young lives playing and rehearsing for the glory of George Vallis ? They were off to one of the Jazz Festival concerts, and why didn't George buy himself a car like they had and join them ?

George was hurt : his band, his arrangements, his training. And Stan Jones had been corrupting them by giving them winners and not letting the Real Power behind the band into it.

George was really upset.

He was even more annoyed when he heard that Sid, cornered, had refused to marry the girl.

Then, the blow fell. But they had wanted it to be a good healthy clout to bring him to his senses, not a poleaxing. The first George knew about it was when Alf rang him up

with the suppressed frenzy the little fellow usually reserved for the occasions when they were a man short, and wanted to know about fixing a deputy drummer for the Saturday night.

" Is anything wrong with Sid ? asked George.

" Wr————!" Alf spluttered a bit. " Wrong ? They think he's going off his rocker !"

" Round the bend ?"

" Man," yipped Alf, " he's past the bend and on the home stretch : *I thought you knew* ! ! !"

George said, with aloof dignity, that he had noticed of late that people did not take him into their confidence as they used. Still, he was only . . .

He began " this is all Stan Jones'—"

" It's a bit hotter than we thought, isn't it ?"

They all went round to see Sid—George and Alf and Dan and the now recovered Sammy. He was a sorry sight—the victim of belief. They grouped round his bed, talking with a forced cheerfulness, wondering, as George thought with a kind of self-satisfied gloom, how to undo the damage. Stan Jones was infallible : Stan Jones had said that he would get Sid a top drummer's kit from 2055 and he had done so. And as that was the case, what was the good of living any more ? *There it was in the corner of the room* ! ! !

They looked at it and then back at Sid, a man so sick and in thrall that he could be taken in by that !

Dan started to talk about dates and future bookings and how Sid must now have learned a lesson, but Alf kicked him hard. George distributed one of his old-style glares and found that there was more response to it than there had been for some time. They were awed. By George of course, George told himself.

They tried to break it to him gently, but even before he started Alf could sense that the blow which Stan Jones had dealt him held him firmly by the mind.

" Stan Jones was no miracle worker," said Alf, " it was all a put up job between him and us when we thought that—"

Sid was shaking his head like a pendulum before Alf got to the piece about the faking of the ' future ' cymbals.

Alf stopped and shook his head too : there was a desperate air about him.

" Sidney," said Dan, " we'll *fetch* Stan and tell him that you need him. He'll convince you."

Sammy shook his head morosely and said, " That damned leg of mine."

Sid moaned, " There's Lu, too. But what's the good, if *that's* the future for us ?"

He wagged his head towards the corner of the bedroom.

They left him : they went outside, lit cigarettes and sat in the brake. There was a lot of dead silence for about three minutes.

" Hell !" said Dan, in an awestruck voice, " isn't he frightened !"

Then Alf said, " The address is seventy-eight Wallington Avenue."

" S.E. ?"

" Yes."

" Indian country," said Sammy.

" No visas," said Dan.

George consulted a notebook.

" The phone number is 3-22476."

Alf stared.

" No such series," he said, and then added something which could have given the shivers to anyone who needed them.

" Not in *this* London," he said.

He started the engine.

" Do we go ?"

" We must," said Dan, " but I don't like it."

And the measure of what they all felt was in that no one disagreed. They were in the wrong, and they didn't feel happy about it. Then, approaching Streatham, it was Dan who broke the silence.

" Who started all this ?"

" Sid," said Alf, " Bighead."

" Wrong—it was Stan Jones."

" But," protested George, " we asked Stan to—"

" He *offered* to do it."

There were grunts of agreement, but they seemed to think that there was not much point in raking it over.

Dan went on : the business seemed to fit into something he had met before.

" We never saw him home, we never saw him with a bass of his own, we never saw him except when we were playing out or rehearsing. We never saw him smoke, drink or eat. We don't know where he worked either : maybe our band was the only way he *could* earn money."

" Smoke, eat, drink ? Who was he then ?"

" Or *what* was he ?" asked Dan crisply.

" Tcha !" That was George. With that derisive sound he tried to dispel the gathering tension : he thought it pretty pinheaded of Dan to add to their worries like that.

" We'll soon see daylight through this," averred George, " this looks like it."

They swung into Wallington Avenue, dingy, lamplit, suburban. Alf was counting.

" Sixty-four, six, eight, seventy—seventy-two—" he slowed and then stopped.

They got out and walked up the pavement.

Seventy-four—six—they passed a weed-grown area, and the numbers began at eighty-two.

" Funny." George had a sinking feeling.

" Mistake," said Sammy.

" See what I mean ?" murmered Dan.

" N-no," said Alf, " we don't. Try seventy-six."

An old dear said she'd never heard of Stan Jones. There was a *Henry* J.———. They tried eighty-two, then back to seventy-four, up again to eighty-four. Not a thing. The houses had been knocked down by Hitler in '41, and that was that. Jones ? No, never heard of him. Jones ? There used to be—oh, dark feller ? No sorry. Good night mister.

They were a group now by the side of the brake. George had to admit that they didn't see. George had the shakes just a bit.

" See what I mean ?" That was Dan, scarcely audible.

They climbed into the brake, and the return journey began. An encephalograph could have had a crazy time with any one of them.

When Streatham was behind them George voiced one thing which they had all been thinking.

" All right then," he said, " we can't find Stan—not at first go, anyway. But we can still tell a lie : anything to get Sid back to being the man he was, bighead or not."

Alf, hunched in the driving seat, grunted.

" Trust a bighead to know a bighead."

George ignored him. He felt slightly, and guiltily, triumphant : an Influence for Good.

" I'll write Sid a fake letter from Stan, explaining that it was all a put up job."

Murmers of approval.

Silence, and the hum of the motor, and lights flicking by.

" Like a blooming visitation, " said Sammy.

They passed Brixton.

" Here !" exclaimed Sammy again, " what's that girl, Lu's—surname ?"

" Good Lord !" said George," it's Jones ! There's a coincidence. Why ?"

" Use it in your letter," was the answer, " then he will believe that it was a scare, if you tell him so—a wheeze thought up by someone in her family : anything you like."

" Anything but the truth," said Dan drily : " you *ought* to read Sturgeon you know, Georgie."

They were nearly at the corner when they dropped Dan.

George answered, " We can't lose Sid : we won't. Where's the sense in being a good drummer to the bad all because he is convinced that the top drummer's kit of 2055 will be a couple of shinbones and a hollow log ?"

Dan opened the door as the brake came to a halt.

" No sense in it at all," he said.

—**John Kippax**

STRAIGHT FROM THE HORSE'S MOUTH

John Boland's contribution this issue is one bordering on the whimsical—so much has to be taken for granted in this type of plot. Nevertheless, it does show to what extremes fantasy writing can go and still remain first-class entertainment. Who ever heard of a talking horse, anyway?

By JOHN BOLAND

Gold Cup day it was, just before the 2.30 race, when Uncle Willie told me he was changing into a horse. That he'd had a spell put on him, and hadn't much longer to go about on just two legs.

Well, now, Uncle Willie's one of the biggest liars ever to touch horse-leather, so of course I didn't pay much attention to him. I was more interested in picking out the winner of the next race for, truth to tell, I needed the money. I'd had a bad season. So I brushed the old boy to one side and said : " Not now, Uncle Willie, I'm busy. Tell me about it later."

Well, I wish I had taken the time to listen to him. It would have saved me money, for the horse I backed came in last. But . . . that's neither here nor there. I was telling you about Uncle Willie. Not that he's my uncle—I simply in-

herited him when I took over the stables. He'd been with the establishment thirty years and so, naturally, I took him on.

He'd never given me any real trouble, although I must admit that at times he wasn't exactly all that you could wish for, for on occasions he drank.

And that, apparently, had been the cause of his present misfortune. This particular piece of trouble had started some months back. He'd been on the bottle, and, as usual at such times, he started to get short-tempered and rude. And on this occasion he'd been rude to the wrong person, for he'd offended a gypsy. Not an ordinary gypsy, either, but one who was a lady of considerable age and experience—a queen in her own tribe.

The outcome was that she cursed him. She put a spell on him that'd take effect the next time he got the worse for drink. He'd been pretty scared by it, too. So much so that he led a sober life for quite a long spell. Then, one day at Wolverhampton, he'd been walking on the course and he'd found a corkscrew. That did it. As he said :

" It did seem a sin, gaffer, not to put the tool to the use for which it was fashioned."

And that was that. Once he'd started again he didn't know when to stop, and he'd finished up well and truly drunk.

Of course, when he told me all this I just laughed at him. I thought it was the best yarn he'd ever spun. But Uncle Willie wasn't laughing. Not by a long chalk he wasn't. And I stopped myself when I found out it was true. He *was* changing into a horse.

So I said : " But look here. All you've got to do is to find the old girl and apologise. Then she'll take the spell off."

Unfortunately, that wasn't any good, for he'd already tried it, and found out that the curse was a very special one and couldn't be lifted.

" I went to see her, gaffer," he said. " But it worn't no good. She's nobbled me and got me entered in the changeling stakes."

Apparently, it was about a week after he'd left Wolverhampton that he'd noticed the first changes. Not very much at first—just his boots getting too tight across the instep. Then they seemed to be getting a bit long, but even at this he hadn't paid much attention. It wasn't until one particular night

when he was bathing that he'd had a shock. He'd climbed out of the bath and gone padding across the lino for the soap, and when he turned to go back he saw a line of circular hoofprints that he'd left on the bathroom floor.

I said : " What a terrible shock that must have been !"

But he was quite cheerful about it. " It was certainly a bit of a shock when I first spotted it, gaffer," he said. " But now it don't worry me at all . . . No, the thought of changing into an 'oss don't bother me at all."

It was all very well saying that, but I could see that *something* was worrying him. " You've got something on your mind though, Uncle Willie," I said. " So out with it. What is it ?"

And then he told me. " Well, gaffer," he said, " there's one thing as does bother me, and that's a fact. It's about what'll happen to me when I'm changed. You—you won't send me to the knackers, will you ?"

Well I ask you ! Fancy the poor old devil worrying about a thing like that. " Don't you fret yourself, Uncle Willie," I said. " As long as I've got a place there'll be no need for you to go looking for somewhere to sleep and eat. As long as I can afford straw and oats, I'll see you don't go short."

I mean. I couldn't let him go to a stranger, could I ? Not after he'd been with the establishment for thirty years or more. So it was up to me to fix something, and when I got back to the stables I talked it over with the head lad. We decided that Uncle Willie could have a corner of the north paddock fenced off for his own private use if he'd like it, and we'd also provide him with a loose-box.

The head lad said : " You know, sir, it's a pity we're losing him, for with all his faults, Uncle Willie's the best judge of an apprentice I ever did see."

It was a fact. Uncle Willie had an instinct about such things that enabled him to pick winners among the apprentices. Give the old fellow a couple of hours to watch and question a boy, and at the end of that time he'd tell you whether the boy would ever make the grade as a jockey. It was uncanny ; the gift never failed. Uncle Willie'd talk to the boy, asking all sorts of daft-sounding questions, and at the end of the session he'd come and report to me.

Twice he'd told me that he'd just been speaking to a future champion. And he was right both times. As I said, Uncle Willie's gift never failed him, not even if he'd been at the

bottle. And it was the bottle that had stopped Uncle Willie himself from becoming a champion.

Judging from the amount he'd put away in his time, he must have had insides of best horse-brass and saddle-leather, otherwise he'd have been dead long ago.

But he was so tough that we'd come to regard him as being indestructible, and when we realised that he wasn't, it took a bit of getting used to. In one particular, however, he became much more handsome. For as long as I'd known him, Uncle Willie'd been bald, but now he'd started growing chesnut-coloured hair, and after a time he became quite proud of it, buying bits of coloured ribbon and spending a lot of time braiding the ribbons into his newly-grown hair.

Apart from that, and a gradual lengthening of his face, most of the change was working up from his feet. After a month or so he moved into the loose-box and spent most of the day currying his flanks and brushing his mane. He was very happy, and he was always very pleased to see me whenever I went into his box, although it was getting more and more difficult to understand what he said.

But you could tell by the way he flicked his ears that he still understood every word we said to him.

Then, some time later, the head boy came to see me.

"About Uncle Willie, sir," he said. "I've been thinking a lot about him lately."

"Who hasn't !" I said.

"Ah !" he said, "but I've been thinking about him in a special way." He hesitated, then went on : "Look, sir, do you reckon Uncle Willie'll be able to speak when he's changed completely ?"

"Now look here !" I said. "Don't be daft. Whoever heard of a horse that could talk !"

"Aye, that's true," he admitted. "And it's a great pity."

I could see he was very downcast about something, so I asked him what was the matter.

"Well, sir," he said, "when Uncle Willie was human, he was a great judge of a jockey, wasn't he ?"

"Way ahead of the field," I admitted. "It was a miracle the way he did it."

