Science Fantasy

No. 27
VOLUME 9
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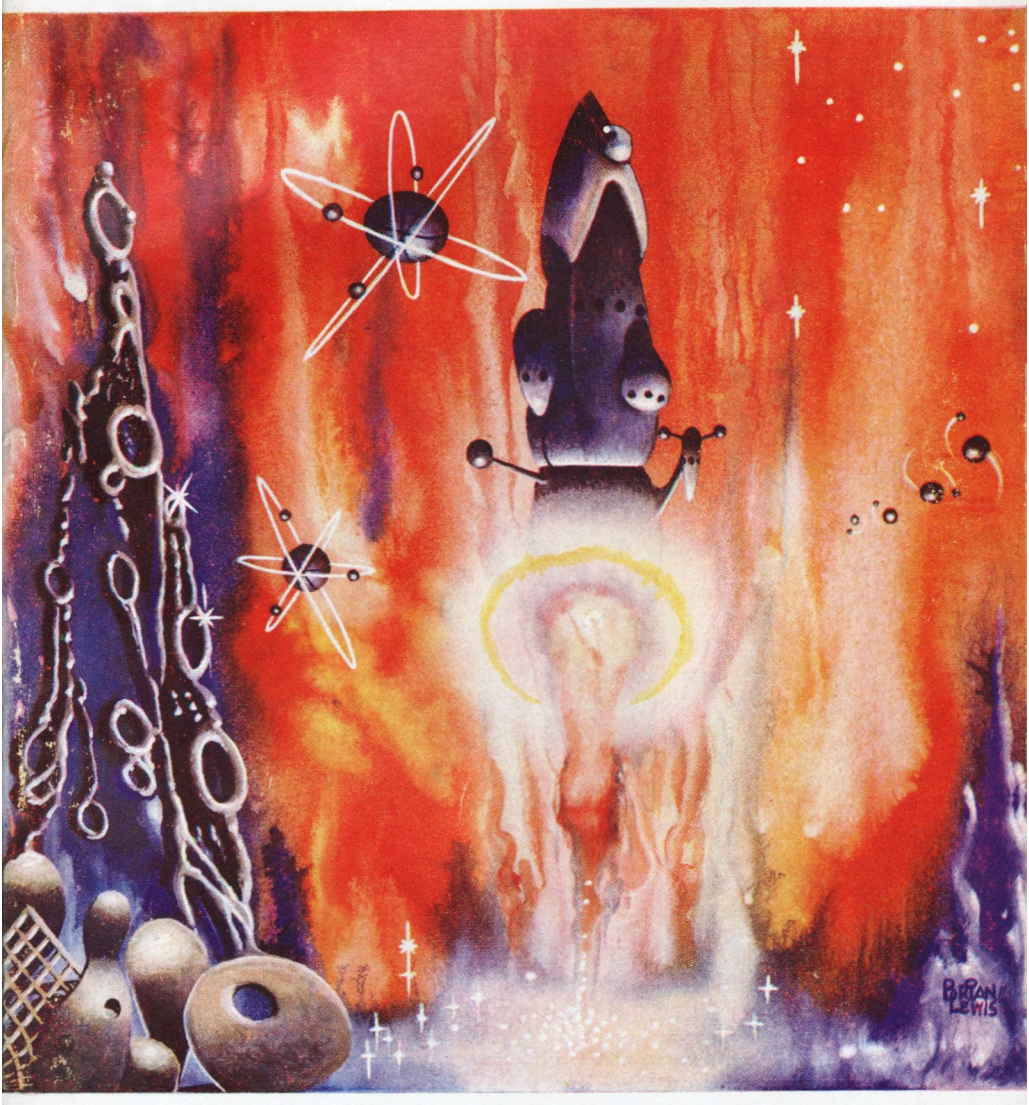

★ VALLEY BEYOND TIME by Robert Silverberg ★

Science Fantasy

Vol. 9 No. 27

1958

CONTENTS

Editor : JOHN CARNELL Cover : LEWIS

Symbolic cover painting from "Valley Beyond Time."

TWO SHILLINGS

Subscription Rates

Great Britain and the Commonwealth, 6 issues 14/- post free

United States of America, 6 issues $2.50 post free.

Published Bi-monthly by

NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD.,

MACLAREN HOUSE, 131 GREAT SUFFOLK STREET, LONDON, S.E.1.

Telephone : HOP 5712

Sole Distributors in New Zealand :

MESSRS. P. B. FISHER, 564 Colombo Street, Christchurch, N.Z.

Printed in England by Rugby Advertiser Ltd., Albert Street, Rugby 2/58

This is the type of story well suited for a fantasy magazine although it has a certain amount of basic science fiction background. However, incomprehensible things happen in the story which cannot be explained away by science as we know it—hence the fantasy angle. And it's right up to the usual high standard of recent Silverberg stories, too.

VALLEY BEYOND TIME

By ROBERT SILVERBERG

I

The valley, Sam Thornhill thought, had never looked lovelier. Drifting milky clouds hung over the two towering bare purple fangs of rock that bordered the Valley on either side and closed it off at the rear. Both suns were in the sky, the sprawling pale red one and the more distant, more intense blue ; their beams mingled, casting a violet haze over tree and shrub and on the fast-flowing waters of the river that led to the barrier.

It was late in the forenoon, and all was well. Thornhill, a slim, compactly-made figure in satinfab doublet and tunic, dark blue with orange trim, felt deep content. He watched the girl and the man come toward him up the winding path from the stream, wondering who they were and what they wanted with him.

The girl, at least, was attractive. She was dark of complexion, and just short of Thornhill's own height : she wore a snug raylon blouse and a yellow knee-length lustrol sheath. Her bare shoulders were wide and sun-darkened.

The man was small, well-set, hardly an inch over five feet tall. He was nearly bald ; a maze of wrinkles furrowed his domed forehead. His eyes caught Thornhill's attention immediately. They were very bright, quick eyes that darted here and there in rapid glittering motions—the eyes of a predatory animal, of a lizard perhaps ready to pounce.

In the distance, Thornhill caught sight of others, not all of them human. A globular Spican was visible near the stream's edge. Then Thornhill frowned for the first time ; who were all these, and what business had they in his Valley ?

" Hello," the girl said. " My name's Marga Fallis. This is La Floquet. You just get here ?"

Thornhill shook his head. " I don't follow you. What do you mean, *did I just get here* ? "

She glanced toward the man named La Floquet and said quietly, " He hasn't come out of it yet, obviously. He must be brand new."

" He'll wake up soon," La Floquet said. His voice was dark and sharp.

" What are you two muttering ?" Thornhill demanded angrily. " How did you get here ?"

" The same way you did," the girl said. " And the sooner you admit that to yourself—"

Hotly, Thornhill said, " I've always been here, damn you ! This is the Valley ! I've spent my whole life here ! And I've never seen either of you before. Any of you. You just appeared out of nowhere, you and this little rooster and those others down by the river, and I—" He stopped, feeling a sudden wrenching shaft of doubt.

Of course I've always lived here, he told himself.

He began to quiver. He leaped abruptly forward, seeing in the smiling little man with the wisp of russet hair around his ears the enemy that had cast him forth from Eden. "Damn you, it was fine till *you* got here ! You had to spoil it ! I'll pay you back, though."

Thornhill sprang at the little man viciously, thinking to knock him to the ground. But to his astonishment he was the one to recoil ; La Floquet remained unbudged, still smiling, still glinting birdlike at him. Thornhill sucked in a

deep breath and drove forward at La Floquet a second time. This time he was efficiently caught and held ; he wriggled, but though La Floquet was a good twenty years older and a foot shorter there was surprising strength in his wiry body. Sweat burst out on Thornhill. Finally, he gave ground and dropped back.

" Fighting is foolish," La Floquet said tranquilly. " It accomplishes nothing. What's your name ?"

" Sam Thornhill."

" Now : attend to me. What were you doing in the moment before you first knew you were in the Valley ?"

" I've always been in the Valley," Thornhill said stubbornly.

" Think," said the girl. " Look back. There was a time before you came to the Valley."

Thornhill turned away, looking upward at the mighty mountain peaks that hemmed them in, at the fast-flowing stream that wound between them and out toward the Barrier. A grazing beast wandered on the upreach of the foothill, nibbling the sharp-toothed grass. Had there ever been a someplace else, Thornhill wondered ?

No. There had always been the Valley, and here he had lived, alone and at peace—until that final deceptive moment of tranquility, followed by this strange unwanted invasion.

" It usually takes several hours for the effect to wear off," the girl said. " Then you'll remember . . . the way we remember. Think. You're from Earth, aren't you ?"

" Earth ?" Thornhill repeated dimly.

" Green hills, spreading cities, oceans, spaceliners. Earth. No ?"

" Observe the heavy tan," La Floquet pointed out. " He's from Earth, but he hasn't lived there for a while. How about Vengamon ?"

" Vengamon," Thornhill declared, not questioningly this time. The strange syllables seemed to have meaning : a swollen yellow sun, broad plains, a growing city of colonists, a flourishing ore trade. " I know the word," he said.

" Was that the planet where you lived ?" the girl prodded. " Vengamon ?"

" I think—" Thornhill began hesitantly. His knees felt weak. A neat pattern of life was breaking down and cascading away from him, sloughing off as if it had never been at all.

It had *never been.*

" I lived on Vengamon," he said.

" Good !" La Floquet cried. " The first fact has been elicited ! Now to think where you were the very moment before you came here. A spaceship, perhaps ? Travelling between worlds ? Think, Thornhill."

He thought. The effort was mind-wracking, but he deliberately blotted out the memories of his life in the Valley and searched backward, until—

" I was a passenger on the liner *Royal Mother Helene,* bound into Vengamon from the neighbouring world of Jurinalle. I . . . had been on holiday. I was returning to my—my plantation ? No, not plantation. Mine. I own mining land on Vengamon. That's it, yes : mining land." The light of the double suns became oppressively warm ; he felt dizzy. " I remember now : the trip was an uneventful one ; I was bored and dozed off a few minutes. Then I recall sensing that I was outside the ship, somehow—and—blank. Next thing, I was here in the Valley."

" The standard pattern," La Floquet said. He gestured to the others down near the stream. " There are eight of us in all, including you. I arrived first—yesterday, I call it, though actually there's been no night. The girl came after me. Then three others. You're the third one to come today."

Thornhill blinked. " We're just being picked out of nowhere and dumped here ? How is it possible ?"

La Floquet shrugged. " You will be asking that question more than once before you've left the Valley. Come. Let's meet the others."

The small man turned with an imperious gesture and retraced his steps down the path ; the girl followed, and Thornhill fell in line behind her. He realized he had been standing on a ledge overlooking the river, one of the foothills of the two great mountains that formed the Valley's boundaries.

The air was warm, with a faint breeze stirring through it. He felt younger than his thirty-seven years, certainly ; more alive, more perceptive. He caught the fragrance of the golden blossoms that lined the riverbed, and saw the light sparkle of the double sunlight scattered by the water's spray.

He thought of glancing at his watch. The hands read 14:23. That was interesting enough. The day-hand said 7 *July* 2671. It was still the same day, then. On 7 July 2671 he had left

Jurinalle for Vengamon, and he had lunched at 11:40. That meant he had probably dozed off about noon—and, unless something were wrong with his watch, only two hours had passed since then. Two hours. And yet—the memories still said, though they were fading fast now—he had spent an entire life in this Valley, unmarred by intruders until a few moments before.

" This is Sam Thornhill," La Floquet suddenly said. "He's our newest arrival. He's out of Vengamon."

Thornhill eyed the others curiously. There were five of them, three human, one humanoid, one non-humanoid. The non-humanoid was a being of Spica, globular, in its yellow-green phase just now but seeming ready to shift to its melancholy brownish-red guise. Tiny clawed feet peeked out from under the great melon-like body ; dark grapes atop stalks studied Thornhill with unfathomable alien curiosity.

The humanoid, Thornhill saw, hailed from one of the worlds of Regulus. He was keen-eyed, pale orange in colour. The heavy flap of flesh swinging from his throat was the chief external alien characteristic of the being. Thornhill had met his kind before.

Of the remaining three, one was a woman, small, plain-looking, dressed in drab grey cloth garments. There were two men : a spidery spindle shanked sort, with mild scholarly eyes and an apologetic smile, and a powerfully-built man of thirty or so, shirtless, scowling impatiently.

" As you can see, it's quite a crew," La Floquet remarked to Thornhill. " Vellers, did you have any luck down by the barrier ?"

The big man shook his head. " I followed the damn stream as far as I dared. But you get beyond that grassy bend down there and you come smack against that barrier, like a wall you can't see planted in the water." His accent was broad and heavy ; he was obviously of Earth, Thornhill thought, and not from one of the colony-worlds.

La Floquet frowned. " Did you try swimming underneath ? No, of course you didn't. Eh ?"

Vellers' scowl grew darker. " There wasn't any percentage in it, Floquet. I dove ten-fifteen feet and the barrier was still like glass—smooth and clean to the touch, y'know, but strong. I didn't aim to go any lower."

" All right," La Floquet said sharply. " It doesn't matter. Few of us could swim that deep anyway." He glanced at Thornhill. " You see that this lovely Valley is likely to become our home for life, don't you ?"

" There's no way out ?"

The small man pointed to the gleaming radiance of the barrier, which rose in a high curving arc from the water and formed a triangular wedge closing off the lower end of the Valley. " You see that thing down there. We don't know what's at the other end—but we'd have to climb twenty thousand feet of mountain to find out. There's no way out of here."

" Do we *want* to get out ?" asked the thin man, in a shallow, petulant voice. " I was almost dead when I came here, La Floquet. Now I'm alive again. I don't know if I'm so anxious to leave here."

La Floquet whirled. His eyes flashed angrily as he said, " Mr. McKay, I'm delighted to hear of your recovery. But life still waits for me outside this place, lovely as the Valley is. I don't intend to rot away in here forever—not La Floquet."

The scholarly-looking man named McKay shook his head slowly. " I wish there were some way of stopping you from looking for a way out. I'll die in a week if I go out of the Valley. If you escape, La Floquet, you'll be my murderer !"

" I just don't understand," Thornhill said in confusion. " If La Floquet finds a way out, what's it to you, McKay ? Why don't you just stay here ?"

McKay smiled unhappily. " I guess you haven't told him then," he said to La Floquet.

" No. I didn't have a chance." La Floquet turned to Thornhill. " What this dried-up man of books is saying is that the Watcher has warned us that if one of us leaves the Valley, all the others must go."

" The Watcher ?" Thornhill repeated.

" It was he who brought you here. You'll see him again. Occasionally he talks to us, and tells us things. This morning he told us this : that our fates are bound together."

" And I ask you not to keep searching for the way out," McKay said dolefully. " My life depends on staying in the Valley !"

" And mine of getting out !" La Floquet blazed. He lunged forward and sent McKay sprawling to the ground in one furious gesture of contempt.

McKay turned even paler, and clutched at his chest as he landed. " My heart ! You shouldn't—"

Thornhill moved forward and assisted McKay to his feet. The tall, stoop-shouldered man looked dazed and shaken, but unhurt. He drew himself together and said quietly, " Two days ago a blow like that would have killed me. And now—you see?" he asked, appealing to Thornhill. " The Valley has strange properties. I don't want to leave. And he—he's condemning me to die !"

" Don't worry so over it," La Floquet said lightly. " You may yet get your wish. You may spend all your days here among the poppies."

Thornhill turned and looked up the mountainside toward the top. The mountain's peak loomed snow-flecked, shrouded by clinging frosty clouds ; the climb would be a giant's task. And how would they know, until they had climbed it, whether merely another impassable barrier lay beyond the mountain's crest ?

" We seem to be stuck here for a while," Thornhill said. " But it could be worse. This looks like a pleasant place to live."

" It is," La Floquet said. " If you like pleasant places. They bore me. But come : tell us something of yourself. Half an hour ago you had no past ; has it come back to you yet ? "

Thornhill nodded slowly. " I was born on Earth. Studied to be a mining engineer. I did fairly well at it, and when they opened up Vengamon I moved out there and bought a chunk of land there, while the prices were low. It turned out to be a good buy. I opened a mine there four years ago. I'm not married. I'm a wealthy man, as wealth is figured on Vengamon. And that's the whole story, except that I was returning home from a vacation when I was snatched off my spaceship and deposited here."

He took a deep breath, drawing the warm, slightly moist air into his lungs. For the moment, he sided with McKay : he was in no hurry to leave the Valley. But he could see that La Floquet, that energetic, driving little man, was bound to have his way. If there were any path leading out of the Valley, La Floquet would find it.

His eyes came to rest on Marga Fallis. The girl was handsome, no doubt about it. Yes, he could stay here a while

longer, under these double suns, breathing deep and living free from responsibility for the first time in his life. But they were supposed to be bound together : once one left the Valley, all would. And La Floquet was determined to leave.

A shadow dimmed the purple light.

" What's that ?" Thornhill said. " An eclipse ?"

" The Watcher," McKay said softly. " He's back. And it wouldn't surprise me if he's brought the ninth member of our little band."

Thornhill stared as a soft blackness descended over the land, the suns still visible behind it but only as tiny dots of far-off radiance. It was as if a fluffy dark cloak had enfolded them. But it was more than a cloak—much more. He sensed a *presence* among them, watchful, curious, eager for their welfare as a brooding hen. The alien darkness wrapped itself over the entire Valley.

This is the last of your company, said a soundless voice that seemed to echo from the mountain walls. The sky began to brighten. Suddenly as it had come, the darkness was gone, and Thornhill once again felt alone.

" The Watcher had little to say this time," McKay commented, as the light returned.

" Look !" Marga cried.

Thornhill followed the direction of her pointing arm, and looked upward, toward the ledge on which he had first become aware of the Valley around him.

A tiny figure was wandering in confused circles up there. At this distance it was impossible to tell much about the newcomer. Thornhill became chilled. The shadow of the Watcher had come and gone—leaving behind yet another captive for the Valley.

II.

Thornhill narrowed his eyes as he looked toward the ledge. " We ought to go get him," he said.

La Floquet shook his head. " We have time. It takes an hour or two for the newcomers to lose that strange illusion of being alone here ; you remember what it's like."

" I do," Thornhill agreed. " It's as if you've lived all your life in paradise . . . until gradually it wears off, and you see others around you. As I saw you and Marga coming up the path towards me." He walked a few paces away from them

and lowered himself to a moss-covered boulder. A small wiry catlike creature with wide cupped ears emerged from behind it and rubbed up against him, and he fondled it idly as if it were his pet.

La Floquet shaded his eyes from the sunslight. "Can you see what he's like, that one up there?"

"No, not at this distance," Thornhill said.

"Too bad you can't. You'd be interested. We've added another alien to our gallery, I fear."

Thornhill leaned forward anxiously. "From where?"

"Aldebaran," La Floquet said.

Thornhill winced. The humanoid aliens of Aldebaran were the coldest of races, fierce savage men who hid festering evil behind masks of outward urbanity. Some of the outworlds referred to the Aldebaranians as devils, and they were not so far wrong. To have one here, a devil in paradise, so to speak—

"What are we going to do?" Thornhill asked.

La Floquet shrugged. "The Watcher has put the creature here, and the Watcher has his own purposes. We'll simply have to accept what comes."

Thornhill rose and paced urgently up and down. The silent small mousy woman and McKay had drawn off to one side; the Spican was peering at his own plump image in the swirling waters, and the Regulan, not interested in the proceedings, stared aloofly toward the leftward mountain. The girl Marga and La Floquet remained near Thornhill.

"All right," Thornhill said finally. "Give the Aldebaranian some time to come to his senses. Meanwhile let's forget about him and worry about ourselves. La Floquet, what do you know about this Valley?"

The small man smiled blandly. "Not very much. I know we're on a world with Earth-norm gravity and a double sun system. How many red-and-blue double suns do you know of, Thornhill?"

He shrugged. "I'm no astronomer."

"I am . . . was . . ." Marga said. "There are hundreds of such systems. We could be anywhere in the galaxy."

"Can't you tell from the constellations at night?" Thornhill asked.

"There *are* no constellations," La Floquet said sadly. "The damnable part is that there's always at least one of the suns in the sky. This planet has no night. We see no stars. But our location is unimportant." The fiery little man chuckled to himself. "McKay will triumph. We'll never

leave the Valley. How could we contact anyone, even if we were to cross the mountains? We cannot."

A sudden crackle of thunder caught Thornhill's attention. A great rolling boom reverberated from the sides of the mountains, dying away slowly.

"Listen," he said.

"A storm," said La Floquet. "Outside the confines of our barrier. The same happened yesterday, at this time. It storms . . . but not in here. We live in an enchanted Valley where the sun always shines and life is gentle." A bitter grimace twisted his thin, bloodless lips. "Gentle!"

"Get used to it," Thornhill said. "We may be here a long time."

His watch read 16:42 when they finally went up the hill to get the Aldebaranian. In the two hours he had seen a shift in the configuration of the suns—the red had receded, the blue grown more intense—but it was obvious that there would be no night, that light would enter the Valley round the clock. In time, he would grow used to that. He was adaptable.

Nine people, plucked from as many different worlds and cast within the space of twenty-four hours into this timeless valley beyond the storms, where there was no darkness. Of the nine, six were human, three were alien. Of the six, four were men, two were women.

Thornhill wondered about his companions. He knew so little about them, yet. Vellers, the strong man, was from Earth; Thornhill knew nothing more of him. McKay and the mousy woman were ciphers. Thornhill cared little about them. Neither the Regulan nor the Spican had uttered a word yet . . . if they could speak the Terran tongues at all. As for Marga, she was an astronomer and she was lovely, but he knew nothing else. La Floquet was an interesting one—a little dynamo, shrewd and energetic, but close-mouthed about his own past.

There they were. Nine pastless people. The present was as much of a mystery to them as the future.

By the time they reached the mountain ledge, Thornhill and La Floquet and the girl, the Aldebaranian had seen them and was glaring coldly at them. The storm had subsided in the land outside the Valley, and once again white clouds drifted in over the barrier.

Like all his race the Aldebaranian was well fleshed, a man of middle height and amiable appearance, with pouches of fat swelling beneath his chin and under his ears. He was grey of skin and dark of eye, with gleaming little hooked incisors that glinted terrifyingly when he smiled. He had extra thumbs on each hand, and Thornhill knew there were extra joints in his limbs as well.

"At last some others join me," the alien remarked in flawless Terran Standard as they approached. "I knew life could hardly go on here as it had."

"You're mistaken," La Floquet said. "It's a delusion common to new arrivals. You haven't lived here all your life, you know. Not really."

The Aldebaranian smiled. "This surprises me. But explain, if you will."

La Floquet explained. In a frighteningly short space of time, the alien had grasped the essential nature of the Valley and his position in it. Thornhill watched coldly; the speed with which the Aldebaranian cast off delusion and accepted reality was disturbing.

They returned to the group at the river's edge. By now, Thornhill was beginning to feel hungry; he had been in the Valley more than four hours. "What do we do about food?" he asked.

La Floquet said, "It falls from the skies three times a day. Manna, you know. The Watcher takes fine care of us. You got here around the time of the afternoon fall, but you were up there in your haze while we ate. It's almost time for the third fall of the day now."

The red sun had faded considerably now, and a haunted blue twilight reigned. Thornhill knew enough about solar mechanics to be aware that the big red sun was nearly dead; its feeble bulk gave little light. Fierce radiation came from the blue sun, but distance afforded protection. How this unlikely pair had come together was a matter for conjecture—some star-capture in eons past, no doubt.

White flakes drifted slowly downward. As they came, Thornhill saw the Spican hoist its bulk hastily from the ground, saw the Regulan running eagerly toward the drifting flakes. McKay stirred; Vellers, the big man, tugged himself to his feet. Only Thornhill and the Aldebaranian looked at all doubtful.

" Suppertime," La Floquet said cheerfully. He punctuated the statement by snapping a gob of the floating substance from the air with a quick sharp gesture, and cramming it into his mouth.

The others, Thornhill saw, were likewise catching the food before it touched ground. The animals of the Valley were appearing—the fat lazy-looking ruminants, the whippetlike dogs, the catlike creatures—and busily were devouring the manna from the ground.

Thornhill shrugged and shagged a mass as it hung before him in the air. After a tentative sniff, he swallowed a hesitant mouthful.

It was like chewing cloud-stuff—except that this cloud had a tangy, wine-like taste ; his stomach felt soothed almost immediately. He wondered how such unsubstantial stuff could possibly be nourishing. Then he stopped wondering, and helped himself to a second portion, and a third.

The fall stopped, finally, and by then Thornhill was sated. He lay outstretched on the ground, legs thrust out, head propped up against a boulder.

Opposite him was McKay. The thin, pale man was smiling. " I haven't eaten this way in years," he said. " Haven't had much of an appetite. But now—"

" Where are you from ?" Thornhill asked, interrupting.

" Earth, originally. Then to Mars when my heart began acting up. They thought the low gravity would help me, and of course it did. I'm a professor of medieval Terran history. That is, I *was*—I was on a medical leave, until—until I came here." He smiled complacently. " I feel reborn here, you know ? If only I had some books—"

" Shut up," growled Vellers. " You'd stay here forever, wouldn't you now ?"

The big man lay near the water's edge, staring moodily out over the river.

" Of course I would," snapped McKay testily. " And Miss Hardin too, I'd wager."

" If we could leave the two of you here together, I'm sure you'd be very happy," came the voice of La Floquet. " But we can't do that. Either all of us stay, or all of us get out of here."

The argument seemed ready to last all night. Thornhill looked away. The three aliens seemed to be as far from each other as possible, the Spican lying in a horizontal position

looking like a great inflated balloon that had somehow come to rest, the little Regulan brooding in the distance and fingering its heavy dewlap, the Aldebaranian sitting quietly to one side, listening to every word, smiling like a pudgy Buddha.

Thornhill rose. He bent over Marga Fallis and said, "Would you care to take a walk with me?"

She hesitated just a moment. "I'd love to," she said.

They stood at the edge of the water, watching the swift stream, watching golden fish flutter past with solemnly gaping mouths. After a while they walked on upstream, back toward the rise in the ground that led to the hills which in turn rose into the two mighty peaks.

Thornhill said, "That La Floquet. He's a funny one, isn't he? Like a little gamecock, always jumping around and ready for a fight."

"He's very dynamic," Marga agreed quietly.

"You and he were the first ones here, weren't you? It must have been strange, just the two of you in this little Eden, until the third one showed up." Thornhill wondered why he was probing after these things. Jealousy, perhaps? Not *perhaps*. Certainly.

"We really had very little time alone together. McKay came right after me, and then the Spican. The Watcher was very busy collecting."

"*Collecting*," Thornhill repeated. "That's all we are. Just specimens collected and put here in this Valley like little lizards in a terrarium. And this Watcher—some strange alien being, I guess." He looked up at the starless sky, still bright with day. "There's no telling what's in the stars. Five hundred years of space travel, and we haven't seen it all."

Marga smiled. She took his hand and they walked on further into the low-lying shrubbery, saying nothing. Thornhill finally broke the silence.

"You said you were an astronomer, Marga?"

"Not really." Her voice was low, for a woman's, and well modulated; he liked it. "I'm attached to the Bellatrix VII observatory, but strictly as an assistant. I've got a degree in astronomy, of course. But I'm just sort of hired help in the observatory."

"Is that where you were when—when—"

"Yes," she said. "I was in the main dome, taking some plates out of a camera. I remember it was a very delicate

business. A minute of two before it happened someone called me on the main phone downstairs, and they wanted to transfer the call up to me. I told them it would have to wait ; I couldn't be bothered until I'd finished with my plates. And then everything blanked out, and I guess my plates don't matter now. I wish I'd taken that call, though."

" Someone important ?"

" Oh—no. Nothing like that."

Somehow Thornhill felt relieved. " What about La Floquet ?" he asked. " Who is he ?"

" He's sort of a big game hunter," she said. " I met him once before, when he led a party to Bellatrix VII. Imagine the odds on any two people in the universe meeting twice ! He didn't recognise me, of course, but I remembered him. He's not easy to forget."

" He *is* sort of picturesque," Thornhill said.

" And you ? You said you owned a mine on Vengamon."

" I do. I'm actually quite a dull person," said Thornhill. " This is the first interesting thing that's ever happened to me." He grinned wryly. " The fates caught up with me with a vengeance, though. I guess I'll never see Vengamon again now. Unless La Floquet can get us out of here, and I don't think he can."

" Does it matter ? Will it pain you never to go back to Vengamon ?"

" I doubt it," Thornhill said. " I can't see any urgent reason for wanting to go back. And you, and your observatory ?"

" I can forget my observatory soon enough," she said.

Somehow he moved closer to her ; he wished it were a little darker, perhaps even that the Watcher would choose this instant to arrive and afford a shield of privacy for him for a moment. He felt her warmth against him.

" Don't," she murmured suddenly. " Someone's coming."

She pulled away from him. Scowling, Thornhill turned and saw the stubby figure of La Floquet clambering toward them.

" I do hope I'm not interrupting any tender scenes," the little man said quietly.

" You might have been," Thornhill admitted. " But the damage is done. What's happened to bring you after us? Is it just the charm of our company ?"

"Not exactly," said La Floquet. "There's trouble down below. Vellers and McKay had a fight."

"Over leaving the Valley?"

"Of course." La Floquet looked strangely disturbed. "Vellers hit him a little too hard, though. He killed him."

Marga gasped. "McKay's dead?"

"Very. I don't know what we ought to do with Vellers. I wanted you two in on it."

Hastily Thornhill and Marga followed La Floquet down the side of the hill, toward the little group clumped on the beach. Even at a distance, Thornhill could see the towering figure of Vellers staring down at his feet, where the crumpled body of McKay lay.

They were still a hundred feet away when McKay rose suddenly to his feet and hurled himself on Vellers in a wild headlong assault.

III

Thornhill froze an instant, and grasped La Floquet's cold wrist.

"I thought you told me he was dead!"

"He *was*," La Floquet insisted. "I've seen dead men before. I know the face, the eyes, the slackness of the lips —Thornhill, this is impossible!"