The head lad nodded. "Aye, he was a good 'un at that all right. But he worn't no judge of horseflesh."

The lad was right. Uncle Willie was last in the field when it came to picking a horse to win. He was even worse at it

than me. In all his long life, only once had his money been on the first past the post, and that had been in a walkover. If there was more than one horse in a race, Uncle Willie's money handicapped the poor beast right down the course.

The head lad went on : " So I was wondering, sir. Now that he's changed, do you suppose his talent's changed too ?"

I saw what he meant in a flash.

It was a fascinating thought. If Uncle Willie, when he was a man, could pick the coming winners among jockeys, why shouldn't he, when he was a horse, pick the coming winners among horses ? There was a fortune in it. Why, just imagine ! Tips, straight from the horse's mouth !

In a few years' time I'd have the finest training establishment in the country. Every horse I trained would be a winner—I wouldn't give stall-room to anything but youngsters specially vetted by Uncle Willie.

And what made it even better, from my point of view, was what had happened to Uncle Willie. Naturally, I'd thought that, being an old man, he'd turn into an old horse. But not a bit of it. He made as handsome a yearling as you could wish to see. A bit light in the shoulders, maybe, but then, you can't have everything.

So, with any luck, Uncle Willie would be with us for many years to come. I was set up for the rest of my life. It was funny, really, the way I'd thought he was bound to turn into an old horse. But of course when you come to think of it, nothing's *born* old, is it ! And Uncle Willie, in a manner of speaking, was being born anew.

Well, without wasting another moment I went right over to see Willie, to explain the scheme. I told him all about it, and it did my heart good to see the way he took it. Of course, by that time you couldn't understand what he was saying, but he seemed to understand me all right, for he got tremendously excited, trying to nuzzle me, tossing his head, and frisking his tail.

I said : " All right, Willie, all right ! Calm down, old boy, calm down." But he kept nosing at my hip, and it was at that moment when I realised my dream world was shattered. Uncle Willie wasn't excited by what I'd been telling him. No. What had got him frisking was the smell of the brandy-flask I'd got in my hip pocket. In one way, at least, he hadn't

changed. But I knew he couldn't understand a word I said to him. Not a single, bloomin' word !

So that was that.

Of course, I made all sorts of experiments to see if he could understand what I was saying, but all along I knew it was a waste of time. Yet I'm *certain* he's got something to tell me, for whenever I go down to the paddock, he leaves the crowd of yearlings he's mingling with and comes galloping over the moment he sees me, and starts going through a whole performance of prancing and neighing. But it doesn't mean a thing to me.

None of it's any use. If he *is* trying to tell me something, I don't understand what it is, and *he* can't understand what I'm trying to tell *him*.

I mean. There just isn't any form of communication you can devise between a horse and a man. Oh I know you can teach a horse tricks, but try teaching one to communicate with you. You'll soon find out what a waste of time it is.

Of course, the pity of it all is that Uncle Willie, when he was two-legged, never bothered to learn how to read or write, so I can't just get him to point out certain names, or to spell them out with his hoof, because he could never read anyway.

Of course, I haven't given up. I still try to teach him the alphabet. Almost every day we have a crack at it, but so far he hasn't got beyond the letter ' A,' and I'm not sure that he ever will.

I've tried to get him to nod or shake his head, but it doesn't work. Just imagine ! Tips, straight from the horse's mouth ! There's a million pounds locked up in Willie's mouth, if only I could find a way of getting 'em out.

So far all I've got from it has been a laugh—a horse laugh.

—**John Boland**

Most readers will probably think that John Brody is another of the new writers we have discovered. In actual fact his first two stories appeared in our companion New Worlds *back in* 1949 *and* 1950. *Since then we have heard little of his activities until recently....and we hope that he has now returned to writing for us.*

BORED TO DEATH

By JOHN BRODY

The brilliant jewel of the yellow, sand-filled oval was accentuated by the white marble of the stands that cupped it. The full glare of the tropical sun brought out every individual hue of the many-coloured garments worn by the excited spectators.

Each movement of the armoured figures in the arena threw back flashes of white sunlight so that they appeared to scintillate and sparkle as they turned and twisted in the long combat. Every segment and scale of their armour was burnished to a mirror surface so that they might have been figures of glass miraculously brought to life.

Even though the combat bored him, Lothar fought with his usual consummate skill. Each attack, each defence, was a problem in dynamics to be solved in lightning quick calculations. But at least his opponent was a man of mettle ! Although Lothar never doubted his own ability to gain victory, he admired the skill and intelligence that was pitted against him.

But now the heavy mace that Hagan carried was launched in yet another attack. Lothar deflected it with his small shield.

All Hagan's strength and weight was behind the blow, and after the deflection he could not easily check the downward course of the heavy mace and the weight of his armoured arm. Hagan's whole body was pulled forward and to the left. His weight went on to his outstretched foot which bit into the sand.

Lothar solved the dynamics involved and saw his chance. His own broad-bladed axe, held knee-high, swung forward and upward, accelerating rapidly. It was aimed at Hagan's crutch, now fully extended as the giant sought to recover and step back.

The razor-keen edge of the hardened blade bit through the segmented armour that protected the giant's vitals as though it was papier mache. The axe went deep beyond, mortally wounding, so that recovery to a defensive tactic was impossible.

In a split second Lothar had freed the blade with a twist that created further havoc. He swung again, this time striking hard at the gleaming helm. Once more the blade sheared through the plate, sinking deep into the brain mechanism beyond. Again and again Lothar struck, for a brief instant his boredom banished in a welter of unchecked destruction.

And then it was over as the giant staggered under the rain of blows, to topple with a crash to the sand. In the stands the spectators rose to their feet in a prolonged ovation. They had been deeply thrilled by this display of skill and they hastened to acclaim Lothar as their champion.

But already Lothar's boredom had swept over him again like a sullen, grey-tinted sea. For several minutes he was motionless, relaxing in a reaction of weariness.

Slowly and carefully he withdrew his hands from the manual control gauntlets. In the arena his robot fighter became immobile, a shining statue powerless to move until some mechanic manipulated it from the field of combat. Such a tedious task could be left to an eager tyro who wanted to feel for a few minutes the thrill of being an undefeated gladiator, marching his puppet back to the workshops under the stands. Lothar wanted only a drink to quicken his appreciation of a boring life.

He slipped off the head-set, releasing the mental link between his own head and the electronic brain of the creature below. He set it on the table, leaving the cables dangling. Imperceptibly the dim light of the control room had brightened so that by the time he pressed the button to slide open the

door his eyes were adjusted to the billiant light of the world outside.

He stepped out into the marble passage and found a dozen admirers waiting to congratulate him. But he brushed off their plaudits quickly. They no longer interested him.

In the arena the spectators were dispersing to the auto-park and copter-level, discussing the details of the epic combat. Mechanics were at work salvaging the shattered remains of Hagan's robot. Although the main control centre in the head-piece was no more than a mess of cloven electronics, most of the remainder of the robot could be repaired and used again.

Lothar moved off along the passage towards the escalator, his entourage falling into procession about him. A second door slid open and the defeated Hagan stepped out.

"Well fought, Lothar !" he cried when he recognised the blond victor. His ugly face creased into a grin. "They told me you were good, but I never guessed *how* good ! It will be a long time before the Empire will find a gladiator who can give you best !"

Lothar clasped his opponent's forearm in a strong grip. He felt the whip-cord muscles under the light golden tunic.

"It was a good combat !" he said. "There were times when I thought you had me. You'll defeat me yet, Hagan my friend. Now join us at the club and sample some of the potent brews that the old Mother Planet can still knock up to shock you colonials !"

He had to admit that he liked Hagan. There was something about the dark giant from the Altairean Federation that made him want to know him better.

Still clasping Hagan's arm, Lothar started off along the passage. Both men were of the same height, and their pace was such as to set their admiring escort a struggle to keep up with the pair. Lothar and Hagan were big men in an age when outstanding physique was the exception rather than the rule. Ten thousand years before, in the dark early days of recorded history each might well have been a true gladiator in his own right. Each would have been able to fight as man to man in mortal combat instead of through the agency of fighting machines geared to every quick thought that sparked in their brains.

At the foot of the escalator several capsules waited for them. Lothar pushed Hagan into the leading ovoid and they settled into the form-enveloping seats. Lothar set the controls for the club, and the capsule accelerated away rapidly through the narrow tunnel fifty feet below the surface of the earth.

" We haven't got these refinements yet on my planet," Hagan commented. " We're strictly frontier, you know. Even the copters only work on automatics between the cities. When I go home I have to fly on manual—and five hundred feet up instead of fifty feet below ground !"

" You're from the Altairean Confederation ?" Lothar asked.

Hagan nodded. " A little planet I don't expect you've ever heard of. New Bavaria."

Lothar had heard of it—but in what connection he couldn't for the moment remember.

" All these automatics take the kick out of life," he said. " Everything is so incredibly safe now on a civilised planet. Robot controls are just one hundred per cent safe—or ought to be. That's the trouble. Life just isn't worth living any longer. I'm bored—bored to death !"

Hagan lifted a swarthy eyebrow. Was the blond Empire champion putting on an act ? Trying to impress him with his nonchalance ? The finest gladiator in the Empire—undefeated in a hundred combats—bored ?

" I find it difficult to believe," he said. " After all you are a gladiator !"

" You're still on the way up," Lothar replied. " You've still a target to aim at. You've got to defeat me—and that makes every fight something exciting, another step towards the top. But for me ? I've nothing but the boredom of sticking to my title. I wish you had defeated me, Hagan. Then at least it would be over and I could begin again at something else."

" But surely you have some stake in the combats you fight ?"

Lothar shook his head. " Nothing ! It is as boring as a game of chess. Oh, I'm not showing off. I needed every ounce of my skill to defeat you today. But the old thrill of combat is no longer there."

" And if I *had* defeated you ?"

" Why then the whole Empire is open to me. Somewhere, surely, there is something that still has the tingle of excitement."

The club was set on a ledge high on the western precipices of the Andes. From the terrace it was possible to look out across the Pacific, now turned to an ocean of gold by the setting sun. The rewards of a champion gladiator were immense and Lothar could afford the luxuries of the very rich.

They entered to a welter of congratulations and backslaps from the clubmen who had watched the combat on the life-size tri-vi screen. But Lothar was in no mood for bonhomie. He shook them off and took Hagan out to the terrace. Soon they were settled in easy chairs, stimulent dispensers at their elbows.

Hagan admired the chrinyan that sparkled in the crystal glass. It was certainly the smoothest drink he had tasted yet in his long voyage to the Mother Planet from Altair—and he had stopped off to win laurels on ten or more other worlds.

But even the soul-warming concoction could not shake Lothar out of his mood.

" The trouble with the Empire is that civilisation's gone too far !" he complained. " It's just no longer possible to risk your neck short of jumping off a cliff or trying to swim the Pacific unaccompanied. God how I long for some gut-crawling excitement !"

" You want to risk you neck ?" Hagan asked. " You must be a throw-back to pre-Dawn times." Even to a colonial from one of the most distant planets such sentiments sounded strange.

" Never having risked my neck voluntarily, I wouldn't know the answer," Lothar said. " But this I can tell you. Once I was flying a planetary jet when the auto-stabilisers failed. For twenty minutes I was fighting gravity and the elements for my life—and I loved every minute of it ! I won the fight and it was a greater victory than ever I've enjoyed in robot combat !"

" You like fighting for your *life* ?" Hagan marvelled. " But you're a gladiator, man !"

" I sometimes wish it was *me* inside that armour plate. That I was down there on the sand, not just an electronic mockery of a man. I wish it was *my* life that I was risking, and not a small fortune in robotics !"

Lothar spoke vehemently and Hagan stared at him in surprise. He was staggered to hear such spoken thoughts by

a citizen of the Empire, a man conditioned from birth to the civilised way of life.

But even as Lothar spoke the words he knew the idea to be ridiculous. After all, he was conditioned. He could as easily kill himself as kill another living man.

And yet he asked himself for the thousandth time in recent months *had the conditioning he had received failed in its purpose*? Could he, in fact, kill another man if he wanted to—if circumstances demanded that he do so to save his own life?

It was an uneasy thought, prompted by the atavistic thrill that possessed him in the last few moments of a combat. When he was sending those destroying blows into his opponent's brain mechanism, he did not see a robot in front of him, but his opponent in all his flesh, blood, bone and muscle!

He knew that conditioning *could* fail in its purpose. Every once in a while citizens were killed. Only one or two in all the teeming millions that inhabited the Empire. But enough to show that the scientists in Psychcentre had failed in their purpose to banish violent death.

Now he leaned across towards Lothar. The nectar in the tumblers he had emptied stimulated him to recklessness.

"Would *you* go into the arena, Hagan?" he asked suddenly. "Man to man—your mace against my axe?"

Hagan was really startled now. He grabbed his tumbler and swallowed the stiff drink.

"You're crazy!" he snapped. "They'd never allow it!"