They ran toward the beach. Vellers had been thrown back by the fury of the resurrected McKay's attack; he went tumbling over, with McKay groping for his throat in blind murderousness.

But Vellers' strength prevailed. As Thornhill approached, the big man plucked McKay off him with one huge hand, held him squirming in the air for an instant, and rising to his feet, hurled McKay down against a beach boulder, with sickening impact. Vellers staggered back, muttering hoarsely to himself.

Thornhill stared down. A gash had opened along the side of McKay's head; blood oozed through the sparse greying hair, matting it. McKay's eyes, half-open, were glazed and sightless; his mouth hung agape, tongue lolling. The skin of his face was grey.

Kneeling, Thornhill touched his hand to McKay's wrist, then to the older man's lips. After a moment he looked up. "This time he's really dead," he said.

La Floquet was peering grimly at him. "Get out of the way!" he snapped suddenly, and to Thornhill's surprise he found himself being roughly grabbed by the shoulder and flung aside by the wiry game-hunter.

Quickly La Floquet flung himself down on McKay's body, straddling it with his knees pressing against the limp arms, hands grasping the slender shoulders. The beach was very silent; La Floquet's rough irregular breathing was the only sound. The little man seemed poised, tensed for a physical encounter.

The gash on McKay's scalp began to heal.

Thornhill watched as the parted flesh closed over, the bruised skin lost its angry discolouration. Within moments, only the darkening stain of blood on McKay's forehead gave any indication that there had been a wound.

Then, McKay's slitted eyelids closed and immediately re-opened, showing bright flashing eyes that rolled wildly. Colour returned to the dead man's face. Like a riding whip suddenly turned by conjury into a serpent, McKay began to thrash frantically. But La Floquet was prepared. His muscles corded momentarily as he exerted pressure; McKay writhed but could not rise. Behind him, Thornhill heard Vellers mumbling a prayer over and over again, while the mousy Miss Hardin provided a counterpoint of harsh sobs, and even the Regulan uttered a brief comment in his guttural, consonant-studded language.

Sweat beaded La Floquet's face, but he prevented McKay from repeating his previous wild charge. Perhaps a minute passed; then, McKay relaxed visibly.

La Floquet remained cautiously astride him. "McKay? McKay, do you hear me? This is La Floquet."

"I hear you. You can get off me now; I'm all right."

La Floquet gestured to Thornhill and Vellers. "Stand near him. Be ready to grab him if he runs wild again." He eyed McKay suspiciously for a moment, then rolled to one side, and jumped to his feet.

McKay remained on the ground a moment longer. Finally he hoisted himself to a kneeling position, and, shaking his head as if to clear it, he stood erect. He took a few hesitant uncertain steps. Then he turned, staring squarely at the three men, and in a quiet voice said, "Tell me what happened to me."

"You and Vellers quarelled," La Floquet said. "He . . . knocked you unconscious. When you came to, something must have snapped inside you—you went after Vellers like a madman. He knocked you out a second time. You just regained consciousness."

"*No* !" Thornhill half-shouted, in a voice he hardly recognised as his own. "Tell him the truth, La Floquet ! We can't gain anything by pretending it didn't happen."

"What truth ?" McKay asked curiously.

Thornhill paused an instant. "McKay, you were dead. At least once. Probably twice, unless La Floquet was mistaken the first time. I examined you the second time—after Vellers bashed you against that rock. I'd swear you were dead. Feel the side of your head . . . where it was split open when Vellers threw you down."

McKay put a quivering hand to his head, drew it away bloody, and stared down at the rock near his foot. The rock was bloodstained also.

"I see blood—but I don't feel any pain."

"Of course not," Thornhill said. "The wound healed almost instantaneously. And you were revived. *You came back to life, McKay* !"

McKay turned to La Floquet. "Is this thing true, what Thornhill's telling me ? You were trying to hide it ?"

La Floquet nodded.

A slow, strange smile appeared on McKay's pale, angular face. "It's the Valley, then ! I was dead—and I rose from the dead ! Vellers—La Floquet—you fools ! Don't you see that we live forever, here in this Valley that you're so anxious to leave ? I died twice . . . and it was like being asleep. Dark, and I remember nothing. You're sure I was dead, Thornhill ?"

"I'd swear to it."

"But of course you, La Floquet—you'd try to hide this from me, wouldn't you ? Well, do you still want to leave here ? We can live forever in the Valley, La Floquet !"

The small man spat angrily. "Why bother ? Why live here like vegetables, eternally, never to move beyond those mountains, never to see what's on the other side of the stream? I'd rather have a dozen unfettered years than ten thousand in this prison, McKay !" He scowled.

"You had to tell him," La Floquet said accusingly to Thornhill.

" What difference does it make ?" Thornhill asked. " We'd have had a repetition sooner or later. We couldn't hide it from anyone." He glanced up at the arching mountains. " So the Watcher has ways of keeping us alive ? No suicide, no murder . . . and no way out."

" There *is* a way out," La Floquet said stubbornly. " Over that mountain pass. I'm sure of it. Vellers and I may go to take a look at it tomorrow. Won't we, Vellers ?"

The big man shrugged. " It's fine with me."

" You don't want to stay here forever do you, Vellers ?" La Floquet went on, " What good is immortality if it's the immortality of prisoners for life ? We'll look at the mountain tomorrow, Vellers."

Thornhill detected a very strange note in La Floquet's voice, a curiously strained facial expression—as if he were pleading with Vellers to support him, as if he were somehow afraid to approach the mountains alone. The idea of La Floquet's being afraid of anything or anyone seemed hard to accept, but Thornhill had that definite impression.

He looked at Vellers, then at La Floquet. " We ought to discuss this a little further, I think. There are nine of us, La Floquet. MacKay and Miss Hardin definitely want to remain in the Valley ; Miss Fallis and I are uncertain, but in any event we'd like to stay here a while longer. That's four against two, among the humans. As for the aliens—"

" I'll vote with La Floquet," said the Aldebaranian quietly. " Important business waits for me outside."

Troublemaker, Thornhill thought. " Four against three, then. With the Spican and the Regulan unheard from. And I guess they'll stay unheard from, since we can't speak their languages."

" I can speak Regulan," volunteered the Aldebaranian. Without waiting for further discussion he wheeled to face the grave dewlapped being, and exchanged four or five short crisp sentences with him. Turning again, he said " Our friend votes to leave. This ties the score, I believe."

" Just a second," Thornhill said hotly. " How do *we* know that's what he said ? Suppose—"

The mask of affability slipped from the alien's face. " Suppose *what* ?" he asked coldly. " If you intend to put a shadow on my honour, Thornhill—" He left the sentence unfinished.

" It would be pretty pointless duelling here," Thornhill said. " Unless your honour satisfies easily. You couldn't very well kill me for long. Perhaps a temporary death might soothe you, but let's let it drop. I'll take your interpreting job in good faith. We're four apiece for staying or trying to break out."

La Floquet said, " It was good of you to take this little vote, Thornhill. But it's not a voting matter. We're individuals, not a corporate entity, and I choose not to remain here so long as I can make the attempt to escape." The little man spun on his heel and stalked away from the group.

" There ought to be some way of stopping him," said McKay thickly. " If he escapes—"

Thornhill shook his head. " It's not as easy as all that. How's he going to get off the planet, even if he does pass the mountains ?"

" You don't understand," McKay said. " The Watcher simply said if one of us *leaves the Valley*, all must go. And if La Floquet succeeds, it's death for me."

" Perhaps we're dead already," Marga suggested, breaking her long silence. " Suppose each of us—you in your spaceliner, me in my observatory—died at the same moment and came here. What if—"

The sky darkened, in the now-familiar manner that signalled the approach of the Watcher.

" Ask him," Thornhill said. " He'll tell you all about it."

The black cloud descended.

You are not dead, came the voiceless answer to the unspoken question. *Though some of you will die if the barrier be passed.*

Again Thornhill felt chilled by the presence of the formless being. " Who are you ?" he shouted. " What do you want with us ?"

I am the Watcher.

" And what do you want with us ?" Thornhill repeated.

I am the Watcher, came the inflexible answer. Fibrils of the cloud began to trickle away in many directions ; within moments the sky was clear. Thornhill slumped back against a rock and looked at Marga.

" He comes and he goes, feeds us, keeps us from killing ourselves or each other. It's like a zoo, Marga ! And we're the chief exhibits !"

La Floquet and Vellers came stumping toward them. " Are you satisfied with the answers to your questions ?" La

Floquet demanded. "Do you still want to spend the rest of your days here?"

Thornhill smiled. "Go ahead, La Floquet. Go climb the mountain. I'm changing my vote. It's five-three in favour of leaving."

"I thought you were with me," said McKay.

Thornhill ignored him. "Go on, La Floquet. You and Vellers climb that mountain. Get out of the Valley, if you can."

"Come with us," La Floquet said.

"Ah, no—I'd rather stay here. But I won't object if *you* go."

Fleetingly La Floquet cast a glance at the giant tooth that blocked the Valley's exit, and it seemed to Thornhill that a shadow of fear passed over the little man's face. But La Floquet clamped his jaws tight, and through locked lips said, "Vellers, are you with me?"

The big man shrugged amiably. "It can't hurt to take a look, I figure."

"Let's go then," La Floquet said firmly. He threw one black, infuriated glance at Thornhill and struck out for the path leading to the mountain approach.

When he was out of earshot, Marga said, "Sam, why'd you do that?"

"I wanted to see how he'd react. I saw it."

McKay tugged at his arm fretfully. "I'll die if we leave the Valley! Don't you see that, Mr. Thornhill?"

Sighing, Thornhill said, "I see it. But don't worry too much about La Floquet. He'll be back, before long."

Slowly the hours passed, and the red sun slipped below the horizon, leaving only the distant blue sun to provide warmth. Thornhill's wrist-watch told him it was past ten in the evening . . . nearly twelve hours since the time he had boarded the space-liner on Jurinalle, more than four hours since his anticipated arrival time in the main city of Vengamon. They would have searched in vain for him, by now, and would be wondering how a man could vanish so thoroughly from a spaceship in hyperdrive.

The little group sat together at the river's edge. The Spican had shifted fully into his brownish-red phase, and sat silently like some owl heralding the death of the universe. The other two aliens kept mainly to themselves as well. There was little to be said.

McKay huddled himself into a knob-kneed pile of limbs and stared up at the mountains as if hoping to see some sign of La Floquet and Vellers. Thornhill understood the expression on his face; McKay knew clearly that if La Floquet succeeded in leaving the Valley's confines, he would pay the price of his double resurrection in the same instant. McKay looked like a man seated below a thread-hung sword.

Thornhill himself stared silently at the mountain, wondering where the two men were now, how far they would get before La Floquet's cowardice forced them to turn back. He had no doubt now that La Floquet dreaded the mountain—otherwise he would have made the attempt long before, instead of merely threatening it. Now, he had been goaded into it by Thornhill, but would he be successful! Probably not; a brave man with one deep-lying fear often never conquered that fear. In a way Thornhill pitied little La Floquet; the gamecock would be forced to come back in humiliation though he might delay that moment as long as he possibly could.

"You seemed troubled," Marga said.

"Troubled? No, just thinking."

"About what?"

"About Vengamon, and my mine there . . . and how the vultures have probably already started to go after my estate."

"You don't miss Vengamon, do you?" she said.

He smiled and shook his head. "Not yet. That mine was my whole life, you know. I took little vacations now and then, but I thought only of the mine, and my supervisors and how lazy they were, and the price of ore in the interstellar markets. Until now. It must be some strange property of this Valley, but for the first time the mine seems terribly remote, as if it had always belonged to someone else. Or as if *it* had owned *me*, and I'm free at last."

"I know something of how you feel," Marga said. "I lived in the observatory day and night. There were always so many pictures to be taken, so many books to read, so much to do—I couldn't bear the thought of missing a day, or even of stopping my work to answer the phone. But there are no stars here, and I hardly miss them."

He took her hand lightly in his. "I wonder, though—if La Floquet succeeds—if we ever do get out of this Valley and back into our ordinary lives—will we be any different? Or

will I go back to double-entry bookkeeping and you to stellar luminosities ?"

" We won't know until we get back," she said. " *If* we get back. But look over there."

Thornhill looked. McKay and Miss Hardin were deep in a serious conversation—and McKay had shyly taken her hand. " Love comes at last to Professor of Medieval History McKay." Thornhill grinned. " And to Miss Something-or-Other Hardin, whoever she is."

The Regulan was asleep ; the Aldebaranian stared broodingly at his feet, drawing pictures in the sand. The bloated sphere that was the Spican was absorbed in its own alien thoughts. The Valley was very quiet.

" I used to pity creatures in the zoos," Thornhill said. "But it's not such a bad life after all."

" So far. We don't know what the Watcher has in store for us."

A mist rolled down from the mountain-peak, drifting in over the Valley. At first Thornhill thought the Watcher had returned for another visit with his captives ; he saw, though, that it was merely a thin mountain mist dropping over them. It was faintly cold, and he drew Marga tighter against him.

He thought back over thirty-seven years as the mist rolled in. He had come through those thirty-seven years well enough, trim, athletic, with quick reflexes and a quicker mind. But not until this day—it was hard to believe this was still his first day in the Valley—had he fully realised life held other things besides mining and earning money.

It had taken the Valley to teach him that ; would he remember the lesson if he ever returned to civilization ? Might it not be better to stay here, with Marga, in eternal youth ?

He frowned. Eternal youth, yes . . . but at the cost of his free will. He was nothing but a prisoner here, if a pampered one.

Suddenly he did not know what to think.

Marga's hand tightened against his. " Did you hear something ? Footsteps, I think. It must be La Floquet and Vellers coming back from the mountain."

" They couldn't make it," Thornhill said, not knowing whether to feel relief or acute disappointment. He heard the sound of voices—and two figures, one small and wiry, one tall and broad, advanced toward them through the thickening mist. He turned to face them.

IV

Despite the dim illumination of twilight and the effects of the fog, Thornhill had no difficulty reading the expression on La Floquet's face. It was not pleasant. The little man was angry, both with himself and with Thornhill, and naked hatred was visible in his sharp features.

"Well?" Thornhill asked casually. "No go?"

"We got several thousand feet before this damned fog closed in around us. It was almost as if the Watcher sent it on purpose. We had to turn back."

"And was there any sign of a pass leading out of the Valley?"

La Floquet shrugged. "Who knows? We couldn't as much as see each other! But I'll find it. I'll go back tomorrow, when both suns are in the sky—and I'll find a way out!"

"You devil," came McKay's thin, dry voice. "Won't you ever give up?"

"Not while I can still walk!" La Floquet shouted defiantly. But there was a note of mock-bravado in his voice. Thornhill wondered just what had really happened up there on the mountain path.

He was not kept long in ignorance. La Floquet stalked angrily away, adopting a pose of injured arrogance, leaving Vellers standing near Thornhill. The big man looked after him and shook his head.

"The liar!"

"What's that?" Thornhill asked, half-surprised.

"There was no fog on the mountain," Vellers muttered bitterly. "He found the fog when we came back down, and he took it as an excuse. The little bullfrog makes much noise, but it's hollow."

Thornhill said earnestly, "Tell me—what happened up there? If there wasn't any fog, why'd you turn back?"