"But if it could be arranged?"

Hagan was silent. He had been too busy in his profession as an up-and-coming gladiator, too stimulated by the desire to enjoy the fruits assembled for him at the peak, to ever plumb the depths of civilised boredom that now racked Lothar.

"I've never considered such an outlandish idea!" he muttered. "Why it's near sacrilege to suggest such a thing. Now I *know* you're crazy, Lothar!"

"Could it be because you're afraid?" Lothar taunted. "I defeated you today because of the skill of my brain. But what if it was my brain *and* body against yours, my friend? What then? I've always heard it said that the colonies contained the true sons of Mother Earth. Perhaps it was wrong

to say so and that courage is only to be found here. Prove your courage by a real gladiatorial combat, Hagan !"

Hagan stood up abruptly, dashing the crystal tumbler to the floor.

" I've heard enough !" he said quickly. " I did not come here to be insulted ! Perhaps you will arrange transport to my hotel, Lothar."

Lothar climbed to his feet. The terrace was almost in darkness and they were alone.

" All right, colonial," he said. " But think it over. If you have the courage to try a trial of strength, let me know. Come, I'll see you to the capsules !"

Afterwards he realised he had been stimulated too well by the new drink. He should never have gone so far. It was not only insulting, it was madness—and it would serve him right if Hagan reported him to Psychcentre.

Suppose Hagan had taken him up on the challenge ? Both men were conditioned not to take life. A combat in the arena under such conditions must end in a ridiculous stalemate with neither able to strike the mortal blow.

Assuming always that his conditioning still held good in the face of his doubts ! And if it didn't ? Perhaps it was as well that Hagan had remained sober enough to resist the insulting barbaric challenge. For it would be a one-sided combat with Hagan unable to kill him while he could strike down his opponent when the chance came !

The archaic word '*murder*' crept into his brain—and he was not revolted by the thought !

It was too late to go to his home that night, and he spent it at the club. Nevertheless his latest wife was still bubbling over with enthusiasm when he arrived the following day. He had chosen her more for her beauty and gaiety than for her intelligence, and so far had had no cause to regret his decision !

She was full of a 'round-by-round' description of the combat which she had watched on the tri-vi. He did not show his boredom with the subject, but as she talked he thought about other and more stimulating prospects.

Having exhausted the combat she turned to Hagan. He had been interviewed shortly before going into the control room to take charge of his fighting machine. There was a shadow of wildness about him, a hint of the old barbarian,

that appealed not only to Mara but to all who had watched the interview.

" But then these colonials are all so uncivilised by *our* standards !" she bubbled on to Lothar's deaf ears. " They make you think of all sorts of exciting things, like watching an historical drama on the tri-vi. He comes from New Bavaria where . . ."

Again the two words impinged on Lothar's subconscious and jerked him back to attention. New Bavaria ? Why should that colony ring a bell deep in his memory ? When he had time he would call Interplanetary Records on the vid and ask them to run a reel on the colony. Possibly they had some savage wild animal there which it was still permissible to hunt—in perfect safety, of course !

" I suppose now you're still champion there'll be no holiday for me," Mara went on. " You know, darling, in between your combats I just long for you to be defeated. But when your robot is in the arena I forget what I'm missing and want you to win. Silly, isn't it ?"

Lothar still found that Mara's charms enthralled him and he wished to please her.

" Don't say that," he said. " I'll be champion *and* we'll have a holiday. I'll arrange it today. Where shall we go ?"

She pouted. " I want it to be a holiday for both of us," she said. " But I know you'll only be bored wherever we go and whatever we do."

" We could do a season's rocket racing in the Asteroids," he offered. " You told me you loved that."

But she would not agree. She sensed the depths of the boredom that gripped her husband. She knew that there could be no holiday for him until he was totally freed from gladiatorial combat.

Distantly the musical carillion of the vid summoned him. He went into the lounge and pressed the ' Accept ' button.

The screen misted and cleared. He saw the ugly face of Hagan scowling at him.

" Welcome, gladiator !" Lothar said. " I'm glad you called. There's something I wanted to say to you. I . . . "

" Your challenge !" Hagan growled, his dark brows knotting. " I accept your challenge."

The words shook Lothar. It was the last thing he expected. If Hagan had not spoken first he was going to apologise, humbly and fully for his disgraceful conduct at the club. Not

that he felt a change in his attitude about a personal battle with another gladiator. But he regretted his uncivilised behaviour towards his guest.

" My challenge," he said slowly, desperately seeking words that could restore a difficult situation. " Hagan, it's not necessary. I was drunk—old-style, uncivilised drunk ! You had to come all the way to Earth to meet up with a man who drinks too much !"

But if he thought he could repair the damage, he was wrong. He knew from Hagan's face that the Altairean was speaking after night-long consideration. Not in the heat of anger but from a deep sense of outraged feelings. The colonial had been put on his mettle and words would not heal the raw edge of his pride.

" You made a challenge last night ! I accept. There's no more to be said. I don't know how you can arrange the matter. I don't know how things will work out. Perhaps we shall look the biggest pair of cretins in the Empire before the combat is over. But the challenge is accepted and you must do the rest. Let it be under the disguise of a return combat. Goodbye, Lothar. We shall meet again in the arena—in reality !"

He reached to clear the circuit. The mists swirled into opacity.

Lothar sat for a long time staring at the blank screen. He began to realise the enormity of his offence against civilised standards. More, he realised just how the situation had changed. For he would undoubtedly have to meet Hagan again. Their last combat had been a needle fight and everyone would insist that Hagan should have another opportunity to defeat him.

Yet if he ignored his own proposal, now accepted by Hagan, and treated the combat as a normal engagement, to be fought with robots, he would know that *he* was the coward. If he defeated Hagan's robot ten times, each time more devastatingly than the last, it would not for an instant remove the inner knowledge that the Altairean was the better man !

He had wanted to stick his neck out ! Well, he wondered, how did it feel to look like an ostrich ?

It did not take him long to reach a decision—for there was really only one decision that he could reach. If his previous

desire for actual combat had lessened, its place was taken by a feeling that his standing as a man was at stake !

Both feelings, he thought grimly, demonstrated that in his own case conditioning must have failed ! He was the citizen in a billion !

He set about the arrangements with an enthusiasm that banished boredom to the winds ! It must be done with the utmost discretion. He would keep the number of people who must know his plan to an irreducible minimum.

Time was on his side. Before Hagan could ask for a return meeting, he would have to defeat several second-level gladiators on the Mother Planet who clamoured to meet him. Perhaps time and action, coupled to the refinements of civilisation to be found on Earth would quieten the Altairean's desire to wipe out the insult !

In the meantime Lothar began to plan. He engaged a master metal-worker who had experience in the robot workshops. He paid the man a princely salary, rushed up a house in the grounds of his estate, and set him to work fabricating two suits of armour. They were to be exactly similar in every respect to those that encased the fighting robots—but without the maze of electronics and mechanics that filled the fighting machines. Moreover they must be so designed that the two men could don them before the combat. All the catches, panels and rivets must be concealed in such a way that even the keenest-eyed observer should see nothing amiss as the gladiators strode into the ring.

Once the metal-worker was housed and equipped with the tools for his task, Lothar turned to new plans. Both he and Hagan must on the face of it go into the control rooms. Then they must escape to the chamber in which the robots waited before going out into the arena. There they would have to be equipped in their armoured suits before emerging on to the sand in place of the robots.

What was the minimum number of people involved behind the scenes at a robot combat whose mouths must be stuffed with money to keep them shut until after the combat ?

There was a third aspect to be considered. If Lothar was still conditioned then the combat would end in an impasse. It was beyond the bounds of reason that Hagan also might be one of those whose conditioning had failed in its purpose. The odds would be so long that they could be ignored. That meant that they would fight on indefinitely until they collapsed

from exhaustion. No doubt when the fact became known they would be dismissed as a couple of wealthy pranksters and the real business of robot combat would begin.

Lothar wondered for a moment if Hagan had considered the outcome of the fight. No doubt he was playing along the line that if a conditioned man was threatened with immediate death, his natural instincts would rebel against his basic conditioning and he would defend himself, to the death if needs be.

And if Lothar's conditioning *had* failed? What would be his position after he had killed—he baulked at the word 'murdered'—Hagan? He thrust the problem into the back of his mind. He would look up precedents later!

In the meantime he attended a number of combats in several of the larger stadiums. He haunted the passages and workshops of the arenas, making mental notes of all those details he had never bothered to observe before.

He found to his surprise that there were only four men who had to be fixed. There was the technician at the control panel who would immediately observe that the robots were not working under load. There was the robotics engineer who waited in the chamber with the two robots, carrying out last minute checks on his charges. There was the attendant who guarded the passage outside the control rooms to see that no one disturbed the two gladiators as they sat at their desks manipulating the robots in the combat. And there was the announcer in his eyrie who would have to explain the delay before the robots entered the arena.

Lothar decided to take a fifth man into his confidence. He realised that the negotiations with the four men would require the skilful handling of an expert in such things and Lothar's temperament was not the sort for that sort of work!

When he explained what he wanted to Grimald, the small man's reaction was only to be expected.

"Sons of Starmen!" he ejaculated. "You're crazy!"

"All right, I'm crazy," Lothar agreed. "But that's the way I want it and I'm prepared to pay for my craziness."

He had selected Grimald with care because he knew that the little man was always ready to earn more money. Grimald could never hope to rise into the top executive class and earn the almost unlimited salaries of the elect. But he was con-

sumed with a longing for the things that only really big money could purchase. He was Lothar's man all right !

When Lothar had sketched in the details of his plan, Grimald shook his head in wonder.

" I still think you're crazy," he said. " But if you're prepared to pay, then the deal's on. It'll cost you a hundred thousand credits—and for what ? You know as well as I do you can't kill Hagan and he can't kill you. At the most you'll come out of the combat without an arm or a foot. At the worst the spectators will ostracise both of you in the future when they find out that they've paid to see a mock struggle."

" Let's suppose I kill Hagan," Lothar asked. " What would happen ?"

" But you couldn't kill him, man !"

" All right ! But supposing I *did* ?"

Grimald pondered the question. It certainly was tricky. He had never been much of a history student ; he certainly could not recall a similar case. He had never heard of a criminal case involving the slaying of one individual by another. If laws existed to cover such an incident, they must be buried deep in the dusty files at Sociocentre.

" I suppose they'd say you'd gone berserk," he said slowly. " You'd go to Psychcentre for analysis and reconditioning."

" Nothing more ?" Lothar pressed.

" You know me, Lothar. I'm an impressario not a sociologist. In the circumstances I think you'd create a first class sensation that would liven up Sociocentre for a decade. Killing another man ! If I was sensitive I suppose I'd retch at the thought. Anyway if I thought there was the barest chance of it happening—bar accidents of course—I'd get out of here just as quick as I came in. All the cash in Creation wouldn't get me mixed up in it. But if you're crazy enough to pay me the price of a Stellar Cruiser to fix this mock combat, I'll have a go. But killing, man—don't mention that word again to me."

The first suit of armour was finished, and Lothar went to try it on. The artistry involved in its creation was superb and Lothar could find no fault. He danced about the workshop as though he were dressed in no more than his work-a-day tunic. True the close confinement of the helm took a great deal of getting used to. But it was only a matter of practice.

He at once sent the finished suit to Hagan. Secretly he hoped that it would be returned with a note saying that the unfortunate affair of the challenge was forgotten. But he received no reply.

Hagan was busy establishing his supremacy among the second-level gladiators of Earth. Lothar had even watched him fight once at the big arena where their ultimate combat must take place. He had taken time out to study every film that had been made of the gladiator and had marked down the attacks and defences that the dark man used.

Already feelers had been put out about a return combat between Lothar and Hagan. Lothar had signified that he was ready for the engagement when the Council controlling such bouts called upon him.

Grimald went about his peculiar business in his own devious way. He reported satisfactory progress to his principle. He had sounded out several men in each capacity and had thinned down the list to a likely customer in each case.

No one wanted to be on duty on the occasion of another combat between the two masters of the gladiatorial art. When Grimald finally closed the deal with the men he had selected, there would be no difficulty in arranging that they were at the key stations. Volunteers for tasks that would keep them out of the stadium seats on the big day would be welcomed by others on the duty rota.

The days flew rapidly by and Lothar realised that he had never enjoyed living so much. As a cure for boredom, whatever the after-effects, his ridiculous plan was certainly working !

Grimald went off to see Hagan and acquaint him with the detailed arrangements that he had made. He came back without an offer to call the battle off.

" I don't know what you said to him," he reported to Lothar. " But he's certainly take a violent, uncivilised dislike to you. He treated me with the utmost correctness—and got rid of me as quick as he could. I don't know where he comes from, but they breed an odd type of human on that planet !"

" He's from New Bavaia," Lothar said. The answer came almost automatically to his lips and he remembered he had not looked up the planet's history. He turned towards the vid to do it there and then, but Grimald headed him off. There were some points to be settled about the packing and transport of Lothar's armour to the arena.

Lothar took him to the house where the artist in metalwork lived and again he forgot to find out more about this

colony of the Empire that lay somewhere out towards the Fringe.

The second suit was as perfect as the first. Lothar had already spent many hours inside it in his gymnasium behind a locked door. He had practiced every feint and attack, working with axe and targe, until he was proficient. It had not been difficult. The manual controls of the fighting robots were so flawless in their responses to the brain and hands of the controller that Lothar stepped easily into the role of actual fighter instead of distant mentor.

The details were settled and Grimald departed, satisfied that every last piece of the jigsaw he had created had dropped into place. There was nothing left to do now until the day of combat.

Lothar went back to the house and found Mara waiting to show him a new creation in gold fibre she had thought up. Their relationship had reached new and exalted heights in the months that had passed since he had met Hagan. She was entranced by his sudden and unexpected freedom from boredom that had marred their marriage. For his part, Lothar had turned his full attention to her and found a whole empire of experiences that he had missed during the grey days before his idea.

The new garment was exquisite. Her vivacity quickly removed even a memory of Lothar's interest in New Bavaria. They dined in her club and returned late to the house.

The day of combat was upon him almost before he realised it. He was experiencing new senstations all the time. A quickening of the pulse when he thought of the possible dangers that lay ahead. Moments of fear at the thought of being maimed. Moments of anticipation when he thought that he might strike down the Altairean in a terrific onslaught.

He said goodbye to Mara. She sensed that he was strained to the limit, in a way she had not recognised before other combats. Then he was in the copter, flying on automatics towards the nearest point on the tunnel grid where he could pick up a capsule that would take him to the arena.

Grimald met him when he arrived. The little man could not conceal his nervousness as they went to a box above the control rooms to watch the preliminaries. As tyro fought tyro on the sandy oval, Lothar found himself clutching and pulling at the hem of his tunic in a manner he had not known since early days of his career as a gladiator.

The last fight finished as an armoured robot severed the headpiece of a second in one wild, exultant sweep of a broadsword. The spectators broke into desultory clapping. It had not been a good combat and everyone was eagerly awaiting the masterpiece that Hagan and Lothar promised.

"Come!" Grimald said. "We must stick to the plan. Everything is timed to a second!"

They went down to the passage. About the doors of the two control rooms friends of Hagan and Lothar clustered. Lothar caught a brief glimpse of Hagan, big, dark and scowling. Then he went into his control room alone. Outside, the friends went back to their seats in the arena. The bribed attendant cleared the passage, hustling the laggards out of the way.

Lothar heard the tap on the metal door. It made him jump, so strained were his nerves. Quickly he opened the door. Grimald was waiting and taking Lothar's arm, drew him swiftly to the stairs that led to the robot chamber. Behind him he heard footsteps. That would be Hagan on his way too.

In the small chamber a pair of robots waited for the impulses from the manual and mental control in the darkened rooms above. They would wait in vain. Stretched on two benches were the suits of armour, and Lothar's armourer waiting to encase the men.

"We meet again!" Lothar said to Hagan as the big Altairean came in. "Would you like to call it off? It is not too late."

"Perhaps you are the coward?" Hagan snapped. "I will accept your apologies if you wish. It will go no further, I promise."

If Hagan had not mentioned cowardice, Lothar would have called it off. But he knew now, beyond a doubt, that if he agreed to call it off, he would never hold his head up again. Hagan would not speak, of that he was sure. But can a man live with himself when he knows he is a coward?

Silently they slipped into their armour. Above, the announcer was explaining the delay. Lothar, he said, had mislaid his lucky charm which he always carried when he engaged in combat. He made a joke about it and the spectators laughed. The seconds ticked by.

Only the helms remained to be put in place. Hagan turned to Lothar.

"Farewell," he said impulsively. "We shall not meet again for one of us must die. It is a good thing that you are not conditioned, my friend. Otherwise it would be a one-sided fight I fear!"

The helm snapped down over Lothar's head as his brain whirled in a devilish frenzy. What in Hades did the dark giant mean. But it *was* a one-sided fight! Lothar was the one who was not properly conditioned, who could dream of slaying his opponent in a welter of blood and tissue. Did that mean that Hagan was a second human being in whom the careful work of Psychcentre had met a negative response? Impossible! The odds were too vast to be considered! But how to explain Hagan's words?

The doors opened and he saw the brilliance of the sun-filled oval. Hagan was already striding forward, his mace held high above his head to the cheers of the spectators. Lothar recovered himself, trying to force down the tornado of thoughts that whirled inside his head.

They took their stations. The spectators thrilled into silence. The great, brazen bell, unearthed in the ruins of Rome, tolled its grim message. And then the combat began!

Lothar went into the struggle mechanically. He attacked and defended automatically, his long-practiced reflexes coping adequately with the opening moves of the combat. All the time he was thinking around Hagan's words.

Then, as he took a blow of the mace on his targe and ducked to feint at the Altairean's flank, he remembered in startling clarity the key to the whole, ghastly situation! He remembered the peculiar significance of the words New Bavaria.

A talk by old Prenton, long years ago at the Academy. A discourse on the Empire and its latest acquisitions. On New Bavaria, recently colonised. Of the perils that beset new colonists. How a negligent biologist had failed to discover the effect of native virus on the human body.

A plague had gripped New Bavaria, decimating the thriving colony before a means of combating the peril had been discovered and defences had been built up. It had shaken the higher councils of Colexcentre badly. They had thought they had guarded against such things beyond the point where they could occur. New Bavaria was sealed off for several years from the rest of the Empire. The decimated colonists struggled on until their economy was re-established and they could again step into the network of inter-related worlds that formed the Empire.

During those grim years when they were on their own, children had been born. Not many, but some had been born. There was no escaping the fact—as Lothar now realised with grim dissatisfaction ! And under the nightmare conditions that reigned on New Bavaria while men and women fought nature to stay alive, there would have been neither time nor facilities for the careful process that went into the conditioning of the human brain to exclude such atavistic desires as killing one's fellow creatures !

For a gap of upwards of four years New Bavaria had produced children who lacked their basic conditioning. Hagan must be one of these children, born during the great plague, for Lothar remembered that it had occurred about the time of his own birth on the Mother Planet.

It meant that Hagan could kill him ! It meant that the combat he was now engaged in was not the one-sided affair he had visualised, but an equal struggle to be fought to the death !

The thoughts cleared from Lothar's brain and he became ice cold. Well, he was the better man ! He had already defeated Hagan once in this same sandy oval. He would do it again. Only this time the stakes he was playing for were higher !

With his brain cleared, his fighting improved. Hagan had been making the pace, but now Lothar rallied. Seeing his chance, he tried an old trick that had won many a combat. He stepped back before an attack and as Hagan came forward heavily, he swung the battle axe in a full circle, aiming the blow at his opponent's massive shoulder. It was not a killing blow but had it gone home it would have disabled Hagan. But Hagan was swift in his recovery. He crouched, riding the blow and at the same time wriggled sideways, catching the blade of the axe at the extremity of his pauldron. The blade skeetered away doing no more than dent the metal plate.

Hagan followed up with a riposte that caught Lothar off guard. Aimed with speed, the mace was not truly on target, but struck Lothar on his breastplate, sending him back two paces and leaving him wide open for a second and better aimed smash.

Hagan, sensing that he had the fight in his hands, now, stepped forward swiftly, again striking hard and true. But Lothar got his targe in the way in time and deflected the spiked head of the mace to his right.

Hagan was wide open to the riposte, with his weight badly off centre, his targe low and useless, while Lothar's axe was shoulder high and poised for a blow.

Lothar struck with all his strength at the unguarded helm. Had it landed, it would have penetrated the armour and split the cranium beyond wide open.

And even as it streaked towards the gleaming target, Lothar altered the angle of the cutting edge. Instead of killing Hagan it smashed the rising point of the helm, denting the plate and sending the big man reeling back.

A wave of frenzy descended on Lothar. He drew back the axe, and instead of striking again at the armoured figure, now hopelessly at his mercy, he paused for a split second.

For he had discovered, in a moment that turned his bowels to water, that *he could not kill Hagan* ! There was nothing wrong with his conditioning and he had been wrong all along the line ! No matter how often Hagan was exposed to the *coup de grace*, Lothar would not be able to deliver it !

The reeling armoured figure had recovered and was already advancing to the attack. The crowd were wildly excited and were cheering in great gouts of sound. Hagan came in again with a feint, a side-step and a whirling blow that Lothar took on the targe and deflected to his hip. He felt, sharp stabbing pain as the dented armour carried the force of the blow to the flesh underneath.

He must fight for time ! There was only one factor left in the struggle for supremacy. To wear Hagan out until he was so tired he could no longer wield the heavy mace and administer death dealing blows. With Lothar's supreme skill, he could defend himself until exhaustion claimed his opponent. Only then could Lothar relinquish the field with honour—despised word that had brought him to the position he was now in !

But if Hagan did kill him—Gods, what a predicament ! For Hagan would be excused everything ! The challenge, the killing—all would be excused on the grounds that Hagan came from New Bavaria ! He was one of the unfortunate children who had survived the plague and missed his conditioning ! He would not only be the champion gladiator as right by trial of combat—he might even be a hero !

Once again ice-cold in mind and body, Lothar set to the struggle for his life with every last reserve of his skill. He

fought defensively, husbanding his strength to resist attack. Let the Altairean wear himself out in headlong onslaughts. It was the only way to survive !

The spectators were puzzled. They saw their champion apparently lacking all his accustomed brilliance of riposte. This could not be Lothar controlling the robot in the arena. Something was badly wrong.

But Hagan showed no signs of fatigue. He circled Hagan, feeling him out for an attack over and over again. Each one was delivered with panther-like speed and agility. Each one pressed nearer home. Grimly Lothar realised that for physical fitness and strength, Hagan was his master.

Lothar's armour was dented in a dozen places. Here and there one of the spikes on the macehead had penetrated the plate, leaving snagging metal edges that tore at the flesh underneath and drew rivulets of blood. But the blood ran internally down the armour. Outwardly there was no sign that anything was wrong with the robot gladiator !

A smashing blow caught Lothar on the knee-cap. Again, with failing strength he struck a savage blow at Hagan's vitals—and turned the blade at the last minute for fear of killing his opponent ! He tried chopping at Hagan's limbs but even this failed to more than dent the strong plate armour.

Dimly he wondered what Mara was thinking as she watched the big tri-vi screen in their house. At least his intense exhileration of the last few months had given them both joy that few humans had ever experienced during these civilised times ! He dodged to avoid an attack.

Too late he realised that it was a feint. That this time it was Hagan who had calculated the dynamics to a nicety and who had deliberately manoeuvred him until all his weight was off centre and he was moving too fast and too far in the wrong direction.

Desperately he sought to recover. At least to get the targe between himself and the arcing mace. But he was too tired to make that lightning movement that might have saved him. Even as his eyes turned in their sockets to see the knob of hardened steel decorated with the ugly spikes, no longer bright, he knew that nothing could save him.

The mace struck home, crumpling the helm under it like paper and smearing the blood and tissue beyond.

As the mists swirled up to envelope his consciousness for ever more, Lothar thought that he had had his wish. He had fought for his life in the arena—and lost !

—**John Brody**

COMEBACK

This is Robert Presslie's second fantasy story in our pages—the first, "Plague," was the feature story in the last issue. This time he has taken for his plot the stage illusionist whose disappearing acts could never be understood by the lay mind. There was a particularly unpleasant reason why.

By ROBERT PRESSLIE

—

Every thirty minutes, every evening for a whole month, Clarion Network put out a blurb about its forthcoming Celebrity Celebration. Mere repetition can blunt the senses and even cause consumer antagonism but Clarion had been too long in the business to make that mistake. Every conceivable stunt was used to whip up public interest and if there was anyone who did not know that the Great Gustav was going to top the bill then he was deaf, blind or lived in the Australian desert, which had been uninhabitable since the Accident.

The month of publicity was only the brief sequel to many months of research and negotiation—or as Clarion's rivals would have said, snooping and coercion. Credit for the original notion of having a special programme to mark the diamond jubilee of the network must go to Tavel the general editor. The blame for the events which led to the death of the Great Gustav must be laid on the shoulders of Harry Sharp, chief reporter for the network.

On the other hand, a case could be made out to show that the public was the prime villain. The public's devotion to television started the decline of the newspapers : the little ones went first, the bigger ones amalgamated. With the persistent demand for more and more home entertainment, it needed only the introduction of the metered receiver and some government legislation for the news combines to take the obvious step and change their medium from paper to sigma-ray tube.

They took their characteristics with them. Reasonably sober newspapers became television networks offering reasonably sober news and entertainment. The yellow press saw the new medium to be better than ever for carrying its brand of sex and sensationalism. The Clarion was shorter on ethics than most.