"We got no more than a thousand feet up," Vellers said. "He had been leading. But then he dropped back, and got very pale. He said he couldn't go on any further."

"Why? Was he afraid of the height?"

"I don't think so," Vellers said. "I think he was afraid of getting to the top and seeing what's there. Maybe he knows there isn't any way out. Maybe he's afraid to face it. I don't know. But he made me follow him back down."

Suddenly Vellers grunted heavily—and Thornhill saw that La Floquet had come up quietly behind the big man and jabbed him sharply in the small of the back. Vellers turned. It took time for a man six feet seven to turn.

" Fool !" La Floquet barked. " Who told you these lies ? Why this fairy tale, Vellers ?"

" Lies ? Fairy tale ? Get your hands off me, La Floquet. You know damn well you funked out up there. Don't try to fast-talk your way out now."

A muscle tightened convulsively in the corner of La Floquet's slit of a mouth. His eyes flashed ; he stared at Vellers as if he were some beast escaped from a cage. Suddenly La Floquet's fists flicked out, and Vellers stepped back, crying out in pain. He swung wildly at the smaller man, but La Floquet was untouchable, humming in under Vellers' guard to plant a stinging punch on the slab-like jaw, darting back out again as the powerful Vellers tried to land a decisive blow. La Floquet fought like a fox at bay.

Thornhill moved uneasily forward, not wanting to get in the way of Vellers' massive fists as the giant tried vainly to hit La Floquet. Catching the eye of the Aldebaranian, Thornhill acted. He seized Vellers' arm and tugged it back, while the alien similarly blocked off La Floquet.

" Enough !" Thornhill snapped. " It doesn't matter which one of you's lying. Fighting's foolish—you told me that yourself earlier today, La Floquet."

Vellers dropped back sullenly, keeping one eye on La Floquet. The small man smiled. " Honour must be defended, Thornhill. Vellers was spreading lies about me."

" A coward and a liar too," Vellers said darkly.

" Quiet, both of you," Thornhill told them. " Look up there !"

He pointed.

A gathering cloud hung low over them. The Watcher was drawing near—had been, unnoticed, all during the raging quarrel. Thornhill looked up, waiting, trying to discern some living form within the amorphous blackness that descended on them. It was impossible. He saw only spreading clouds of night, hiding the dim sunlight.

He felt the ground rocking gently, quivering in a barely perceptible manner. What now. he wondered, peering at the enfolding darkness. A sound like a far-off musical chord

echoed in his ears—a subsonic vibration, perhaps, making him giddy, soothing him, calming him the way gentle stroking might soothe a cat.

Peace among you, my pets, the voiceless voice said, softly, almost crooningly. *You quarrel too much. Let there be peace . . .*

The subsonic note washed up over him, bathed him, cleansed him of hatred and anger. He stood there smiling, not knowing why he smiled, feeling only peace and calmness.

The cloud began to lift ; the Watcher was departing. The unheard note diminished in intensity, and the motion of the ground subsided. The Valley was at rest, in perfect harmony. The last faint murmur of the note died away.

For a long while, no one spoke. Thornhill looked around, seeing an uncharacteristic blandness loosen the tight set of La Floquet's jaws, seeing Vellers' heavy-featured, angry face begin to smile. He himself felt no desire to quarrel with anyone.

But deep in his mind the words of the Watcher echoed, and thrust at him : *Peace among you, my pets.*

Pets.

Not even specimens in a zoo, Thornhill thought with increasing bitterness, as the tranquility induced by the subsonic began to leave him. Pets. Pampered pets.

He realised he was trembling. It had seemed so attractive, this life in the Valley. He tried to cry out, to shout his rage at the bare purple mountains that hemmed them in, but the subsonic had done its work well. He could not even vocalize his anger.

Thornhill looked away, trying to drive the Watcher's soothing words from his mind.

In the days that followed, they began to grow younger. McKay being the oldest, was the first to show any effects of the rejuvenation. It was on the fourth day in the Valley—days being measured, for lack of other means, by the risings of the red sun. The nine of them had settled into a semblance of a normal way of life by that time. Since the time when the Watcher had found it necessary to calm them, there had been no outbreaks of bitterness among them ; instead, each went about his daily life quietly, almost sullenly, under the numbing burden of the knowledge of their status as *pets.*

They found they had little need for sleep or food ; the manna sufficed to nourish them, and as for sleep, that could be had in brief cat-naps when the occasion demanded. They spent much of their time telling each other of their past lives, hiking through the Valley, swimming in the river. Thornhill was beginning to get terribly bored with this kind of existence.

McKay had been staring into the swiftly-running current when he first noticed it. He emitted a short, sharp cry ; Thornhill, thinking something was wrong, ran hurriedly toward him.

" What happened ?"

McKay hardly seemed in difficulties. He was staring intently at his reflection in the water. " What colour is my hair, Sam ?"

" Why, grey—and—and a little touch of brown !"

McKay nodded. " Exactly. I haven't had brown in my hair in twenty years !"

By this time, most of the others had gathered. McKay indicated his hair and said, " I'm growing younger. I feel it all over. And look—look at La Floquet's scalp !"

In surprise, the little man clapped one hand to the top of his skull—and drew the hand away again, thunderstruck. " I'm growing hair again," he said softly, fingering the gentle fuzz that had appeared on his tanned, sun-freckled scalp. There was a curious look of incredulity on his wrinkled brown face. " That's impossible !"

" It's also impossible for a man to rise from the dead," Thornhill pointed out. " The Watcher is taking very good care of us. We're getting the best of treatment."

He looked at all of them—at McKay and La Floquet, at Vellers, at Marga, at Lona Hardin, at the aliens. Yes, they had all changed. They looked healthier, younger, more vigorous.

He had felt the change in himself from the start. The Valley, he thought. Was this the Watcher's doing, or simply some marvellous property of the area ?

Suppose the latter, he thought. Suppose through some charm of the Valley they were growing ever younger. Would it stop ? Would the process level off ?

Or, he wondered, had the Watcher brought them all here solely for the interesting spectacle of observing nine adult beings retrogressing rapidly into childhood ? It was hardly a thought to make him cheerful.

That " night "—they called the time when the red sun left the sky " night," even though there was no darkness—Thornhill learned three significant things.

He learned he loved Marga Fallis, and she him.

He learned that their love could have no possible consummation within the Valley.

And he learned that La Floquet, whatever had happened to him on the mountain peak, had not yet forgotten how to fight.

Thornhill had asked Marga to walk with him, into the secluded wooded area high on the mountain path, where they could have some privacy. She seemed oddly reluctant to accept, which surprised and dismayed him, since at all other times since the beginning she had gladly accepted any offers of his company. He urged her again, and finally she agreed.

They walked silently for a while. Gentle-eyed cat-creatures peered at them from behind shrubs, and the air was moist and warm. Peaceful white clouds drifted high above them.

Thornhill said, " Why didn't you want to come with me, Marga ?"

" I'd rather not talk about it," she said.

He shied a stone unto the underbrush. " Four days, and you're keeping secrets from me already ?" He started to chuckle—then, seeing her expression, he cut short his laughter. " What's wrong ?"

" Is there any reason why I *shouldn't* keep secrets from you ?" she asked. " I mean, is there some sort of agreement between us ?"

He hesitated. " Of course not. But I thought—"

She smiled, reassuring him. " I thought, too. But I might as well be frank. This afternoon La Floquet asked me to be his woman."

Stunned, Thornhill stammered, " He—why—"

" He figures he's penned in here for life," Marga said. "And he's not interested in Lona. That leaves me, it seems. La Floquet doesn't like to go without women for long."

Thornhill moistened his lips, but said nothing.

Marga went on, " He told me point blank I wasn't to go into the hills with you any more. That if I did, he'd make trouble. He wasn't going to take no for an answer, he told me."

" And what answer did you give—if I can ask ?"

She smiled warmly; blue highlights danced in her dark eyes as she said, "Well—I'm here, aren't I? Isn't that a good enough answer to him?"

Relief swept over Thornhill like an unchecked tide. He had known of La Floquet's rivalry from the start, but this was the first time the little man had ever made any open overtures toward Marga. And if those overtures had been refused—

"La Floquet's interesting," she said, as they stopped to enter a sheltered, sweet-smelling bower of thickly-entwined shrubs. They had discovered it the night before. "But I wouldn't want to be number four hundred and eighty-six on his string. He's a galaxy-roamer; I've never fallen for that type. And I feel certain he'd never have been interested in me except as something to amuse him while he was penned up in this Valley."

She was very close to him, and in the bower not even the light of the blue star shone very brightly. *I love her*, he thought suddenly to himself, and an instant later he found his voice saying out loud. "I love you, Marga. Maybe it took a miracle to put us both in this Valley, but . . ."

"I know what you mean. And I love you too. I told La Floquet that."

He felt an irrational surge of triumph. "What did he say?"

"Not much. He said he'd kill you if he could find some way to do it in the Valley. But I think that'll wear off soon."

His arms slipped around hers. They spoke wordlessly with one another for several moments.

It was then that Thornhill discovered that sex was impossible in the Valley. He felt no desire, no tingling of need, *nothing.* Absolutely nothing. He enjoyed her nearness, but neither needed nor could take anything more.

"It's part of the Valley," he whispered. "Our entire metabolic systems have been changed. We don't sleep more than an hour a day, we hardly eat (unless you call that fluff food), our wounds heal, the dead rise—and now this. It's as if the Valley casts a spell that short-circuits all biological processes."

"And there's nothing we can do?"

"Nothing," he said tightly. "We're pets. Growing ever younger, and helpless against the Watcher's whims."

He stared silently into the darkness, listening to her quiet sobbing. How long can we go on living this way, he wondered. How long?

We have to get out of this Valley, he thought. *Somehow.* But will we remember one another once we do? Or will it all fade away, like a child's dream of fairyland?

He clung tightly to her, cursing his own weakness even though he knew it was hardly his fault. There was nothing they could say to one another.

But the silence was abruptly broken.

A deep, dry voice said, "I know you're in there. Come on out, Thornhill. And bring the girl with you."

Thornhill quickly rose to a sitting position. "It's La Floquet!" he whispered.

"What are you going to do? Can he find us in here?"

"I'm sure of it. I'm going to have to go out there and see what he wants."

"Be careful, Sam!"

"He can't hurt me. This is the Valley, remember?" He grinned at her and clambered to his feet, stooping as he passed through the clustered underbrush. He blinked as he made the transition from darkness to pale light.

"Come on out of there, Thornhill!" La Floquet repeated. "I'll give you another minute and then I'm coming in!"

"Don't fret," Thornhill called. "I'm on my way out."

He battled past two clinging enwrapped vines and stepped into the open. "Well, what do you want?" he demanded impatiently.

La Floquet smiled coldly. There was little doubt of what he wanted. His small eyes were bright with anger, and there was murder in his grin. Held tight in one lean corded hand was a long, triangular sliver of rock whose jagged edge had been painstakingly abraded until it was knife-sharp. The little man waited in a half-crouch, like a tiger or a panther impatient to spring on its prey.

V

They circled tentatively around each other, the big man and the small one. La Floquet seemed to have reached a murderous pitch of intensity; muscles quivered in his jaws as he glared at Thornhill.

"Put that knife down," Thornhill said. "Have you blown your stack, La Floquet? You can't kill a man in the Valley. It won't work."

"Perhaps I can't kill a man. Still, I can wound him."

" What have I ever done to you ?"

" You came to the Valley. I could have handled the others, but you— ! You were the one who taunted me into climbing the mountain. You were the one who took Marga."

" I didn't take anyone. You didn't see me twisting her arm. She picked me over you, and for that I'm genuinely sorry."

" You'll be more than sorry, Thornhill !"

Thornhill forced a grin. This little kill-dance had gone on too long as it was. He sensed Marga not far behind him, watching in horror.

" Why, you murderous little paranoid, give me that piece of stone before you slash yourself up !" He took a quick step forward, reaching for La Floquet's wrist. The little man's eyes blazed dangerously. He pirouetted backward, snapping a curse at Thornhill in some alien language, and drove the knife downward with a low cry of triumph.

Thornhill swerved, but the jagged blade ripped into his arm three inches above the elbow, biting into the soft flesh on the inside of his biceps, and La Floquet sliced quickly downward, cutting a bloody trail for nearly eight inches. Thornhill felt a sudden sharp burst of pain down to the middle of his forearm, and a warm flow of blood gushed past his wrist into the palm of his hand. He heard Marga's sharp gasp.

Then he moved forward, ignoring the pain, and caught La Floquet's arm just as the smaller man was lifting it for a second slash. Thornhill twisted ; something snapped in La Floquet's arm, and the little man gave forth a brief *uh* of pain. The knife dropped from suddenly uncontrollable fingers and landed slightly on an angle, its tip resting on a pebble. Thornhill planted his foot on the dagger and leaned down heavily, shattering it.

Each of them now had only the limited use of his right hand. La Floquet charged back toward Thornhill like someone possessed, head down as if to butt, but at the last moment swerved upward, driving his good hand into Thornhill's jaw. Thornhill rocked backward, pivoted around, smashed down at La Floquet and heard teeth splinter. He wondered when the Watcher would show up to end the fight—and whether these wounds would heal.

La Floquet's harsh breathing was the only sound audible. He was shaking his head, clearing it, readying himself for a

new assault. Thornhill tried to blank out the searing pain of the gash in his arm.

He stepped forward and hit La Floquet quickly, spinning him half around ; bringing his slashed right hand up, Thornhill drove it into La Flouqet's middle. A wall of rocklike muscle stunned his fist. But the breath had been knocked from La Floquet ; he weaved uncertainly, grey-faced, wobbly-legged. Thornhill hit him again and he toppled.

La Floquet crumpled into an awkward heap on the ground and stayed there. Thornhill glanced at his own arm. The cut was deep and wide, though it seemed to have missed any major veins and arteries ; blood welled brightly from it, but without the familiar arterial spurt.

There was a curious fascination in watching his own blood flow. He saw Marga's pale, frightened face beyond the dim haze that surrounded him ; he realised he had lost more blood than he thought, perhaps was about to lose consciousness as well. La Floquet still slumbered. There was no sign of the Watcher.

" Sam—"

" Pretty little nick, isn't it ?" He laughed. His face felt warm.

" We ought to bind that some way. Infection—"

" No. There's no need of that. I'll be all right. This is the Valley."

He felt an intense itching in the wounded arm ; barely did he fight back the desire to claw at the gash with his fingernails.

" It's—it's healing !" Marga said.

Thornhill nodded. The wound was beginning to close.

First the blood ceased flowing, as ruptured veins closed their gaping sides and once again began to circulate the blood. The raw edges of the wound strained toward each other, puckering, reaching for one another, finally clasping. A bridge of flesh formed over the gaping slit in his arm. The itching was impossibly intense.

But in a few moments more it was over ; a long livid scar remained, nothing more. Experimentally he touched the new flesh ; it was warm, yielding, real.

La Floquet was stirring. His right forearm had been bent at an awkward angle ; now, it straightened out. The little

man sat up groggily. Thornhill tensed in case further attack was coming, but there was very little fight left in La Floquet.