Fifty years after going into the television business, Clarion's general editor happened to be Vic Tavel and Vic Tavel's energy plus the public's gluttony for excitement had built Clarion into the master market for muck.

Tavel's original idea for a celebration programme was comparatively innocent. He planned a grand review of Clarion's star shows and performers over the fifty years. Naturally there would be girlies and smut merchants but a review of Clarion's half century in the business would have been incomplete without these. It was Harry Sharp's resurrection of the Great Gustav that left a smell about Clarion from which it never recovered.

Harry had been delegated to locating any of the old-time performers who were still alive. Since Harry was under thirty he had to make continual reference to the files to determine just who had been a star fifty years back. He found that most of the performers were long dead, or if still alive too decrepit to appear or unworthy of selection. The Great Gustav was one of the few possibilities he discovered. He was also extremely difficult to find. Harry made the motions and then gave up, deciding nobody that old was worth that much trouble.

Vic Tavel differed. " Find him, Harry," he said when he looked through Sharp's notes.

" I've tried. His real name was Gustav Levant. According to the records he's still alive—somewhere. But I don't know where. Can't we forget him ?"

" Forget him ! He's exactly what we need to top the bill. There was never anybody like the Great Gustav. You wouldn't remember him of course. I never saw him myself but I did see our tapes of his shows before we lost them in that fire ten years ago. He was the only illusionist whose stuff nobody could see through. Me, I'm Doubting Thomas himself but if anyone told me the Great Gustav did his tricks by real magic I wouldn't argue."

Harry was sceptical. He said, "A kid can work magic with the cameras to help him."

Tavel snorted. " How long ago do you think fifty years is ? That wasn't the dark ages. We had three-dee *and* the sensories years before then. With the old flatties anything was possible but you can't fool a sigma-ray tube. Go find him, Harry. We need him."

And in his persistent way, which was plentifully oiled with money, Harry found the Great Gustav. He found him in his native Europe, living practically on a mountain top, to all intents and purposes a recluse—even if his solitude was suffered in as much luxury as can be obtained in the hinterlands of civilisation.

But Harry's success was married to failure. Gustav Levant adamantly refused to make a comeback and nothing Harry could say or offer would change his mind. Failure and Harry seldom met. The experience reduced him to nail-biting. Just thinking about what Tavel would say fostered three new buds on his ulcer.

Vic Tavel hit the ceiling. " What do you mean he isn't interested ?" he barked. " It was your job to make him interested. With the budget I gave you, a moron could have bought him."

" I've been to him three times," Harry said. " Travelling expenses alone have made quite a hole in that budget. Three times I've tried and three times he has shown me the door. He can't be bought."

The editor snorted. " Show me a man who can't be bought and I'll show you a corpse."

" He's different," Harry argued. " Maybe he is keeping himself to himself but I could see he wasn't exactly a pauper. He must be loaded—he said he had all the money one man can get through in a lifetime."

Vic Tavel took a moment for reflection before saying, " It could be true. You know, he only gave ten performances in his career, only ten. They were all for Clarion. The first one was an audition, the rest were broadcast. But for those nine broadcasts he collected more than any other performer, past or present, ever made in his entire career. According to the files there was quite a row about the expense at the time. But he wouldn't do his stuff for less, his audition proved the act was sensational and the end certainly justified the means—those nine shows really established Clarion's audience."

Harry Sharp was curious about a man who did not want money. He asked, " Why did he stop? He could have made a fortune."

" He did. I don't know why he stopped. But stop he did. Only nine shows then he disappeared. I expect we are the only people who know he is still alive."

" Do you still want him?"

" More than ever, Harry. I don't like being baulked and the advance publicity is already well under way. We've got to get him. See him again, but keep the pressure low, just kick the conversation around until you find his price. Everybody has one even if it isn't always money."

Harry was only slightly daunted by Gustav Levant's refusal to see him again. And since Harry had nothing to learn as regards the modern equivalent of the foot in the doorway, he saw Levant—perhaps not in the flesh but Harry thought his idea of putting a swamp gauss field around the old man's residence was pretty clever, even if it did break a few laws and take a large bite out of his budget. The result was all he cared about and the result was that Harry's face grinned at Levant no matter which way he turned ; short of smashing the sigma tubes of the communiscreens there was nothing Levant could do to get rid of Harry and even a recluse must have communiscreens if only to order the groceries.

The bulk of the conversation was made up of arguments as to the legality or otherwise of Harry's tactics. The cogent part was contained in one of the old man's sentences when he said, " I will never repeat my act because it was too . . . I wish I had never done it at all . . . please go away and leave me in peace."

Harry Sharp was well qualified to smell a felony. He apologised profusely for his intrusion. For two reasons he

wanted to put Gustav Levant at ease : one, he did not want the old man to know his past sins were showing ; two, he did not want him seeking a new refuge where no one could find him in a hurry.

The next time the Clarion legman appeared before Levant it was in the flesh, by the most illegal method in existence and at such a cost in buying the scruples of a government trans-matter operator that Harry's purse was empty. Not that it mattered, for Harry knew he had Levant where he wanted him and that the Great Gustav was going to make a comback after all—free, gratis and entirely against his will.

The old man was wild. His anger took the stoop out of his shoulders and put a blaze of youth in his eyes. Harry thought he must have been a fine figure of a man in his day—tall, big-framed, hair theatrically long.

" You'll go to corrective for this," Levant said in low tones. His voice vibrated with outrage. " For illegal use of a trans-matter and the invasion thereby of a man's privacy you'll get a lobotomy at least and probably a complete mindwash."

Harry lifted a satchel onto a table. He said, " If you knew this was the second time I've been there illegally you'd wish I had two heads so they could wash me twice, eh ? Sit down, Levant. Cool off. I've got news you won't like."

The old man moved towards a communiscreen.

" I wouldn't do that," Harry warned. " Not unless you want certain documents to be published—"

" Documents ? What documents ?"

Harry unzipped the satchel, extracted a wad of paper and tossed it on the table. " These," he said. " I gather from the drawings that I possess the complete plans of your act. Now which is it going to be ? Do you perform the show or do I pass these into the right hands and have somebody else do the fabulous disappearing trick as invented by the Great Gustav ?"

" You stole my notes !" the old man accused.

" Wicked of me, wasn't it ?" Harry was unabashed.

" You'll never be able to read them," Levant said. " I was careful to write them in code in case anything like this ever happened." It was a brave effort but Harry could see the shoulders beginning to sag. He punched home his advantage.

" Grow up," he sneered. " Things are different from your day. We've got a semantic knot-cutter at Clarion that can

rip this apart and give us a translation in twenty minutes—and in Chinese if we so wished it. Clarion wants the Great Gustav for its celebration show. I was sent to get him. And the Great Gustav's act is going out on that programme whether the Great Gustav waves the wand or somebody else does it. The choice is yours. The boss wants you but I think he will be just as happy with the act no matter who does it. Make up your mind."

Levant accepted the invitation to sit down which he had previously ignored. He looked all of his eighty years. He mumbled to himself. Harry bent to catch his words.

"Half a century," the old man muttered. "For half a century I've tried to forget what I did. For fifty years I've wrestled with my conscience and for fifty years I've known I did a bad thing. I haven't done much to atone for my sins but I've been able to console myself because I stopped when I did. And now—now I have to do it again."

Harry grinned. It was going to be all right. "I'm glad you've seen reason," he said. "Stick your thumb on this contract."

Levant looked around stupidly, as if there might be a way out somewhere or as if someone might save him by a last minute intervention. "How soon?" he asked in a croak.

"The publicity is all set. It gets its first airing tomorrow. The show goes out one month from then."

"As soon as that? I don't know if I can be ready. My apparatus no longer exists. It will have to be completely rebuilt."

Harry thought he was hedging. He offered: "I'll send you a team of technicians."

The old man shook his head violently. "No, no. I will manage by myself. I was lying."

"Are you sure you aren't lying now?" Harry asked shrewdly. "You wouldn't be thinking of pulling a fast one, would you?"

Levant smiled weakly. "You have my promise. The Great Gustav will make a comeback. It shall be a performance to remember, a show that will never be forgotten."

To eight out of ten people the Great Gustav was only a name; he had been before their time. Even that proportion which had seen and remembered his act had relegated it to the inner-recesses of their memories. Fifty years is a long

time. For every star of yesterday there were a score of new starts to dim his brilliance by their own. It was a wonderful testimony to Clarion's publicity methods that on the night of the celebration programme the audience figures were an all-time record.

Most of the show was routine Clarion stuff apart from a few other old-timers who were more pathetic than entertaining to watch. Perhaps Vic Tavel organised things so that the show was deliberately mediocre to point the contrast more ; nobody will ever know about that because Vic Tavel never talked about the show afterwards. The fact remains that when the moment came and the Great Gustav was announced the excitement and expectation caused thirty-five cases of stroke, seven of which later turned out to be fatal. These figures do not include the four hundred odd people who just plain fainted away but came round in time to see the act.

Vic was on stage to make a personal introduction. He spoke about the Great Gustav's impact on the first of Clarion's programmes fifty years earlier. He told the set-bound audience of the tremendous expense and trouble which Clarion had expended to find the Great Gustav and to persuade him to make a comeback. He timed his speech expertly to the second—to the exact second when a hundred million viewers were on the point of saying they wished he would shut up and let the show proceed.

When Tavel had said his piece, the kliegs blacked out, leaving the stage in darkness. Coupled with the expectant silence of the studio audience, this sent millions of frantic hands reaching for the controls of the receivers. Again it was a typical Tavel gimmick and when the lights went up the home audience reaction was almost strong enough to reach back through the ether to the studio.

Gustav Levant had ten cabinets arranged on the stage. To the uninitiated they were ordinary stock-in-trade vanishing cabinets. Only Levant knew how different they were.

He moved along the line of cabinets, opening the glass front and back of each to show that they were completely empty and without concealed partitions. Since they were raised on four-legged pedestals it was obvious that there were also no trapdoors in the deception.

Below the stage there was a certain amount of apparatus. Both Vic Tavel and Harry Sharp had asked its purpose. When Levant had told them it was necessary in order to

perform the only real magic show-business had ever possessed, they had looked at each other and shrugged. If the Great Gustav wanted to keep up the pretense even in front of them that was a whim they were willing to humour so long as he did the act.

But they both frowned in the wings when Levant touched a switch on a mid-stage stanchion and the unmistakable hum of power vibrated beneath their feet.

They positively scowled when Levant held up a hand for attention. The old records available had revealed that Levant had always done his act in complete silence. Speech-making was not on the schedule.

" Ladies and gentlemen," Levant began. In the control room, engineers adjusted balance knobs to amplify the illusionist's weak voice.

The Great Gustav continued his announcement. " This is an act which has not been seen for fifty years. Half a century ago I swore to myself that I would never repeat it and that its secret would go with me to the grave. However I was persuaded—very much against my will—to appear tonight for one final appearance. The responsibility for what happened fifty years ago is mine and mine alone but I disclaim any responsibility for what takes place tonight. That responsibility must lie with Clarion Network and its principals."

Harry Sharp turned to his editor. He looked scared. " Will I tell the engineers to kill it ?" he asked.

" Kill it !" Vic Tavel was grinning widely. " They'll be lapping this up. What a build-up the old boy is giving ! It couldn't be better if I had written his material myself."

The Great Gustav had more to say. " For the benefit of the younger generation, let me explain that my act consisted of placing a girl in a cabinet—similar to one of these—and making her disappear. One difference between my act and comparable acts was that I used glass-fronted cabinets so that the audience could actually see the girl disappearing slowly before their eyes. Another and greater difference was the fact that *I never made the girl reappear.* They vanished and remained vanished."

He paused to adjust the controls on the stanchion and checked the passage of time on his watch.

" Tonight," he went on. " Tonight I have ten cabinets on stage. One for each of the nine girls who never came back

and one for myself. Tonight I will make myself disappear and simultaneously those nine girls of fifty years ago will reappear."

He moved the stanchion and its attendant cable backwards to where he could reach the controls while standing in the centre cabinet.

Boom mikes swung across stage to keep in touch with his voice. He stood inside the centre cabinet and held aloft a folder. Harry Sharp was still wondering why Levant had insisted on having his papers on stage with him. He soon learned the reason.

The mikes gave the Great Gustav's voice a resonant power. He said, "This folder contains the secret of the mechanism of my act. When I vanish the secret will go with me."

"Terrific stuff!" Vic Tavel whispered to Harry. "What a showman! He may be ancient but he could teach us a few tricks in audience stimulation."

Harry made no reply. He was worried. It was all right for Vic to prattle about technique—he hadn't done the bargaining with Levant, he hadn't heard the blend of fear and menace in the old man's voice when he had reluctantly agreed to make a comeback. As Levant went on, Harry got more worried.

"The secret will go with me," the illusionist repeated. "But first I will reveal a little of it. I have already hinted that my act entails real magic and it does—it entails the magic of science. For many years it has been accepted that worlds parallel in space-time to ours might possibly exist. Fifty years ago I discovered that such worlds were indeed a fact. But instead of publishing my findings or turning them over to a recognised scientific body I kept them to myself."

Vic Tavel could only shake his head in admiration. Harry Sharp bit his lip nervously.

"I was greedy," the Great Gustav said. "I saw the opportunity to make a fortune. Fifty years ago I made that fortune. God help me—it cost me my soul."

For long seconds he was silent and Tavel wondered if he had dried up. But after a deep shuddering breath he concintued.

"I was a coward then. I did not have the courage to investigate the parallel worlds myself yet I had little compunction about sending ten young and healthy girls through the barrier. And when I came to my senses and abandoned

the act I was still a coward. A truly penitent man would have left the face of this Earth and condemned himself to another world. But I was afraid. I was a coward."

He adjusted the controls before him until the hum of dynamic power made a hundred million heads ache and the smell of ozone reeked from the sensory receptors into a hundred million pairs of nostrils.

"This is my second comeback in a sense. Long ago I made the experiment of recalling one of my girl assistants. It was the thing I saw then which made a coward of me. Tonight, through force of circumstances, I am making another comeback. And tonight I have found my courage."

He flicked a switch and the cabinets were bathed in a ghostly green effulgence which rapidly gained in intensity.

The mikes just caught his last words: "Time runs faster on the other worlds and fifty years is a long, long time. Look and learn, dear friends. See for yourselves why I was craven and see for yourselves why my secret must never be used again—"

When the green light had become so bright that all colour was lost in a white billiance, the power cut itself off abruptly. A hundred million pairs of eyes took several seconds to get accustomed to the comparatively dark stage. The eyes had been on the Great Gustav and the first thing they saw was that he was gone.

The next thing they saw was a line of nine horrors, nine rotted corpses which had made a comeback from other worlds and other times. And the smell that stank from the sensories was a smell that put Clarion out of business, a smell that put an end to all cheap sensationalism, a smell that ushered in an era of clean, sane entertainment.

—**Robert Presslie**

HIDDEN

Bob Silverberg's contribution this month deals with the psi powers—a subject we have not used a great deal of late. This time, however, the plot deals with the suppression *of telekinetic power by its user for his own safety on a world where such phenomena is classified as witchcraft.*

TALENT

By ROBERT SILVERBERG

The spaceport on Mondarran IV was a small one, as might be expected on the sort of fifth-rate backwater world it was. Rygor Davison picked up his lone suitcase at the baggage depot and struck out into the dry windy heat of mid-afternoon. The sun—G-type, hot—was high overhead, and a dusty brown dirt road ran crookedly away from the rudimentary spaceport toward a small grey village about a thousand meters away.

There was no one on hand to greet him. Not an impressive welcome, he thought, and began to walk down the dirt road toward the village which would be his home for the next five years—if he survived.

After he had gone half a dozen steps, he heard someone behind him, turned and saw a small boy heavily tanned, come trotting down the road. He was about eleven, and clad in a pair of golden swim trunks and nothing else. He seemed to be in a hurry.

"Whoa, youngster!" Davison called.

The boy looked up questioningly, slowed, and stopped, panting slightly. "Just get here? I saw the ship come down!"

Davison grinned. "Just got here. What's the hurry?"

"Witch," the boy gasped. "They're giving him the business this afternoon. I don't want to miss it. Come on—hurry along."

Davison stiffened. "What's going to happen, boy?"

"They're roasting a witch," the boy said, speaking very clearly, as one would to an idiot or an extremely young child. "Hurry along, if you want to get there on time—but don't make me miss it."

Davison hefted his suitcase and began to stride rapidly alongside the boy, who urged him impatiently on. Clouds of dust rose from the road and swirled around them.

A witch-burning, eh? He shuddered despite himself, and wondered if the Esper Guild has sent him to his death.

The Guild of Espers operated quietly but efficiently. They had found Davison, had trained him, had developed his enormous potential of telekinetic power. And they had sent him to the outworlds to learn how *not* to use it.

It had been Lloyd Kechnie, Davison's guide, who explained it to him. Kechnie was a wiry, bright-eyed man with a hawk's nose and a gorilla's eyebrows. He had worked with Davison for eight years.

"You're a damned fine telekinetic," Kechnie told him. "The guild can't do anything more for you. And in just a few years, you'll be ready for a full discharge."

"Few *years*? But I thought—"

"You're the best tk I've seen," said Kechnie. "You're so good that by now it's second nature for you to use your power. You don't know *how* to hide it. Someday you'll regret that. You haven't learned restraint." Kechnie leaned forward over his desk. "Ry, we've decided to let you sink or swim—and you're not the first we've done this to. We're going to send you to a psiless world—one where the powers haven't been developed. You'll be *forced* to hide your psi, or else be stoned for witchcraft or some such thing."

"Can't I stay on Earth and learn?" Davison asked hopefully.

"Uh-uh. It's too easy to get by here. In the outworlds, you'll face an all-or-nothing situation. That's where you're going."

Davison had gone on the next ship. And now, on Mondarran IV, he was going to learn—or else.

"Where you come from?" the boy asked, after a few minutes of silence. " You going to be a colonist here ?"

" For a while," Davison said. " I'm from Dariak III." He didn't want to give any hint of his Earth background. Dariak III was a known psiless world. It might mean his life if they suspected he was an esper.

" Dariak III ?" the boy said. " Nice world ?"

" Not very," Davison said. " Rains a lot."

Suddenly a flash of brilliant fire burst out over the village ahead, illuminating the afternoon sky like a bolt of low-mounting lightning.

" Oh, damn," the boy said disgustedly. " There's the flare. I missed the show after all. I guess I should have started out earlier."

" Too late, eh ?" Davison felt more than a little relieved. He licked dry lips. " Guess we missed all the fun."

" It's real exciting," the boy said enthusiastically. "Especially when they're good witches, and play tricks before we can burn 'em. You should see some of the things they do, once we've got 'em pinned to the stake."

I can imagine, Davison thought grimly. He said nothing.

They continued walking, moving at a slower pace now, and the village grew closer. He could pick out the nearer buildings fairly clearly, and was able to discern people moving around in the streets. Overhead, the sun shone down hard.

A shambling, ragged figure appeared and came toward them as they headed down the final twist in the road. "Hello, Dumb Joe," the boy said cheerily, as the figure approached.

The newcomer grunted a monosyllable and kept moving. He was tall and gaunt-looking, with a grubby growth of beard, open-seamed moccasins, and a battered leather shirt. He paused as he passed Davison, looked closely into his face, and smiled, revealing yellow-stained teeth.

" Got a spare copper, friend ?" Dumb Joe asked in a deep, rumbling voice. " Somethin' for a poor man ?"

Davison fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a small coin. The boy glared at him disapprovingly, but he dropped the coin into the waiting palm of the panhandler.

" Best of luck, mister," the beggar said, and shuffled away. After a few steps he turned and said, " Too bad you missed the roasting, mister. It was real good."

They proceeded on into the town. Davison saw that it consisted of a sprawling group of two-storey shacks, prefabs, apparently, strung loosely around a central plaza—in the heart of which, Davison noticed, was a sturdy steel post with something unpleasant smouldering at its base. He shuddered, and looked away.

"What's the matter, mister?" the boy asked derisively. "Don't they roast witches on Dariak III?"

"Not very often," Davison said. He found that his fingers were trembling, and he struggled to regain control over them.

He thought of Kechnie, comfortably back on Earth. While he was out here, on a fly-plagued dust hole of a world, doomed to spend the next five years in a pokey village twiddling his thumbs. It was like a prison sentence.

No—worse. In prison, you don't have any worries. You just go through your daily rock-crumbling, and they give you three meals and a place, of sorts, to sleep. No agonies.

Here it was different. Davison barely repressed a curse. He'd have to be on constant lookout, supressing his psi, hiding his power—or he'd wind up shackled to that steel gibbet in the central plaza, providing a morning's entertainment for the villagers before he went up in flames.

Then he grinned. *Kechnie knows what he's doing*, he admitted despite himself. *If I survive this, I'll be fit for anything they can throw at me.*

He squared his shoulders, fixed a broad grin on his face, and headed forward into the town.

A tall man with a weather-creased face the colour of curdled turpentine came toward him, loping amiably.

"Hello, stranger. My name's Domarke—I'm the Mayor. You new down here?"

Davison nodded. "Just put down from Dariak III. Thought I'd try my luck here."

"Glad to have you, friend," Domarke said pleasantly. "Too bad you missed our little show. You probably saw the flare from the spaceport."

"Sorry I missed it too," Davison forced himself to say. "You have much trouble with witches down here?"

Domarke's face darkened. "A little," he said. "Not much. Every once in a while, there's a guy who pulls off some kind of fancy stunt. We've been pretty quick to send them to their Master the second we spot them. We don't want none of that kind here, brother."

" I don't blame you," Davison said. " Men aren't supposed to do things the way those guys do."

" Nossir," the Mayor said. " But we fix 'em when they do. There was a fellow down from Lanargon Seven last year, took a job here as a beekeeper. Nice boy—young, with a good head on his shoulders. Saw a lot of my daughter. We all liked him. We never suspected he was a wronger."

" Witch, eh ?"

" Sure was," Domarke said. " Swarm of his bees got loose and broke up. They come after him, and started stinging away. Next thing we know, he's looking at them kinda funny and fire starts shootin' from his fingertips." Domarke shook his head retrospectively. " Burned all those bees to tatters. He didn't even try to stop us when we strung him up."

" Strung him up ? How come you didn't burn him ?" Davison asked, morbidly curious.

Domarke shrugged. " Wasn't any point to it. Those guys in league with fire, you don't get anywhere trying to burn 'em. We hang them on the spot."

One of Kechnie's boys, probably, Davison thought. *A pyrotic sent out here to learn how to control his power. He didn't learn fast enough.*

He chewed at his lower lip for a second and said, " Guess it's about time I got to my point. Who can I see about getting a room in this town ?"

They found him a room with a family named Rinehart, on a small farm about ten minutes' walk from the heart of the village. They had posted a sign advertising for a hired hand.

He moved in that afternoon, unpacked his meagre belongings, and hung up his jacket in the tiny closet they provided. Then he went downstairs to meet his hosts.

It was a family of five. Rinehart was a balding man of fifty-five or so, dark skinned from long hours of toil in the blazing sun, heavy-jowled and jovial. His wife—Ma—was a formidable woman in an amazingly archaic-looking apron. Her voice was a mellow masculine boom, and she radiated an atmosphere of simple, traditional folksiness. It was, thought Davison, a frame of mind long since extinct on so sophisticated a planet as Earth.

They had three children—Janey, a long-legged, full-bodied girl of eighteen or so; Bo, a sullen-faced muscular seventeen-year-old; and Buster, a chubby eleven-year-old. It seemed to be a happy familial setup, thought Davison.

He left his room—painstakingly opening and closing the door by hand—and ambled down the stairs. He slipped on the fourth from the bottom, started to slide, and teeked against the landing to hold himself upright. He caught his balance, straightened up, and then, as he realised what he had done, he paused and felt cold droplets of sweat starting out on his forehead.

No one had seen. No one *this* time.

But how many more slips would there be?

He let the shock filter out of his nervous system, waited a moment while the blood returned to his cheeks, and then finished descending the stairs and entered the living-room. The Rineharts were already gathered.

Janey appeared in the doorway and glanced indolently at Davison. " Supper's on," she said.

Davison sat down. Rinehart, at the head of the table, uttered a brief but devout blessing, finishing up with a word of prayer for the new hired hand who had come among them. Then Janey appeared from the back with a tray of steaming soup.

" Hot stuff," she said, and Bo and Buster moved apart to let her serve it. She brought the tray down—and then it happened. Davison saw it starting, and bit his lip in anguish.

One of the scalding bowls of soup began to slide off the end of the tray. He watched, almost in slow motion, as it curled over the lip of the tray, dipped, and poured its steaming contents on his bare right arm.

Tears of pain came to his eyes—and he didn't know which hurt more, the pain of the soup on his arm or the real shock he had received when he had forced himself to keep from teeking the falling soup halfway across the room.

He bit hard into his lip, and sat there, shivering from the mental effort the restraint had cost him.

Janey put down the tray and fussed embarrassedly over him. " Gee, Ry, I didn't mean that ! Gosh, did I burn you?"

" I'll live," he said. " Don't trouble yourself about it."

He mopped the soup away from his corner of the table, feeling the pain slowly subside.

Kechnie, Kechnie, you didn't send me on any picnic !

Rinehart gave him a job, working in the fields.

The staple crop of Mondarran IV was something called Long Beans, a leguminous vegetable that everyone ate in great

quantities, pounded down into wheat, and used for a dozen other purposes. It was a tough, almost indestructible plant that yielded three crops a year in the constant warmth of Mondarran IV.