" The Watcher has made the necessary repairs," Thornhill said. " We're whole again, except for a scar here and there. Get up, you idiot."

He hoisted La Floquet to his feet.

" This is the first time anyone has bested me in a fight," La Floquet said bitterly. His eyes had lost much of their eager brightness ; he seemed demolished by his defeat. "And you were unarmed, and I had a knife."

" Forget that," Thornhill said.

" How can I ? This filthy Valley—from which there is no escape, not even suicide—and I am not to have a woman. Thornhill, you're just a businessman. You don't know what it's like to set codes of behaviour for yourself and then not to be able to live by them." La Floquet shook his head sadly. " There are many in the galaxy who would rejoice to see the way this Valley has humiliated me. And there is not even suicide here ! But I'll leave you with your woman."

He turned and began to walk away, a small, almost pathetic figure now, the fighting-cock with his comb shorn and his tail-feathers plucked. Thornhill contrasted him with the ebullient little figure he had first seen coming toward him up the mountain path, and it was a sad contrast indeed. He slouched, now, shoulders sloping in defeat.

" Hold it, La Floquet !"

" You have beaten me—and before a woman. What more do you want with me, Thornhill ?"

" How badly do you want to get out of this Valley, La Floquet ?" Thornhill asked bluntly.

" What—"

" Badly enough to climb that mountain again ?"

La Floquet's face, pale already, turned almost ghostly beneath his tan. In an unsteady voice he said, " I ask you not to taunt me, Thornhill."

" I'm not. I don't give a damn what phobia it is that drove you back from the mountain that night. I think that mountain can be climbed. But not by one or two men. If we *all* went up there—or most of us—"

La Floquet smiled wanly. " You would go, too ? And Marga ?"

" If it means out, yes. We might have to leave McKay and Lona Hardin behind, but there'd still be seven of us.

Possibly there's a city outside the Valley ; we might be able to send word and be rescued."

Frowning, La Floquet said, " Why the sudden change of heart, Thornhill ? Why the sudden desire to get out of the Valley ? I thought you liked it here . . . you and Miss Fallis both, that is. I thought *I* was the only one willing to climb that peak."

Thornhill glanced at Marga and traded secret smiles with her. " I'll decline to answer that, La Floquet. But I'll tell you this : the quicker I'm outside the influence of the Valley, the happier I'll be !"

When they had reached the foot of the hill, and called everyone together, Thornhill stepped forward. Sixteen eyes were on him—counting the two stalked objects of the Spican as eyes.

He said, " La Floquet and I have just had a little discussion up in the hill. We've reached a few conclusions I want to put forth to the group at large.

" I submit that it's necessary for the well-being of all of us to make an immediate attempt at getting out of the Valley. Otherwise, we're condemned to a slow death of the most horrible kind—gradual loss of our faculties."

McKay broke in, saying, " Now you've shifted sides again, Thornhill ! I thought maybe—"

" I haven't been on any side," he responded quickly. " It's simply that I've begun thinking. Look : we were all brought here within a two-day span, snatched out of our lives no matter where we were, dumped down in a seemingly impassable Valley by some unimaginably alien creature. Item : we're watched constantly, tended and fed. Item : our wounds heal almost instantly. Item : we're growing younger. McKay, you yourself were the first to notice that.

" Okay, now. There's a mountain up there, and quite probably there's a way out of the Valley. La Floquet tried to get there, but he and Vellers couldn't make it ; two men can't climb a 20,000-foot peak alone, without provisions without help. But if we all go—"

McKay shook his head. " I'm happy here, Thornhill. You and La Floquet are jeopardizing that happiness."

" No," La Floquet interjected. " Can't you see that we're just house-pets here ? That we're the subjects of a rather interesting experiment, nothing more ? And that if this

rejuvenation keeps up, we may all be babies in a matter of weeks or months ?"

" I don't care," McKay said stubbornly. " I'll die if I leave the Valley—my heart can't take much more. Now you tell me I'll die if I stay. But at least I'll pass backward through manhood before I go—and I can't have those years again outside."

" All right," Thornhill said. " Ultimately it's a matter of whether we all stay here so McKay can enjoy his youth again, or whether we try to leave. La Floquet, Marga and I are going to make an attempt to cross the mountain. Those of you who want to join us, can. Those of you who'd rather spend the rest of their days in the Valley can stay behind and wish us bad luck. Is that clear ?"

Seven of them left the following " morning," right after the breakfast-time manna-fall. McKay stayed behind, with little Lona Hardin. There was a brief, awkward moment of farewell-saying. Thornhill noticed how the lines were leaving McKay's face, how the old scholar's hair had darkened, his body broadened. In a way, he could see McKay's point of view—but there was no way he could accept it.

Lona Hardin, too, was younger-looking, and perhaps for the first time in her life she was making an attempt to disguise her plainness. Well, Thornhill thought, these two might find happiness of a sort in the Valley—but it was the mindless happiness of a puppet, and he wanted none of it for himself.

" I don't know what to say," McKay declared as the party set out. " I'd wish you good luck—if I could."

Thornhill grinned. " Maybe we'll be seeing you two again. I hope not, though."

Thornhill led the way up the mountain's side : Marga walked with him, La Floquet and Vellers a few paces behind, the three aliens trailing behind them. The Spican, Thornhill was sure, had only the barest notion of what was taking place; the Aldebaranian had explained things fairly thoroughly to the grave Regulan. One factor seemed common : all of them were determined to leave the Valley.

The morning was warm and pleasant ; clouds hid the peak of the mountain. The ascent, Thornhill thought, would be strenuous but not impossible—provided the miraculous field of the Valley continued to protect them when they passed the

timberline, and provided the Watcher did not interfere with the exodus.

There was no interference. Thornhill felt almost a sensation of regret at leaving the Valley—and in the same momont realised this might be some deceptive trick of the Watcher's, and he cast all sentiment from his heart.

By mid-morning they had reached a considerable height, a thousand feet or more above the Valley. Looking down, Thornhill could barely see the brightness of the river winding through the flat basin that was the Valley, and there was no sign of McKay far below.

The mountain sloped gently upward toward the timberline. The real struggle would begin later, perhaps, on the bare rock face, where the air might not be so balmy as it was here, the wind not quite as gentle.

When Thornhill's watch said noon, he called a halt and they unpacked the manna they had saved from the morning fall, wrapped in broad coarse velvet-textured leaves of the thick-trunked trees of the Valley. The manna tasted dry and stale, almost like straw, with just the merest vestige of its former attractive flavour. But, as Thornhill had guessed, there was no noon-time manna fall here on the mountain slope, and so the party forced the dry stuff down their throats, not knowing when they would have fresh food again.

After a short rest Thornhill ordered them up. They had gone no more than a thousand feet when an echoing cry drifted up from below :

" Wait ! Wait, Thornhill !"

He turned. " You hear something ?" he asked Marga.

" That was McKay's voice," La Floquet said.

" Let's wait for him," Thornhill ordered.

Ten minutes passed—and then, McKay came into view, running upward in a springy long-legged stride, Lona Harbin a few paces behind him. He caught up with the party and paused a moment, catching his breath.

" I decided to come along," he said finally. " You're right, Thornhill ! We have to leave the Valley."

" And he figures his heart's better already," Lona Hardin said. " So if he leaves the Valley now, maybe he'll be a healthier man again."

Thornhill smiled. " It took a long time to convince you, didn't it ?" He shaded his eyes and stared upward. " We have a long way to go. We'd better not waste any more time."

VI

Twenty thousand feet was less than four miles. A man should be able to walk four miles in an hour or two. But not four miles *up*.

They rested frequently, though there was no night and they had no need to sleep. They moved on, inch by inch, advancing perhaps five hundred feet over the steadily more treacherous slope, then crawling along the mountain face a hundred feet to find the next point of ascent. It was slow, difficult work, and the mountain spired yet higher above them until it seemed they would never attain the summit.

The air, surprisingly, remained warm, though not oppressively so ; the wind picked up as they climbed. The mountain was utterly bare of life—the gentle animals of the Valley ventured no higher than the timberline, and that was far below. The party of nine scrambled up over rockfalls and past sheets of stone.

Thornhill felt himself tiring, but he knew the Valley's strange regenerative force was at work, carrying off the fatigue poisons as soon as they built up in his muscles, easing him, giving him the strength to go on. Hour after hour they forced their way up the mountainside.

Occasionally he would glance back to see La Floquet's pale, fear-tautened face. The little man was terrified of the height —but he was driving gamely on. The aliens straggled behind; Vellers marched mechanically, saying little, obviously tolerant of the weaker mortals to whose pace he was compelled to adjust his own.

As for Marga, she uttered no complaint. That pleased Thornhill more than anything.

They were a good thousand feet from the summit when Thornhill called a halt.

He glanced back at them—at the oddly unweary, unlined faces. *How we've grown young* ! he thought suddenly. *McKay looks like a man in his late forties ; I must seem like a boy. And we're all fresh as daisies, as if this were just a jolly hike.*

" We're near the top," he said. " Let's finish off whatever of the manna we've got. The downhill part of this won't be so bad."

He looked up. The mountain tapered to a fine crest, and through there a pass was visible, leading down to the other side. " La Floquet, you've got the best eyes of any of us. You see any sign of a barrier up ahead ?"

The little man squinted and shook his head. " All's clear, so far as I can see. We go up, then down, and we're home free."

Thornhill nodded. " The last thousand feet, then. Let's go !"

The wind was whipping hard against them as they pushed on through the dense snow that cloaked the mountain's highest point. Up here, some of the charm of the Valley seemed to be gone, as if the cold winds barrelling in from the outlands beyond the crest could in some way negate the gentle warmth they experienced in the Valley. Both suns were high in the sky, the red and the blue, the blue visible as a hard blotch of radiance penetrating the soft, diffuse rays of the red.

Thornhill was tiring rapidly—but the crest was in sight. Just a few more feet and they'd stand on it—

Just up over this overhang—

The summit itself was a small plateau, perhaps a hundred feet long. Thornhill was the first to pull himself up over the rock projection and stand on the peak ; he reached back, helped Marga up, and within minutes the other seven had joined them.

The Valley was a distant spot of green, far below ; the air was clear and clean, and from here they could plainly see the winding river heading down valley to the yellow-green radiance of the barrier.

Thornhill turned. " Look down there," he said in a quiet voice.

It was hardly a cheering sight.

" It's a world of deserts !" La Floquet exclaimed.

The view from the summit revealed much of the land beyond the Valley—and it seemed the Valley was but an oasis in the midst of utter desertion. For mile after grey mile, barren land stretched before them, an endless plain of rock and sand rolling on drearily to the farthest horizon.

Beyond this. Behind, the Valley.

Thornhill looked around. " We've reached the top. You see what's ahead. Do we go on ?"

" Do we have any choice ?" McKay asked. " We're practically out of the Watcher's hands now. Down there, perhaps we have freedom. Behind us—"

" We go on," La Floquet said firmly.

" Down the back slope, then," said Thornhill. " It won't be easy. There's the path, over there. Suppose we—"

The sudden chill he felt was not altogether due to the whistling wind. The sky suddenly darkened ; a cloak of night settled around them.

Of course, Thornhill thought dully. *I should have foreseen this.*

" The Watcher's coming !" Lona Hardin screamed, as the darkness closed around them, obscuring both the bleakness ahead and the Valley behind.

Thornhill thought, *It was part of the game. To let us climb the mountain, to watch us squirm and struggle, and then to hurl us back into the Valley at the last moment, as we stand on the border.*

Wings of night nestled round them. He felt the coldness that signified the alien presence, and the soft voice said, *Would you leave, my pets ? Don't I give you the best of care ? Why this ingratitude ?*

" Let's keep going," Thornhill muttered. " Maybe it can't stop us. Maybe we can escape it yet."

" Which way do we go ?" Marga asked. " I can't see anything. Suppose we go over the edge.?"

Come, crooned the Watcher, *come back to the Valley. You have played your little game. I have enjoyed your struggles, and I'm proud of the battle you fought. But the time has come to return to the warmth and the love you may find in the Valley below—*

" Thornhill !" cried La Floquet suddenly, hoarsely. " I have it ! Come help me !"

The Watcher's voice died away abruptly ; the black cloud swirled wildly. Thornhill whirled, peering through the darkness for some sign of La Floquet—

And found the little man on the ground, wrestling with—something. In the darkness, it was hard to tell—

" It's the Watcher !" La Floquet grunted. He rolled over and Thornhill saw a small snakelike being writhing under La Floquet's grip, a bright-scaled serpent the size of a monkey.

" Here in the middle of the cloud—*here's* the creature that held us here !" La Floquet cried. Suddenly, before Thornhill could move, the Aldebaranian came bounding forward, thrusting beyond Thornhill and Marga, and flung himself

down on the strugglers. Thornhill heard a guttural bellow ; the darkness closed in on the trio, and it was impossible to see what was happening.

He heard La Floquet's cry : " Get . . . this devil . . . off me ! He's helping the Watcher !"

Thornhill moved forward. He reached into the struggling mass, felt the blubbery flesh of the Aldebaranian, and dug his fingers in hard. He wrenched ; the Aldebaranian came away. Hooked claws raked Thornhill's face. He cursed ; you could never tell what an Aldebaranian was likely to do, at any time. Perhaps the creature had been in league with the Watcher all along.

He dodged a blow, landed a solid one in the alien's plump belly, and crashed his other fist upward into the creature's jaw. The Aldebaranian rocked backward. Vellers appeared abruptly from nowhere and seized the being.

" No !" Thornhill yelled, seeing what Vellers intended. But it was too late. The giant held the Aldebaranian contemptuously dangling in the air, then swung him upward and outward. A high ear-piercing shriek resounded. Thornhill shuddered. It takes a long time to fall 20,000 feet.

He glanced back now at La Floquet and saw the small man struggling to stand up, arms still entwined about the serpent-like being. Thornhill saw a metal-mesh helmet on the alien's head. The means with which they'd been controlled, obviously.

La Floquet took three staggering steps. " Get the helmet off him !" he cried thickly. " I've seen these before. They are out of the Andromeda sector . . . telepaths, teleports . . . deadly creatures. The helmet's his focus-point."

Thornhill grasped for it as the pair careened by ; he missed, catching instead a glimpse of the Watcher's devilish, hate-filled eyes. The Watcher had fallen into the hands of his own pets—and was not enjoying it.

" I can't see you !" Thornhill shouted. " I can't get the helmet !"

" If he gets free, we're finished," came La Floquet's voice. " He's using all his energy to fight me off . . . but all he needs to do is turn on the subsonics—"

The darkness cleared again. Thornhill gasped. La Floquet, still clutching the alien, was tottering on the edge of the mountain peak, groping for the helmet in vain. One of the little man's feet was virtually standing on air. He staggered

wildly. Thornhill rushed toward them, grasped the icy metal of the helmet, and ripped it away.

In that moment both La Floquet and the Watcher vanished from sight. Thornhill brought himself up short and peered downward, hearing nothing, seeing nothing—

There was just one scream . . . not from La Floquet's throat, but from the alien's. Then all was silent. Thornhill glanced at the helmet in his hands, thinking of La Floquet, and in a sudden impulsive gesture hurled the little metal headpiece into the abyss after them.

He turned, catching one last glimpse of Marga, Vellers, McKay, Lona Hardin, the Regulan, and the Spican. Then, before he could speak, mountain-peak and darkness and indeed the entire world shimmered and heaved dizzyingly about them, and he could see nothing and no one.

He was in the main passenger cabin of the Federation Spaceliner *Royal Mother Helene*, bound for Vengamon out of Jurinalle. He was lying back in the comfortable pressurized cabin, with the grey nothingness of hyperspace outside forming a sharp contrast to the radiant walls of the cabin, which glowed in soft yellow luminescence.

Thornhill opened his eyes slowly. He glanced at his watch. 12:13, 7 July 2671. He had dozed off about 11:40, after a good lunch. They were due in at Port Vengamon later that day, and he'd have to tend to mine business immediately. There was no telling how badly they'd fouled things up in the time he'd been vacationing on Jurinalle.

He blinked. Of a sudden, strange images flashed into his eyes—a valley, somewhere on a barren desolate planet beyond the edge of the galaxy. A mountain's peak, and a strange alien being, and a brave little man falling to the death he dreaded, and a girl—

It couldn't have been a drean, he told himself. *No. Not a dream. It was just that the Watcher yanked us out of space-time for his little experiment, and when I destroyed the helmet we re-entered the continuum at the instant we'd left it.*

A cold sweat burst out suddenly all over his body. *That means*, he thought, *that La Floquet's not dead. And Marga—Marga—*

Thornhill sprang from his gravity couch, ignoring the sign that urged him to *Please remain in your couch while ship is*

undergoing spin, and rushed down the aisle toward the steward. He gripped the man by the shoulder, spun him around.

"Yes, Mr. Thornhill? Is anything wrong? You could have signalled me, and—"

"Never mind that. I want to make a subradio call to Bellatrix VII."

"We'll be landing on Vengamon in a couple of hours, sir. Is it so urgent?"

"Yes."

The steward shrugged. "You know, of course, that ship-board subradio calls may take some time to put through, and that they're terribly expensive—"

"Damn the expense, man! Will you put through my call or won't you?"

"Of course, Mr. Thornhill. To whom?"

He paused and said carefully, "To Miss Marga Fallis, in some observatory on Bellatrix VII." He peeled a bill from his wallet and added, "Here. There'll be another one for you if the call's put through in the next half an hour. I'll wait."

The summons finally came. "Mr. Thornhill, your call's ready. Would you come to Communications Deck, please?"

They showed him to a small, dimly-lit cubicle. There could be no vision on an interstellar subradio call, of course, just voice transmission. But that would be enough. "Go ahead, Bellatrix-*Helene*. The call is ready," an operator said.

Thornhill wet his lips. "Marga? This is Sam—Sam Thornhill!"

"Oh!" He could picture her face now. "It—it wasn't a dream, then. I was so worried it was!"

"When I threw the helmet off the mountain—the Watcher's hold was broken—did you return to the exact moment you had left?"

"Yes," she said. "Back in the observatory, with my camera plates and everything. And there was a call for me, and at first I was angry and wouldn't answer it the way I always won't answer, and then I thought a minute and had a wild idea and changed my mind—and I'm glad I did, darling!"

"It seems almost like a dream now, doesn't it? The Valley, I mean. And La Floquet, and all the others. But it

wasn't any dream," Thornhill said. "We were really there. And I meant the things I said to you."

The operator's voice cut in sharply: "*Standard call time has elapsed, sir. There will be an additional charge of ten credits for each further fifteen-second period of your conversation.*"

"That's quite all right, operator," Thornhill said. "Just give me the bill at the end. Marga, are you still there?"

"Of course, darling."

"When can I see you?"

"I'll come to Vengamon tomorrow. It'll take a day or so to wind things up here at the observatory. Is there an observatory on Vengamon?"

"I'll build you one," Thornhill promised. "And perhaps for our honeymoon we can go looking for the Valley."

"I don't think we'll ever find it," she said. "But we'd better hang up, now. Otherwise you'll become a pauper talking to me."

He stared at the dead phone a long moment after they broke contact thinking of what Marga looked like, and La Floquet, and all the others. Above all, Marga.

It wasn't a dream, he told himself. He thought of the shadow-haunted Valley where night never fell and men grew younger, and of a tall girl with dark flashing eyes who waited for him now half a galaxy away.

With quivering fingers he undid the sleeve of his tunic and looked down at the long, livid scar that ran almost the length of his right arm, almost to the wrist. Somewhere in the universe now was a little man named La Floquet, who had inflicted that wound and died and returned to his point of departure, and who now was probably wondering if it had all ever happened. Thornhill smiled, forgiving La Floquet for the ragged scar inscribed on his arm, and headed up the companionway to the passenger cabin, impatient now to see Vengamon once more.

—**Robert Silverberg**

JUDAS

Strange are the workings of the human mind ; stranger still the thought-processes of one which does not conform to the normal standards. Now add a writer like Brian Aldiss who specialises in bizarre plots and you have one of the most unusual fantasy stories ever published.

DANCED

By BRIAN W. ALDISS

It was not a fair trial.

You understand I was not inclined to listen properly, but it was not a fair trial. It had a mistrustful and furtive haste about it. Judge, counsel and jury all took care to be as brief and explicit as possible. I said nothing, but I knew why : everyone wanted to get back to the dances.

So it was not very long before the judge stood up and pronounced sentence :

" A exander Abel Crowe, this court finds you guilty of murdering Parowen Scryban for the second time."

I could have laughed out loud. I nearly did.

He went on : " You are therefore condemned to suffer death by strangulation for the second time, which sentence will be carried out within the next week."

Round the court ran a murmur of excitement.

In a way, even I felt satisfied. It had been an unusual case : few are the people who care to risk facing death a second time; the first time you die makes the prospect worse, not better. For just a minute, the court was still, then it cleared with almost indecent haste. In a little while, only I was left there.

I, Alex Abel Crowe—or approximately he—came carefully down out of the prisoner's box and limped the length of the dusty room to the door. As I went, I looked at my hands. They weren't trembling.

Nobody bothered to keep a check on me. They knew they could pick me up whenever they were ready to execute sentence. I was unmistakable, and I had nowhere to go. I was the man with the club foot who could not dance ; nobody could mistake me for anyone else. Only I could do that.

Outside in the dark sunlight, that wonderful woman stood waiting for me with her husband, waiting on the court steps. The sight of her began to bring back life and hurt to my veins. I raised my hand to her as my custom was.

" We've come to take you home, Alex," Husband said, stepping towards me.

" I haven't got a home," I said, addressing her.

" I meant *our* home," he informed me.

" Elucidation accepted," I said. " Take me away, take me away, take me away, Charlemagne. And let me sleep."

" You need a sleep after all you have been through," he said. Why, he sounded nearly sympathetic.

Sometimes I called him Charlemagne, sometimes just Charley. Or Cheeps, or Jags, or Jaggers, or anything, as the mood took me. He seemed to forgive me. Perhaps he even liked it—I don't know. Personal magnetism takes you a long way ; it has taken me so far I don't even have to remember names.

They stopped a passing taxi and we all climbed in. It was a tumbril, they tell me. You know, French ? Circa seventeen-eighty something. Husband sat one side, Wife the other, each holding one of my arms, as if they thought I should get violent. I let them do it, although the idea amused me.

" Hallo, friends !" I said ironically. Sometimes I called them " parents," or " disciples," or sometimes " patients." Anything.

The wonderful woman was crying slightly.

" Look at her !" I said to Husband. " She's lovely when she cries, that I swear. I could have married her, you know, if I had not been dedicated. Tell him, you wonderful creature, tell him how I turned you down !"

Through her sobbing, she said, " Alex said he had more important thing to do than sex."

" So you've got to thank me for Perdita !" I told him. " It was a big sacrifice, but I'm happy to see you happy." Often now I called her Perdita. It seemed to fit her. He laughed at what I had said, and then we were all laughing. Yes, it was good to be alive ; I knew I made them feel good to be alive. They were loyal. I had to give them something—I had no gold and silver.

The tumbril stopped outside Charley's place—the husband residence, I'd better say. Oh, the things I've called that place ! Someone should have recorded them all. It was one of those inverted beehive houses : just room for a door and an elevator on the ground floor, but the fifth floor could hold a ballroom. Topply, topply. Up we went to the fifth. There was no sixth floor ; had there been, I should have gone up there, the way I felt. I asked for it anyhow, just to see the wonderful woman brighten up. She liked me to joke, even when I wasn't in a joking mood. I could tell she still loved me so much it hurt her.

" Now for a miracle, ye pampered jades," I said, stepping forth, clumping into the living room.

I seized an empty vase from a low shelf and spat into it. Ah, the old cunning was still there ! It filled at once with wine, sweet and bloody-looking. I sipped and found it good.

" Go on and taste it, Perdy !" I told her.

Wonderful w. turned her head sadly away. She would not touch that vase. I could have eaten every single strand of hair on her head, but she seemed unable to see the wine. I really believe she could not see that wine.

" Please don't go through all that again, Alex," she implored me wearily. Little faith, you see—the old, old story. (Remind me to tell you a new one I heard the other day). I put my behind on one chair and my bad foot on another and sulked.

They came and stood by me . . . not too close.

" Come nearer," I coaxed, looking up under my eyebrows and pretending to growl at them. " I won't hurt you. I only murder Parowen Scryban, remember ?"

"We've got to talk to you about that," Husband said desperately. I thought he looked as if he had aged.

"I think you look as if you have aged, Perdita," I said. Often I called him Perdita, too; why, man, they sometimes looked so worried you couldn't tell them apart.

"I cannot live forever, Alex," he replied. "Now try and concentrate about this killing, will you?"

I waved a hand and tried to belch. At times I can belch like a sinking ship.

"We do all we can to help you, Alex," he said. I heard him although my eyes were shut; can *you* do that? "But we can only keep you out of trouble if you co-operate. It's the dancing that does it; nothing else betrays you like dancing. You've got to promise you'll stay away from it. In fact, we want you to promise that you'll let us restrain you. To keep you away from the dancing. Something about that dancing . . ."

He was going on and on, and I could still hear him. But other things were happening. That word "dancing" got in the way of all his other words. It started a sort of flutter under my eyelids. I crept my hand out and took the wonderful woman's hand, so soft and lovely, and listened to that word "dancing" dancing. It brought its own rhythm, bouncing about like an eyeball inside my head. The rhythm grew louder. He was shouting.

I sat up suddenly, opening my eyes.

W. woman was on the floor, very pale.

"You squeezed too hard, boy," she whispered.

I could see that her little hand was the only red thing she had.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I really wonder you two don't throw me out for good!" I couldn't help it, I just started laughing. I like laughing. I can laugh even when nothing's funny. Even when I saw their faces, I still kept laughing like mad.

"Stop it!" Husband said. For a moment he looked as if he would have hit me. But I was laughing so much I did not recognize him. It must have done them good to see me enjoying myself; they both needed a fillip, I could tell.

"If you stop laughing, I'll take you down to the club," he said, greasily bribing.

I stopped. I always know when to stop. With all humility, that is a great natural gift.

"The club's the place for me," I said. "I've already got a club foot—I'm half way there!"

I stood up.

"Lead on, my loyal supporters, my liege lords," I ordered.

"You and I will go alone, Alex," Husband said. "The wonderful woman will stay here. She really ought to go to bed."

"What's in it for her?" I joked. Then I followed him to the elevator. He knows I don't like staying in any one place for long.

When I got to the club, I knew, I would want to be somewhere else. That's the worst of having a mission: it makes you terribly restless. Sometimes I am so restless I could die. Ordinary people just don't know what the word means. I could have married her if I had been ordinary. They call it destiny.

But the club was good.

We walked there. I limped there. I made sure I limped badly.

The club had a timescreen. That, I must admit, was my only interest in the club. I don't care for women. Or men. Not living women or men. I only enjoy them when they are back in time.

This night—I nearly said "this particular night," but there was nothing particularly particular about it—the timescreen had only been tuned roughly three centuries back into the past. At least, I guessed it was twenty-first century stuff by the women's dresses and a shot of a power station. A large crowd of people were looking in as Perdita Caesar and I entered, so I started to pretend he had never seen one of the wall screens before.

"The tele-eyes which are projected back over history consume a fabulous amount of power every second," I told him loudly in a voice which suggested I had swallowed a poker. "It makes them very expensive. It means private citizens cannot afford screens and tele-eyes, just as once they could not afford their own private cinemas. This club is fortunately very rich. Its members sleep in gold leaf at nights."

Several people were glancing round at me already. Caesar was shaking his head and rolling his eyes.

" The tele-eyes cannot get a picture further than twenty-seven centuries back," I told him, " owing to the limitations of science. Science, as you know, is a system for taking away with one hand while giving with the other."

He could not answer cleverly. I went on : " It has also proved impossible, due to the aforesaid limitations, to send human beings further back in time than one week. And that costs so much that only governments can do it. As you may have heard, nothing can be sent ahead into time—there's no future in it !"

I had to laugh at that. It was funny, and quite spontaneous.

Many people were calling out to me, and Caesar Borgia was dragging at my arm, trying to make me be quiet.

" I wouldn't spoil anyone's fun !" I shouted. " You lot get on with your watching ; I'll get on with my speech."

But I did not want to talk to a lot of feather-bedders like them. So I sat down without saying another word, Boy Borgia collapsing beside me with a sigh of relief. Suddenly I felt very, very sad. Life just is not what it was ; once on a time, I could have married this husband's wife.

" Physically, you can go back one week," I whispered, " optically, twenty-seven centuries. It's very sad."

It was very sad. The people on the screen were also sad. They lived in the Entertainment Era, and appeared to be getting little pleasure from it. I tried to weep for them but failed because at the moment they seemed just animated history. I saw them as period pieces, stuck there a couple of generations before reading and writing had died out altogether and the fetters of literacy fell forever from the world. Little any of them cared for the patterns of history.

" I've had an idea I want to tell you about, Cheezer," I said. It was a good idea.

" Can't it wait ?" he asked. " I'd like to see this scan. It's all about the European Allegiance."

" I must tell you before I forget."

" Come on," he said resignedly, getting up.

" You are too loyal to me," I complained. " You spoil me. I'll speak to St. Peter about it."

As meek as you like, I followed him into an ante-room. He drew himself a drink from an automatic man in one corner. He was trembling. I did not tremble, although at the back of my mind lurked many things to tremble about.

" Go on then, say whatever in hell you want to say," he told me, shading his eyes with his hand. I have seen him use that trick before ; he did it after I killed Parowen Scryban the first time, I remember. There's nothing wrong with my memory, except in patches.

" I had this idea," I said, trying to recall it. " This idea—oh, yes. History. I got the idea looking at those twenty-first century people. Mythology is the key to everything, isn't it ? I mean, a man builds his life on a set of myths, doesn't he ? Well, in our world, the so-called Western world, those accepted myths were religious until about mid-nineteenth century. By then, a majority of Europeans were literate, or within reach of it, and for a couple of centuries the myths became literary ones : tragedy was no longer the difference between grace and nature but between art and reality."

Julius had dropped his hand. He was interested. I could see he wondered what was coming next. I hardly knew myself.