Rinehart had a small farm, ten acres or so, spreading out over a rolling hill that overlooked a muddy swimming-hole. It was almost time for the year's second crop, and that meant a laborious process of stripping the stalks of the twisted pods that contained beans.

"You bend down like this and rip," Rinehart said, demonstrating for Davison. "Then you swivel around and drop the pod in the basket behind you."

Rinehart strapped the harness around Davison's shoulders, then donned his own, and together they started through the field. Overhead, the sun was high. It always seems to be noon on this planet, Davison thought, as he began to sweat.

Purple-winged flies buzzed noisily around the thick stalks of the bean-plants. Dragging the basket behind him, Davison advanced through the field, struggling to keep up with Rinehart. The older man was already ten feet ahead of him in the next furrow, ducking, bobbing, yanking, and depositing the pod in the basket all in a smooth series of motions.

It was hard work. Davison felt his hands beginning to redden from the contact with the rough sandpaper surfaces of the plants' leaves, and his back started to ache from the constant repetition of the unaccustomed pattern of motion. Down, up, reach around. Down, up, reach around.

He ground his teeth together and forced himself to keep going. His arm was throbbing from the exertion of using muscles that had lain unbothered for years. Sweat rolled down his forehead, crept into his collar, fell beadily into his eyebrows. His clothes seemed to be soaked through and through.

He reached the end of the furrow at last, and looked up. Rinehart was waiting there for him, arms akimbo looking almost as cool and fresh as he had when he had begun. He was grinning.

"Tough sled, eh, Ry?"

Too winded to say anything, Davison simply nodded.

"Don't let it get you. A couple of weeks out here, and it'll toughen you up. I know how you city fellows are at the start."

Davison mopped his forehead. "You wouldn't think just pulling pods off a plant could be so rough," he said.

"It's tough work, and I'm not denying it," Rinehart said. He pounded Davison affectionately on the back. "You'll get used to it. Come on back to the house, and I'll get you some beer."

Davison started in as a full-time picker the next day. It was, like all the other days promised to be, hot.

The whole family was out with him—the two elder Rineharts, Janey, Bo, and Buster. Each had his own harness strapped on, with the basket behind for dropping in the pods.

"We'll start down at the east end," Rinehart said, and without further discussion the entire crew followed him down. Each took a furrow. Davison found himself with Janey on his left, Bo Rinehart on his right. Further down the field, he could see Dirk Rinehart already fearsomely making his way through the close-packed rows of plants, a two-legged picking machine and nothing more. He watched the older man's effortless motions for a moment, and then, conscious that Janey and Bo were already a few steps ahead of him, he set to work.

The morning sun was still climbing in the sky, and the day had not yet reached its peak of heat, but Davison began to perspire after only a few moments of bending and yanking. He stopped to rub his sleeve over his forehead and heard light, derisive laughter come from up ahead.

Flushing hotly, he glanced up and saw Janey pausing in her furrow, hands on her hips, grinning back at him. It was much the same pose her father had taken the day before, and it irritated him. Without saying anything, he bent his head and returned to the job of picking.

A muscle at the base of his right arm began to complain. It was the business of reaching back and thrusting the picked pod into the basket that was doing it, straining the arm-socket muscles in a way they had never been used before.

Kechnie's mocking words drifted back to him. "*You don't want your muscles to atrophy, son.*" They had been words spoken lightly, in jest—but, Davison now realised, they carried with themselves a certain measure of truth.

He had relied on his psi for the ordinary tasks of life, had gloried in his mastery of the power to relieve himself of a portion of everyday drudgery. Little things—things like opening doors, pulling up hassocks, moving furniture. It was

simpler to teek an object than to drag it, Davison had always felt. Why not use a power, if you have it to perfection?

The answer was that he didn't have it to perfection—yet. Perfection implied something more than utter control of objects; it meant, also, learning moderation, knowing when to use the psi and when not to.

On Earth, where it didn't matter, he had used his power almost promiscuously. Here he didn't dare to—and his aching muscles were paying the price of his earlier indulgence. Kechnie had known what he was doing, all right.

They reached the end of the furrow finally. Davison and Buster Rinehart came in in a dead heat for last place, and Buster didn't even seem winded. Davison thought he caught a shred of disapproval on Rinehart's face, as if he were disappointed at his hired hand's performance, but he wasn't sure There was a definite expression of scorn on Janey's face; her eyes under their heavy lids, sparkled at him almost insultingly.

He glanced away, over to Rinehart, who was emptying his basket into the truck that stood in the middle of the field. " Let's dump here before we start the next row," he said.

The field seemed to stretch out endlessly. Davison lifted his basket with nerveless fingers and watched the grey-green pods tumble into the back of the truck. He replaced it in his harness, feeling oddly light now that the dragging weight no longer pulled down on him.

He had a fleeting thought as they moved on to the next batch of furrows: *How simple it would be to teek the pods into the baskets* ! *No more bending, no swivelling, no arms that felt like they were ready to fall off.*

Simple. Sure, simple—but if Janey or Bo or any of the others should happen to turn around and see the beanpods floating mysteriously into Davison's basket, he'd be roasting by nightfall.

Damn Kechnie, he thought savagely, and wiped a glistening bead of sweat from his face.

What had seemed like a wry joke half an hour before now hung temptingly before Davison's eyes as a very real possibility.

He was almost an entire furrow behind the rest of them. He was disgracing himself. And his poor, unused, unathletic body was aching mercilessly.

He had the power and he wasn't using it. He was penning it up within himself, and it hurt. It was the scalding soup all

over again; he didn't know if it hurt more to keep bending and dragging his numb arm back up again in the blistering heat, or to pen the psi up within him until it seemed almost to be brimming out over the edges of his mind.

Davison forced himself to concentrate on what he was doing, forced himself to forget the power. *This is the learning process*, he told himself grimly. *This is growing up. Kechnie knows what he's doing.*

They reached the end of the furrow, and through a dim haze of fatigue he heard Rinehart say, " Okay, let's knock off for a while. It's getting too hot to work, anyway."

He shucked off his harness and dropped it where he was, and began to walk back toward the farmhouse. With an unvoiced sigh of relief, Davison wriggled out of the leather straps and stood up straight.

He made his way across the field, noticing Janey fall in at his side. " You look pretty bushed, Ry," she said.

" I am. Takes a while to get used to this sort of work, I guess."

" Guess so," the girl said. She reached out and kicked a clump of dirt. " You'll toughen up," she said. " Either that or you'll fall apart. Last hired man we had fell apart. But you look like better stuff."

" Hope you're right," he said, wondering who the last hired man was and what power it was that he had cooped up within himself. For some, it wouldn't be so bad. A precog wouldn't need a training session like this—but precogs were one in a quadrillion. Telepaths might not, either, since anyone who had tp already had such a high-voltage mind that this sort of kindergarten toilet-training was unnecessary.

It was only the garden-variety espers who needed trips to the psiless worlds, Davison thought. Telekinetics and pyrotics, and others whose simple, unspecialized powers lulled them into false security.

A new thought was entering Davison's mind as he crossed the field, with Janey's distracting legs flashing at his side. A normal man needed some sort of sexual release; long-enforced continence required a special kind of mind, and most men simply folded from the sustained tension.

How about a normal esper? Could he keep his power bottled up like this for five years? He was feeling the strain already, and it was just a couple of days.

Just a couple of days, Davison thought. He'd been hiding his psi only that long. Then he stopped to think how many days there were in five years, and he began to perspire afresh.

Two more days in the field toughened him to the point where each picking-session was no longer a nightmare. His body was a healthy one, and his muscles adapted without too much protest to their new regime. He could hold his own in the field now, and he felt a gratifying broadening of muscle and increase of vigour, a development of mere physical power which somehow pleased him mightily.

"Look at him eat," Ma Rinehart commented one night at supper. "He puts it away like it's the last meal he's ever going to see."

Davison grinned and shovelled down another mouthful of food. It was true; he was eating as he had never eaten before. His entire life on Earth seemed peculiarly pale and cloistered, next to this ground-hugging job on Mondarran IV. He was rounding into fine shape, physically.

But what was happening to his mind was starting to worry him.

He had the tk well under control, he thought, despite the fairly constant temptation to use it. It hurt, but he went right on living without making use of his paranormal powers. But there was a drawback developing.

Early on the fifth morning of his stay on Mondarran IV, he came awake in an instant, sitting up in bed and staring around. His brain seemed to be on fire; he blinked, driving the spots away, and climbed out of bed.

He stood there uneasily for a moment or two, wondering what had happened to him, listening to the pounding of his heart. Then he reached out, found the trousers draped over a chair, and slipped into them. He walked to the window and looked out.

It was still long before dawn. The sun was not yet gleaming on the horizon, and, high above, the twin moons moved in stately procession through the sky. They cast a glittering, icy light on the fields. Outside, it was terribly quiet.

Davison knew what had happened. It was the reaction of his tortured, repressed mind, jolting him out of sleep to scream its protest at the treatment it was receiving. You couldn't just stop teeking, just like that. You had to taper off. That was it, thought Davison. Taper off.

He made his way down the stairs, sucking in his breath in fear every time they creaked, and left the farmhouse by the side door. He trotted lightly over the ground to the small barn that stood at the edge of the field brimming over with picked bean pods.

Quickly, in the pre-dawn silence, he hoisted himself up the ladder and into the barn. The warm, slightly musty odour of masses of pods drifted up at him. He dropped from the ladder, landed hip-deep in pods.

Then, cautiously, he brought his tk into use. A flood of relief came over him as he teeked. He reached out, lifted a solitary pod, flipped it a few feet in the air, and let it fall back. Then another; then, two at a time. It continued for almost fifteen minutes. He revelled in the use of his power, throwing the pods merrily about.

One thing alarmed him, though. He didn't seem to have his old facility. There was a definite effort involved in the telekinesis now, and he sensed a faint fatigue after a few moments of activity. This had never happened to him before.

The ominous thought struck him: suppose abstinence hurt his ability? Suppose five solid years of abstinence—assuming he could hold out that long—were to rob him of his power forever?

It didn't seem likely. After all, others had gone on these five-year exiles and returned with their powers unimpaired. They had abstained—or had they? Had they been forced into some expedient such as this, forced to rise in the small hours and go behind someone's barn to teek or to set fires?

Davison had no answers. Grimly, he teeked a few more pods into the air, and then, feeling refreshed, he climbed back out the window and down the long ladder.

Buster Rinehart was standing on the ground, looking up curiously at him.

He caught his breath sharply and continued descending.

"Hey there," Buster said. "What you doin' in there, Ry? Why ain't you asleep?"

"I could ask you the same thing," Davison said, determined to bluff it out. His hands were shaking. What if Buster had spied on him, watched him using his power? Would they take a small boy's word on so serious a charge? Probably they would, on a psiless, witch-hysterical world like this. "What are you doing out of bed, Buster? Your mother

would whale you if she knew you were up and around at this hour."

"She don't mind," the boy said. He held out a bucket that slopped over with greasy-looking pale worms. "I was out gettin' fishbait. It's the only time you can dig it, in the middle of the night with the moons shining." He grinned confidentially up at Davison. "Now what's your story?"

"I couldn't sleep. I just went for a walk," Davison said nervously, hating the necessity of defending himself in front of this boy. "That's all."

"That's what I thought. Having sleepin' troubles, eh?" Buster asked. "I know what's the matter with you, Ry. You're out mooning after my sister. She's got you so crazy for her you can't sleep. Right?"

Davison nodded immediately. "But don't tell her, will you?" He reached in a pocket and drew out a small coin, and slipped it into the boy's palm. Instantly the stubby fingers closed around it, and the coin vanished. "I don't want her to know anything about the way I feel till I've been here a while longer," Davison said.

"I'll keep shut," said the boy. His eyes sparkled in the light of the twin moons. He grasped the can of worms more tightly. He was in possession of a precious secret now, and it excited him.

Davison turned and headed back to the farmhouse, grinning wryly. The net was getting tighter, he thought. He was at the point where he had to invent imaginary romances with long-legged farm-girls in order to save his skin.

It had worked, this once. But he couldn't risk getting out there a second time. His private teeking in the barn would have to stop. He'd need to find an outlet somewhere else.

When morning finally came, Davison went downstairs and confronted old Rinehart.

"Can you spare me for today, sir? I'd like to have some free time, if it's all right with you."

The farmer frowned and scratched the back of one ear. "Free time? At harvest? Is it really necessary, boy? We'd like to get everything picked before season's out. It's going to be planting-time again soon enough, you know."

"I know," Davison said. "But I'd still like to have the morning free. I need to think some things out."

"Okay, Ry. I'm no slave-driver. Take the morning off, if you want. You can make up the time on Sunday."

The heat was just beginning as he trudged away from the Rinehart farm and down to the muddy swimming-hole at the far end of their land. He skirted it and headed on into the thick forest that separated their land from that of wealthy Lord Gabrielson.