" Then mechanical aids—television, computers, scanners of every type—abolished literacy," I said. " Into the vacuum came the timescreens. Our mythologies are now historical : tragedy has become simply a failure to see the future."

I beamed at him and bowed, not letting him know I was beyond tragedy. He just sat there. He said nothing. Sometimes such terrible boredom descends on me that I can hardly fight against it.

" Is my reasoning sound ?" I asked. (Two women looked into the room, saw me, and left again hurriedly. They must have sensed I did not want them, otherwise they would have come to me ; I am young and handsome—I am not thirty-three yet).

" You could always reason well," Marcus Aurelius Marconi said, " but it just never leads anywhere. God, I'm so tired."

" This bit of reasoning leads somewhere. I beg you to believe it, Holy Roman," I said, flopping on my knees before him. " It's the state philosophy I've really been telling you about. That's why although they keep the death penalty for serious crimes—like murdering a bastard called Parowen Scryban—they go back in time the next day and call off the execution. They believe you should die for your crime, you see ? But more deeply they believe every man should face his true future. They've—we've all seen too many premature deaths on the timescreens. Romans, Normans, Celts, Goths,

English, Israelis. Every race. Individuals—all dying too soon, failing to fulfil——"

Oh, I admit it, I was crying on his knees by then, although bravely disguising it by barking like a dog : a Great Dane. Hamlet. Not in our stars but in our selves. (I've watched W. S. write that bit).

I was crying at last to think the police would come without fail within the next week to snuff me out, and then resurrect me again, according to my sentence. I was remembering what it was like last time. They took so long about it.

They took so long. Though I struggled, I could not move; those police know how to hold a man. My windpipe was blocked, as sentence of court demanded.

And then, it seemed, the boxes sailed in. Starting with small ones, they grew bigger. They were black boxes, all of them. Faster they came, and faster, inside me and out. I'm telling you how it felt, my God ! And they blocked the whole, whole universe, black and red. With my lungs really crammed tight with boxes, out of the world I went. Dead !

Into limbo I went.

I don't say nothing happened, but I could not grasp what was happening there, and I was unable to participate. Then I was alive again.

It was abruptly the day before the strangulation once more, and the government agent had come back in time and rescued me, so that from one point of view I was not strangled. *But* I still remembered it happening, and the boxes, and limbo. Don't talk to me about paradoxes. The government expended several billion megavolts sending that man back for me, and those megevolts account for all paradoxes. I was dead and then alive again.

Now I had to undergo it all once more. No wonder there was little crime nowadays : the threat of that horrible experience held many a likely criminal back. But I *had* to kill Parowen Scryban ; just so long as they went back and resurrected him after I had finished with him, I had to go and do it again. Call it a moral obligation. No one understands. It is as if I were living in a world of my own.

" Get up, get up ! You're biting my ankles."

Where had I heard that voice before ? At last I could no longer ignore it. Whenever I try to think, voices interrupt. I stopped chewing whatever I was chewing, unblocked my

eyes and sat up. This was just a room ; I had been in rooms before. A man was standing over me ; I did not recognize him. He was just a man.

" You look as if you have aged," I told him.

" I can't live forever, thank God," he said. " Now get up and let's get you home. You're going to bed."

" What home ?" I asked. " What bed ? Who in the gentle name of anyone may you be ?"

He looked sick.

" Just call me Adam," he said sickly.

I recognized him then and went with him. We had been in some sort of a club ; he never told me why. I still don't know why we went to that club.

The house he took me to was shaped like a beehive upside-down, and I walked there like a drunk. A club-footed drunk.

This wonderful stranger took me up in an elevator to a soft bed. He undressed me and put me in that soft bed as gently as if I had been his son. I am really impressed by the kindness strangers show me ; personal magnetism, I suppose.

For as long as I could after he had left me, I lay in the bed in the inverted beehive. Then the darkness grew thick and sticky, and I could imagine all the fat, furry bodies, chitinously winged, of the bees on the ceiling. A minute more and I should fall head first into them. Stubbornly, I fought to sweat it out, but a man can only stand so much.

On hands and knees I crawled out of bed and out of the room. Quickly, softly, I clicked the door shut behind me : not a bee escaped.

People were talking in a lighted room along the corridor. I crawled to the doorway, looking and listening. The wonderful stranger talked to the wonderful woman ; she was in night attire (pronounced " nigh ta-ta ") with a hand bandaged.

She was saying : " You will have to see the authorities in the morning and petition them."

He was saying : " It'll do no good. I can't get the law changed. You know that. It's hopeless."

I merely listened.

Sinking onto the bed, he buried his face in his hands, finally looking up to say, " The law insists on personal responsibility. We've got to take care of Alex. It's a reflection of the time we live in ; owing to the timescreens we've got—

whether we like it or not—historical perspectives. We can see that the whole folly of the past was due to failures in individual liability. Our laws are naturally framed to correct that, which they do—it just happens to be tough on us."

He sighed and said, "The sad thing is, even Alex realises that. He talked quite sensibly to me at the club about not evading the future."

"It hurts me most when he talks sensibly," the wonderful double-you said. "It makes you realise he is still capable of suffering."

He took her bandaged hand, almost as if they had a pain they hoped to alleviate by sharing it between them.

"I'll go and see the authorities in the morning," he promised, "and ask them to let the execution be final—no reprieve afterwards."

Even that did not seem to satisfy her.

Perhaps, like me, she could not tell what either of them were talking about. She shook her head miserably from side to side.

"If only it hadn't been for his club foot," she said. "If only it hadn't been for that, he could have danced the sickness out of himself."

Her face was growing more and more screwed up.

It was enough. More.

"Laugh and grow fat," I suggested. I croaked because my throat was dry. My glands are always like bullets. It reminded me of a frog, so I hopped spontaneously into the room. They did not move ; I sat on the bed with them.

"All together again," I said.

They did not move.

"Go back to bed, Alex," she of the wonderfulness said in a low voice.

They were looking at me ; goodness knows what they wanted me to say or do. I stayed where I was. A little green clock on a green shelf said nine o'clock.

"Oh, holy heavens ?" the double-you said. "What does the future hold !"

"Double chins for you, double-yous for me," I joked. That green clock said a minute past nine. I felt as if its little hand were slowly, slowly disembowelling me.

If I waited long enough, I knew I should think of something. They talked to me while I thought and waited ; what good they imagined they were doing is beyond me, but I

would not harm them. They mean well. They're the best people in the world. That doesn't mean to say I have to listen to them.

The thought about the clock arrived. Divine revelation.

"The dancing will be on now," I said, standing up like a jackknife.

"No !" Husband said.

"No !" Perdita said.

"You look as if you have aged," I told them. That is my favourite line in all speech.

I ran out of the room, slamming the door behind me, ran step-club-step-club down the passage and hurled myself into the elevator. With infinitesimal delay, I chose the right button and sank to ground level. There, I wedged the lattice door open with a chair ; that put the elevator out of action.

People in the street took no notice of me. The fools just did not realise who I was. Nobody spoke to me as I hurried along, so of course I replied in kind.

Thus I came to the dance area.

Every community has its dance area. Think of all that drama, gladiatorial contests, reading, and sport have ever meant in the past ; now they are all merged into dance, inevitably, for only by dance—our kind of dance—can history be interpreted. And interpretation of history is our being, because through the timescreens we see that history is life. It lives round us, so we dance it. Unless we have club feet.

Many dances were in progress among the thirty permanent sets. The sets were only casually separated from each other, so that spectators or dancers going from one to another, might get the sense of everything happening at once, which is the sense the timescreens give you.

That is what I savagely love about history. It is not past : it is always going on. Cleopatra lies forever in the sweaty arms of Anthony, Socrates continually gulps his hemlock down. You just have to be watching the right screen or the right dance.

Most of the dancers were amateurs—although the term means little where everyone dances out their roles whenever possible. I stood among a crowd, watching. The bright movements have a dizzying effect ; they excite me. To one side of me, Marco Polo sweeps exultantly through Cathay to Kubla Khan. Ahead, four children who represent the sat-

ellites of Jupiter, glide out to meet the sombre figure of Galileo Galilei. To the other side, the Persian poet Firdausi leaves for exile in Bagdad. Further still, I catch a glimpse of Heyerdahl turning towards the tide.

And if I cross my eyes, raft, telescope, pagoda, palm all mingle. That is meaning ! If I could only dance it !

I cannot stay still. Here is my restlessness again, my only companion. I move, eyes unfocused. I pass round the sets or across them, mingling stiff-legged among the dancers. Something compels me, something I cannot remember. Now I cannot even remember who I am. I've gone beyond mere identity.

Everywhere the dancing is faster, matching my heart. I would not harm anyone, except one person who harmed me eternally. It is he I must find. Why do they dance so fast ? The movements drive me like whips.

Now I run into a mirror. It stands on a crowded set. I fight with the creature imprisoned in it, thinking it real. Then I understand that it is only a mirror. Shaking my head, I clear the blood from behind my eyes and regard myself. Yes, that is unmistakeably me. And I remember who I am meant to be.

I first found who I was meant to be as a child, when I saw one of the greatest dramas of all. There it was, captured by the timescreens ! The soldiers and centurions came and a bragging multitude. The sky grew dark as they banged three crosses into the ground. And when I saw the Man they nailed upon the central cross, I knew I had His face.

Here it is now, that same sublime face, looking at me in pity and pain out of the glass. Nobody believes me ; I no longer tell them who I think I am. But one thing I know I have to do. I have to do *it*.

So now I run again clump-trot-clump-trot, knowing just what to look for. All these great sets, pillars and panels of concrete and plastic, I run round them all, looking.

And here it is. Professionals dance out this drama, my drama, so difficult and intricate and sad. Pilate in dove grey, Mary Magdalene moves in green. Hosts of dancers fringe them, representing the crowd who did not care. I care ! My eyes burn among them, seeking. Then I have the man I want.

He is just leaving the set to rest out of sight until the cue for his last dance. I follow him, keeping behind cover like a crab in a thicket.

Yes ! He looks just like me ! He is my living image, and consequently bears That face. Yet it is now overlaid with make-up, pink and solid, so that when he comes out of the bright lights he looks like a corpse.

I am near enough to see the thick muck on his skin, with its runnels and wrinkles caused by sweat and movement. Underneath it all, the true face is clear enough to me, although the make-up plastered on it represents Judas.

To have That face and to play Judas ! It is the most terrible of all wickedness. But this is Parowen Scryban, whom I have twice murdered for this very blasphemy. It is some consolation to know that although the government slipped back in time and saved him afterwards, he must still remember those good deaths. Now I must kill him again.

As he turns into a rest room, I have him. Ah, my fingers slip into that slippery pink stuff, but underneath the skin is firm. He is small, slender, tired with the strain of dancing. He falls forward with me on his back.

I kill him now, although in a few hours they will come back and rescue him and it will all not have happened. Never mind the shouting : squeeze. Squeeze, dear God !

When blows fall on my head from behind, it makes no difference. Scryban should be dead by now. the traitor. I roll off him and let many hands tie me into a strait jacket.

Many lights are in my eyes. Many voices are talking. I just lie there, thinking I recognize two of the voices, one a man's, one a woman's.

The man says, " Yes, Inspector, I *know* that under law parents are responsible for their own children. We look after Alex as far as we can, but he's mad. He's a throwback ! I—God, Inspector, I *hate* the creature."

" You mustn't say that !" the woman cries. " Whatever he does, he's our son."

They sound too shrill to be true. I cannot think what they make such a fuss about. So I open my eyes and look at them. She is a wonderful woman but I recognize neither her nor the man ; they just do not interest me. Scryban I do recognize.

He is standing rubbing his throat. He looks a real mess with his two faces all mixed in together like a Picasso. Be-

cause he is breathing, I know they have come back and saved him again. No matter : he will remember.

The man they call Inspector (and who, I ask, would want a name like that ?) goes over to speak to Scryban.

" Your father tells me you are actually this madman's brother," he says to Scryban. Judas hangs his head, though he continues to massage his neck.

" Yes," he says. He is as quiet as the woman was shrill ; strange how folks vary. " Alex and I are twin brothers. I changed my name years ago—the publicity, you know . . . harmful to my professional career . . ."

How terribly tired and bored I feel.

Who is whose brother, I ask myself, who mothers whom ? I'm lucky : I own no relations. These people look sad company. The saddest in the universe.

" I think you all look as if you have aged !" I shout suddenly.

That makes the Inspector come and stand over me, which I dislike. He has knees halfway up his legs. I manage to resemble one of the tritons on one of Benvenuto Cellini's salt cellars, and so he turns away at last to speak to Husband.

" All right," he says. " I can see this is just one of those things nobody can be responsible for. I'll arrange for the reprieve to be countermanded. This time, when the devil is dead he stays dead."

Husband embraces Scryban. Wonderful woman begins to cry. Traitors all ! I start to laugh, making it so harsh and loud and horrible it frightens even me.

What none of them understand is this : on the third time I shall rise again. And, oh. to dance !

—**Brian W. Aldiss**

DROG

New writers—new approaches to familiar themes. John Rackham conjures up a small demon with which his central character becomes involved — but decidedly not with the usual stock ending.

By JOHN RACKHAM

George Whipple squatted, cross-legged, on the bare floor of his studio, to add the final touches to the painting that had taken him two days. It was an unlovely, revolting thing, repulsive to anyone else but him, but George had grown fond of the little monster. He thought it had a sort of wistful charm, so that he was almost sorry it was nearly finished. With gentle moving lips he studied the lettering in the battered old book by his side, then, brush poised in sensitive fingers, he proceeded to transfer those words to the canvas.

" Nema—Nema—Nema— !" he murmured, tilting his head aside to study the effect. " But of course !" he added, suddenly understanding. " It's ' Amen ' in reverse—how ridiculous— !"

" Gee !" growled a gruff voice by his side, " Ain't she a honey ? Boy, I'd go for her in a big way !"

" Gah !" George choked, his eyes flickering from the little purple demon by his side to the little purple demon in the picture. There were subtle differences. The real one was more aggressive, more dominant. Its fangs were a more vivid green. Its red eyes glowed with real fire. Quite suddenly, George was no longer fond of either the pictured horror, or

its terrifying counterpart. He cringed as those red eyes turned on him.

" Go away !" he quavered, " I don't know who or what you are, or where you've sprung from—but go back, go away —that is, if you're really there— ?"

He squeezed his eyes tight shut, opened them after a decent interval, and cringed still further, punishing his knee-joints agonisingly.

" Go away !" he repeated, desperately, " I've got all the trouble I can stand, as it is, without seeing things while I'm cold sober— !"

" Sorry—" the thing said, " Can't be done. You called me. I came. The name's ' Drog '—" It produced a card from thin air, handed it across to George. " At your service, in the usual way."

With starting eyes he read :—

' Drog ' Demonic Agent. 3rd Class.
Individuals and couples, only.

He handed back the card, watched it vanish as silently as it had come, and swallowed, noisily. Then he got to his feet, striving to keep his knees firm.

" But—I don't believe in you," he stuttered. " You're an illusion— !"