He struck out into the forest, which was delightfully cool. Thick-boled, redleaved trees stood arrayed in a closely-packed stand of what looked like virgin timber; the soil was dark and fertile looking, and a profusion of wild vegetation spread heavily over the ground. Above, there was the chittering of colourful birds, and occasionally a curious bat-winged creature fluttered from branch to branch of the giant trees.

He knew why he was on Mondarran IV: to learn moderation. To learn to handle his power? That much was clear. But how was he going to survive?

The religious set-up here was one of jealous orthodoxy, it seemed, and the moral code made no allowance for any deviatory abilities. Psi meant witchcraft—a common equation apparently, on these backwater psiless worlds. The farmers here had little contact with the more sophisticated planets from which they had sprung, ten or twenty centuries before, and somehow they had reached a point of cultural equilibrium that left no room for psi.

That meant that Davison would have to suppress his power. Only—he *couldn't* suppress it. Five days of watchful self-control and he was half out of his mind from the strain. And what if he ran into a position where he *had* to use his psi or be killed? Suppose that tree over there were to fall directly on him; he could push it away, but what would that avail if someone were watching—someone who would cry "Witch!"

Yet men had come to Mondarran IV and returned, and survived. That meant they had found the way. Davison threaded further on into the forest, trying to arrange his thoughts coherently.

He glanced up ahead. A winding river trickled softly through the trees. And, it seemed to him, up ahead a blue curl of smoke rose up over the bushes. Was someone using a fire there?

Cautiously, he tiptoed forward cursing every time his foot cracked a twig. After a few tense moments, he rounded a bend in the path and discovered where the fire was coming from.

Squatting at the edge of the river, holding a pan in one hand, was Dumb Joe—the beggar he had encountered on the road

from the spaceport. The beggar was still clad in his tattered leather outfit, and he seemed to be roasting a couple of fish over a small fire.

Grinning in relief, Davison came closer. And then the grin vanished, and he stood in open-jawed astonishment.

Dumb Joe was roasting fish all right. But there wasn't any fire—except for the radiation that seemed to be streaming from his fingertips.

Dumb Joe was a pyrotic.

Davison hung in midstride, frozen in amazement. Dumb Joe, a filthy, ignorant half-imbecile of a beggar, was casually squatting in the seclusion of the forest, psionically cooking a couple of fish for breakfast. A little further up the bank, Davison saw a rudely-constructed shack which was evidently Dumb Joe's home.

The answer to the whole thing flooded through his mind instantly. It made perfect sense.

It was impossible to live in Mondarran society with a psi power and survive the full five years. It was too hard to keep from unintentional uses of power, and the strains attendant on the whole enterprise were too great for most men to stand.

But one could live *alongside* society—as a wandering hobo, perhaps, frying fish in the forest—and no one would notice no one would be on hand to see your occasional practice of psi. No one would suspect a flea-ridden tramp of being a witch. Of course not !

Davison took another step forward, and started to say something to Dumb Joe. But Dumb Joe looked up at the sound of the footstep. He spotted Davison standing some twenty feet away, glared angrily at him, and let the pan of fish drop to the ground. Reaching down to his hip, he whipped out a mirror-surfaced hunting knife, and without the slightest hesitation sent it whistling straight at Davison.

In the brief flashing instant after the knife left Dumb Joe's hand, a thought tore through Davison's mind. Dumb Joe would have to be an Earthman like himself, serving his five-year stay out on Mondarran. And therefore it wasn't necessary to hide his own psi power from him, wasn't necessary to let the blade strike—

Davison whisked the knife aside and let it plant itself to the hilt in the soft earth near his foot. He stooped, picked it up, and glanced at Dumb Joe.

" You—teeked it away," the beggar said, almost incredulously. " You're not a spy !"

Davison smiled. " No, I'm a tk. And you're a pyrotic !"

A slow grin crept over Dumb Joe's stubblebearded face. He crossed the ground to where Davison was standing, and seized his hand. " You're an Earthman. A real Earthman," he said exultantly, in a half whisper.

Davison nodded. " You too ?"

" Yes," Dumb Joe said. " I've been here three years, and you're the first I've dared speak to. All the others I've seen have been burned."

" *All* of them ?" Davison asked.

" I didn't mean that," Dumb Joe said. " Actually hardly any get burned. The Guild doesn't lose as many men as you might think. But the ones I've known about got roasted. I didn't dare approach those I wasn't sure about. You're the first—and you saw me first. I shouldn't have been so careless, but no one ever comes out this way but me."

" Or another crazy Earthman," Davison said.

He didn't dare to spend much time with Dumb Joe—whose real name, he discovered was Joseph Flanagan, formerly of Earth.

In their hurried conversation in the forest, Flanagan explained the whole thing to him. It was a perfectly logical development. Apparently a great many of the Earthmen sent to such planets adopted the guise of a tramp, and moved with shambling gait and rolling eyes from one village to another, never staying anywhere too long, never tipping their hands as to the power they possessed.

They could always slip off to the forest and use their power privately, to relieve the strain of abstinence. It didn't matter. No one was watching them; no one expected them to be witches. It was perfect camouflage.

" We'd better go," Flanagan said. " It isn't safe, even this way. And I want to last out my remaining two years. Lord, it'll be good to take baths again regularly !"

Davison grinned. " You've really got it figured," he said.

" It's the simplest way," said Flanagan. " You can't bat your head against the wall forever. I tried living in the village, the way you're doing. I almost cracked inside a month, maybe less. You can't come down to their level and hope to survive; you've got to get *below* their level, where they don't expect to find witches. Then they'll leave you alone."

Davison nodded in agreement. "That makes sense."

"I'll have to go now," said Flanagan. He allowed his muscles to relax, adopted the crooked gait and the character of Dumb Joe again, and without saying goodbye began to straggle off further into the forest. Davison stood there for a while, watching him go, and then turned and started back the way he came.

He had an answer now, he thought.

But by the time he had emerged from the forest and felt the noonday sun beating down, he wasn't so sure. Kechnie had once told him, "*Don't run away.*" He hadn't explained —but now Davison knew what he meant.

Dumb Joe Flanagan would last out his five years with a minimum of effort, and when he returned he would get his release and become a member of the Guild. But had he really accomplished his goal to the fullest? Not really, Davison told himself. It wouldn't be possible for him to hide as a beggar forever; sometime, somewhere, it would be necessary for him to function as a member of society, and then Flanagan's five years of shambling would do him little good.

There had to be some other way, Davison thought fiercely. Some way to stick out the five years without burying his head like an ostrich. Some way that would leave him fit to return to society, or to live in some psiless society, and still have his psi power under firm control.

He strode through the hot fields. Off in the distance, he could see the Rinehart family finishing up a furrow. It was noon, and they would be knocking off now. As he looked, he saw sturdy Dirk Rinehart finish his furrow and empty his pods into the waiting truck, and before he had come within shouting distance the rest of them had done so too, and were standing around relaxing after a hard morning's work.

"Well, look who's back!" Janey exclaimed, as Davison drew near. "Have a nice morning's relaxation?"

"I did some heavy thinking, Janey," Davison said mildly. "And I'll be making up my time on Sunday, while you're resting. It balances out."

Old Rinehart came over, smiling. "All thought out, youngster? I hope so, because there's a rough afternoon's work waiting for us."

"I'll be with you," Davison said. He clamped his lips together, not listening to what they were saying, wondering only where the way out might lie.

" Hey, look at me," called a piping voice from behind him.

" Put those down !" Dirk Rinehart ordered sternly. " Get down from there before you break your neck !"

Davison turned and saw Buster Rinehart, standing upon the cab of the truck. He had some bean pods in his hands, and he was energetically juggling them through the air. " Look at me !" he yelled again, evidently proud of his own acrobatic skill. " I'm juggling !"

A moment later he lost control of the pods. They fell and scattered all over the ground. A moment later, the boy was yowling in pain as his father's palm administered punishment vigorously.

Davison chuckled. Then he laughed louder, as he realised what had happened.

He had his answer at last.

Davison gave notice at the end of the week, after working particularly hard in the field. He felt a little guilty about quitting just before planting time, and he had grown to like the Rineharts more than a little. But it was necessary to pull out and move on.

He told Dirk Rinehart he would go after another week had elapsed, and though the farmer had obviously not been pleased by the news, he made no protest. When his week was up, Davison left, gathering his goods together in his suitcase and departing by foot.

He needed to cover quite a distance—far enough from the village so that no one would trace him. He hired one of the nearby farmers' sons to drive him to the next town, giving him one of his remaining coins to do so. Folded in his hip pocket was the crumpled wad of bills that was his salary for his stay at Rinehart's above room and board. He didn't want to touch that money at all.

The boy drove him through the flat, monotonous Mondarran countryside to another town only slightly larger than the first, and otherwise almost identical.

" Thanks," Davison said simply, got out and started to walk. He entered the town—it, too, had its witch-pole—and started looking around for a place to live. He had many preparations to tend to before he would be ready.

Six months later, the signs started to appear all over the local countryside. They were gaudy, printed in three colours, bright and eye-catching. They said, simply,

THE PRESTIDIGITATOR IS COMING !

It caused a stir. As Davison drove his gilded, ornate chariot into the first town on his itinerary, the rambling village on the far side of Lord Gabrielson's domain, a crowd gathered before him and preceded him down the main street, shouting and whooping. It wasn't every day of the year that a travelling magician came to town.

He drove solemnly behind them down the wide street, turned the chariot around, and parked it almost in front of the steel witch-pole. He set the handbrakes, lowered the little platform on which he was going to perform, and stepped out, resplendent in his red-and-gold costume with billowing cloak, in full view of the crowd. He saw a little ripple of anticipation run through them at his appearance.

A tall yokel in the front called out, " Are you the presti—prestig—the whatever you are ?"

" I am Marius the Prestidigitator, indeed," Davison said in a sepulchral voice. He was enjoying it.

" Well, just what do you do, Mr. Marius ?" the yokel replied.

Davison grinned. This was better than having a shill or a trained stooge in the crowd. " Young man, I perform feats that stagger the imagination, that astound the mind, that topple reality." He waved his arms over his head in a wild, grandiose gesture. " I can call spirits from the vasty deep !" he thundered. " I hold the secrets of life and death ?"

" That's what all you magicians say," someone drawled boredly from the back of the crowd. " Let's see you do something, before we have to pay !"

" Very well, unbeliever !" Davison roared. He reached behind himself, drew forth a pair of wax candles, struck a match, and lit the candles. " Observe the way I handle these tapers," he said sonorously. " Notice that I handle the fiery flames without experiencing the slightest harm."

He hefted the candles, tossed them aloft, and began to rotate them telekinetically so that whenever they came down, it was the unlit end he grasped. He juggled the two candles for a moment or two, then reached back, drew forth a third, and inserted it into the rotation. He remained that way for a moment, and the crowd grew silent as Davison tottered around under the candles, pretending to be having all sorts of

difficulties. Finally, when the wax became too pliable to handle easily, he teeked the candles down and caught them. He waved them aloft. The crowd responded with a tinkle of coins.

"Thank you, thank you," he said. He pulled out a box full of coloured globes, and began to juggle them without prologue. Within a few seconds he had five of them going at once—actually manipulated by tk, while he waved his hands impressively but meaninglessly beneath them. He sent up a sixth, then a seventh.

He smiled pleasantly to himself as he juggled. Quite possibly these people had encountered telekinetics before, and had burned them for witches. But those were *real* telekinetics; he was only a sleight-of-hand artist, a man of exceptional co-ordination, a wandering charlatan—a fake. Everyone knew magicians were phonies, and that it was by tricky fingerwork that he kept all those globes aloft.

When the shower of coins had stopped, he caught the balls and restored them to their box. He began a new trick—one which involved a rapid line of patter while he set up an elaborate balancing stunt. Piling chairs on top of thin planks and adding odd pieces of furniture from the back of his chariot to make the edifice even more precarious, he assembled a balanced heap some twelve feet high. He ran round it rapidly ostensibly guiding it with his hands, actually keeping the woodpile under a firm tk control.

Finally he was satisfied with the balance. He began to climb slowly. When he reached the uppermost chair—balanced crazily on one of its legs alone—he climbed up, bracing himself, and by teeking against the ground, lifted himself and balanced for a long moment by one hand. Then he swung down, leaped lightly to the ground, and waved one hand in triumph. A clatter of coins resulted.

This was the way, he thought, as the crowd roared its approval. They'd never suspect he was using a sort of *real* magic. He could practice control of his psi in ordinary life, and this charlatanry would give him the needed outlet as well. When he returned to Earth, he'd be adjusted, more so than the ones like Dumb Joe. Davison was remaining in society. He wasn't running away.

A small boy in the first row stood up. "Aw, I know how you did that," he shouted derisively. "It was just a trick. You had it all—"

"Don't give the show away, sonny," Davison interrupted in a loud stage whisper. "Let's just keep these things secret—between us magicians, huh?"

—Robert Silverberg