" That's what they all say," Drog was professionally calm, " all the time. You now do whatever you want to prove to yourself that I'm here. Just a moment—" It made a grasping movement, produced a tattered old folder, clawed through it, rapidly. " Here we are—Section 5, sub-section 14B—' there must be no aim or intent to harm, maim, mutilate or otherwise injure the agent—see under penalties and forfeits '—there you are, friend. Anything you like, only don't try to damage me. Not that you could, of course—" It disposed of the folder, and stood, waiting, looking like a little, purple fat man whose paunch has spread all round his circumference.

George gripped the brush tighter, and bent, to daub Flake White on Drog's tubular nose. Then he straightened, unhappily.

" That's real enough " he groaned, handing Drog a paint rag, " But this is mad. I don't believe in things like you— !"

" Lots of them say that, too." Drog crossed his legs, sitting back onto his tail as if it was a shooting-stick. " You humans are forever getting your words and meanings crossed. You should have said ' faith '—"

"I should?"

"Sure! Faith is trying to believe in something you know damn well ain't so. Believing is something different. Just the opposite. You believe in the weather, this solid floor, these walls, your hunger, debt, failure—because you accept them. They correspond with patterns you have formed in your mind. If you can form the pattern in your mind—then it's so, and you believe it. If you can't form the pattern, mentally, then you have to have faith. It's all in the way you think. You follow that—?"

"Frankly—no." George groped for a chair, feeling more giddy with each passing moment. "Does it matter?"

"Surely! That's how you called me. You formed the pattern. You painted a magic circle—see? Faith has nothing to do with it."

George let his brush and pallette slip to the floor, and clutched his head, despairingly. It made sense, of a kind. Now he had called up a devil, and what the devil was he to do with it? Through his fingers he saw Drog glowing at the painting. The faint ghost of an idea stirred in his mind.

"Glad you like the picture," he muttered. "I'm sorry it's not a good likeness of you—but, of course, I had no idea—"

"Likeness!" Drog growled, pityingly. "That, my friend, is a female—and a lulu, at that—a real pip! Would you look at those bulges—and that three-point tail! It's positively indecent! Wow!" He drooled into silence.

"I might have known!" George groaned. "That's all I can ever paint—women! And I can't even get those right—" he threw a gesture at the canvases which ringed the studio. "I like them, but everyone else seems to think them loathsome and repulsive. Magazine editors see my pictures and shudder. My models, in the days when I could afford to use them, used to sue me for making them look weird and eerie. I can't help it. It's just the way I paint—"

"Because that's the way you think," Drog nodded. "Like I was just telling you—" He glowed at the picture again "This kind of thinking—I like—!"

"You can have it, as a gift," George said, with sudden craft. "You might as well. It's my last canvas, and the last of my paint. I'm broke—in debt—with no prospects, no skill or talent except the ability to paint pictures which give other people the creeps. This was my last fling. I was going to show

'em ! They call my pictures ' creepy '—I was going to do something really weird— !" He stared at his work, and sighed. " You can have it, Drog. Take it, and go—"

" Now, now—" the red eyes glowed, reprovingly at George. " You can't catch me like that, friend. I can't go, yet. It's all in the rules, see ?"

" Oh, hell !" George sagged back into the chair. Drog bobbed, respectfully.

" Now—can we get to business ?" he growled. " You have the usual three wishes. I guess you've heard of that, huh ?"

" Not that old fairy-tale nonsense— ?"

" Surely ! All part of the service. Tradition, you know."

" And you take my soul, as payment, I suppose ?"

" Now that really is a fairy-tale," Drog showed his fangs in a brilliant green smile, " and what a depreciated currency it would be, in any case."

" Then where's the catch ?"

" No catch at all. It's just one of those things. I can't help doing this, any more than you can help painting. I don't do it for a fee, though I'm not saying a bit of remuneration wouldn't come amiss. If you meant that about the pin-up picture, I might be able to work you in a bit of extra credit."

" But there must be a snag, somewhere— !"

" Well—I guess it's just a matter of natural law. You make the wish, and you're stuck with it, see ?"

" So—I have to be damned careful what I wish for, eh ?" Drog nodded, and George frowned, thoughtfully. It was tempting. It might work. He would be a fool not to push it to the limit.

" Can I make stipulations ? "

" Surely, within reason—" Drog considered awhile. " You open to a bit of advice ? No scales off my proboscis, you understand, but you seem to be a decent guy—and I owe you a bit for the picture—well, just don't try any of those trick wishes. Like a fellow I once served. He wished that all his wishes would come true. Poor guy— !"

George thrust the very same thought from his mind, feverishly, and asked, " What happened to him ?"

" He got his wish, naturally. You imagine how many thousands of wishes you make in a single day ! Wish you were dead—or that you'd never been born ! That's a real troublesome one, believe me ! I wouldn't be surprised if you were wishing, right now, that you could think what to wish for first— ! "

" Stipulation !" George babbled, hastily, through chattering teeth. " Nothing happens 'till I say ' NOW.' Is that all right ?" Apparently it was.

He plunged into desperate musings. He was hungry, gnawingly and achingly hungry—but it would be criminal to waste a wish on food. He could only eat so much, and he would, eventually, be hungry again. Unless he could make it preserved food—stuff that would keep—enough to put away for a month, say, with something hot and delicious, right now. The very thought of it made him weak at the knees.

" Be specific, now !" Drog cautioned. " I only obey orders. I can't interpret. Be precise, either in words or in mental pictures."

George tottered to the bare trestle table that was the only other article of furniture in his studio, and stood by it.

" I want this table laid for a tremendous meal," he mumbled. " Nothing exotic, just good food, and lots of it. Soup—consomme, I think—and Dover Sole—and roast duck, and green peas—" his tongue failed, entirely, but the vision was starkly vivid in his mind.

" Take it easy, now !" Drog warned, again. " I can get it from your thoughts. Just you picture it, in your mind."

He visualised stacks of canned and potted foods, jams, spreads, cheeses, wines of many kinds, biscuits sweets—until his mouth watered so much that he was choking.

" Any special touches ?"

" No—yes ! Music—sweet music playing while I eat—and a pretty girl to sit there, at the other end of the table, for company. Is that all right ?"

" Surely, if that's the way you want it. Ready, now ?"

" NOW ! "

There was nothing that could be described as sensation, but he was aware of being seated. He opened his eyes to the strains of ' Eine Kleine Nachtmusik,' to see the table exactly as he had visioned it, agonisingly replete, and, at the other end—he got to his feet, staring !

She, too, stood up, rigid with terror, her pointed ears stiff, her blue hair standing on end, tilted yellow cat's eyes dilated with dread. She was tall, and slim, and—he thought—delightfully developed. Her dress, such as it was, consisted

of strings of glittering stones, looped and pendant, catching the light vividly against her bright emerald skin.

" Aaaah !" she screamed, " Keep off—you *human* ! Keep away ! Help ! Help !"

" Mildred !" he gasped, coming round the corner of the table and holding out a welcoming hand, " Don't you remember me ?" Her scream-power multiplied as the square of the nearness of him. Within three steps he was deafened. He shot a helpless, appealing glance at Drog, who shrugged, and made movements.

" Leave the food !" George screamed, as the scene blurred.

" As a special favour," Drog said, reprovingly, into the ringing silence. " I have left the food—but I can't do that again, picture or no picture. All or nothing—that's the rules !"

George settled limply into his chair, reached for a spoon, and began, warily to sample the consomme. After the first, satisfactory gulp, he settled down to it in earnest, furrowing his brow meanwhile.

" I don't understand it," he confessed, between swallows. " What was she screaming about ? Must have been a shock for her, of course, but there was no call for all that fuss— !"

" You have me beat, George !" Drog hopped onto the table, and began digging into a pot of caviare. " Don't you realise you must have looked as horrible to her as she did to you— ?"

" Horrible ?" He spluttered into his soup, " Who, Mildred? She's my fiancee, or was—until I painted her portrait. She's beautiful. See for yourself !" He gestured to a full-length canvas, in one corner. " I loved her, Drog—love her still, as a matter of fact—" the hot soup was making him slightly maudlin. " But she—she said my picture of her was a monstrosity, an insult. Hideous, she said it was. Women !" He pushed aside the soup-plate, moodily, and reached for the fish.

" And she really had slanted, yellow eyes—?"

" Well—no, not really, but they looked to me as if they ought to be. It's the way I saw them—the artist's eye, you know !"

" And pointed ears, green skin, blue hair ?"

" Can I help it if I see people that way ?" George grew suddenly defiant. The sole had been delicious. He slid the plate away, reached for the duck. " You like my paintings, anyway, even if no-one else does."

Drog drove his long, yellowish-purple tongue down into the caviar pot to scoop out the last taste, and belched, politely.

"Second wish— ?"

"I've been thinking about that—" George munched a morsel of duck. "I think I've got a safe one, this time." He pondered a moment. "Can I have a sort of trial run, a sample ?"

"How do you mean ?" Drog's eyes glowed with red curiosity.

"Can you produce for me—on loan, only—a fiver, a Bank of England five-pound-note ?"

"Like this, you mean ?" Drog clawed one from the air, held it out.

"The snag is—I'm not qualified to know whether this is genuine or not, or whether it has been stolen— ?"

"Do me a favour !" Drog was hurt, "It's O.K. I guarantee that."

"No offence intended," George said, hastily. "I believe you. All right. I wish for a million pounds—"

"They all do it— !" Drog sneered into the vacant room, mockingly.

"Ah—but mine must be all in fivers. That's two hundred thousand notes, genuine ones, exactly like this one. Not counterfeit, out-of-date, faulty in any way—but genuine. Not stolen. Nothing wrong with them in any way. They must be exactly like this one !" He stared, meaningly at Drog. "All right ? NOW ! "

It made a nice little pile on the floor, by his feet. He was surprised at the smallness of the pile, until he checked it, dizzily. Bundles of a hundred in stacks of twenty bundles—each stack was ten thousand pounds—a hundred stacks in a square, ten by ten. And it was all there ! He walked round it, in a daze, afraid to touch it, unable to believe it, wondering where the hell he was going to keep it all. Calls for a drink, he thought, wildly, and went back to the table, groping for a bottle.

There was an evil grin on Drog's face. George felt a little seed of suspicion burst into dreadful bloom in his mind.

"What's wrong with it ?" he demanded, fiercely. "Come on, out with it, you devil— !"

"Not 'devil,' George—only a demon. Devils are higher up the scale."

" Demon, then—damn you ! What harm did I ever do you? And I did give you a pin-up— ! What did I do wrong ?" He stared critically at the pile of currency. " I might have known there would be a catch—but I didn't think it would be a bare-faced swindle !"

" Now, now, George !" Drog put down the new pot of caviar, and frowned, " No need to be offensive, you know. I did exactly what you wanted—"

" Then what's wrong with it ?"

" It's a little matter of serial numbers, that's all. You said ' exactly ' !"

George's jaw sagged for a moment, then he laughed, harshly, and kicked at the stacks of notes. " Fair enough," he admitted. " My own fault."

" It wouldn't have done any good to warn you, either," Drog pointed out. " You couldn't possibly visualise two hundred thousand different serial numbers—"

George gloomed at the useless money, his head aching, his hand still holding the champagne glass.

" Can you take it away again ? Without using up another wish, I mean ?" He tasted the flat stuff in the glass and shuddered. " I've still one left— ?"

" I'll do that little thing, surely— !"

" Look—*must* I make a third wish ? Can't I just call the whole thing off, and stop, while I'm on the credit side ? I'll settle just for the food— ?"

" Not a chance, sorry !" Drog was positive. " They come in threes, always. I'd look a fool, trying to return one to stores. Besides, it's yours, by right. I'm just the operator." George held his head and groaned. " See here—" Drog softened his gruff tones, " I've taken a liking to you. I'd like to help you out. Come on, now—there must be some little thing you could wish for, and get it all done with— ?"

" That's just it !" George complained. " There isn't anything I really want, except to be successful. Not spectacular—just enough to be free from worry and debt—and if I could visualise that, I wouldn't need your silly wishes, at all. And I'd like to be married—happily married, to that gorgeous girl you saw, just now—but you've seen what she thinks about that ! And there you are. What more is there for a chap to wish for ?"

He reached for the bottle again, but put it back, in distaste. " Help yourself !" he offered, to Drog. " Or is that rather silly. I suppose you can get anything you want, anytime— ?"

" Not really," Drog perched on his pronged tail again, " I can only operate within the framework of someone's wishes. A sort of expense account, you know. Can't do it for myself alone—"

" Yes—I think I see that," George nodded. " I was wondering where the caviar came from. All right—help yourself to your favourite tipple—it's on me !" Drog made that grasping movement, and was holding an oddly shaped flagon, with thick green fumes curling lazily from its neck. He sniffed, coughed, said, " Excuse me—but this stuff won't pour—goes right through glass— !"

He put the flagon to his mouth, and glugged, seven times, then he came up for air, shuddered, and his eyes shone like beacons.

" Try some !" he coughed, offering the flask. " It's prime —hits the spot perfectly—plenty more—go on !"

" No thanks ! I'm a beer man, myself—can't really fancy anything else—gosh ! Thanks ! Cheers !" He tucked in his shoulders, put his nose deep into the tankard Drog had produced, and went right down, gurglingly. He came up with a sigh, licked off the froth, and sighed again.

" How do you do that, anyway ? Or is it a secret ?"

" Used to call it ' magic,' once," the little demon swayed on his perch, " but it's all science, these days. Infinite number of simultaneous universes—" he stopped to unravel his tongue, " Everything's possible, someplace—"

" I've heard of that," George frowned, sorting out hazy memories. " It means there is a universe just like this, but you're green instead of purple ; and another where I'm a quarter of an inch taller—and any amount of others, all kinds, and every possible variation. And that's how you get all the stuff ?"

" Not quite right," Drog struggled with a thickened tongue. " Think of a kal—a kal—jussa minute—" He drew a deep breath, "—a kaleidoscope—what a word ! Anyway—you have a lotta pieces, and you can change the pattern, but you have to take something from here, to put it over there—see what I mean ? In that universe where you're taller, something else will be different—to make up for it—"

" Drog !" George jumped to his feet in sudden excitement. " I've got it !" He stared at the little demon, who had fallen flat on his back.

" Don't *do* that—" Drog struggled, groggily back to his feet, " Damn near put my flame out. What's the big idea, hey ?"

" Listen ! Instead of you fishing about in other universes, getting odd items, why not transport me to some other universe, complete. Can you do that ?"

" I dunno—never had that one before—jussa minute—" He put out an unsteady claw, produced the tattered folder again, and riffled the pages. He seemed to sober up, visibly. " Oh brother ! I don't like this ! Somebody has slipped—there's nothing against that, in the book— !"

" Is that bad ?"

" You bet it is. I don't like this, one little bit. Change your mind, George—please !"

" Not likely. Why should I ?"

" Because it might work out—and that just never happens. It would upset the whole business. It's not ethical, don't you see. Nobody ever gets anything worthwhile from wishing—that's the whole point. You can't upset that, but you will, this way. Don't you see ? There'll be the most holy row, when I get—"

" Sorry—" George was unrepentant. " I've got my wish all worked out. I'm going to visualise a universe as nearly like this one as possible, except that I'm a working success—and I'm happily married to, and in love with, Mildred, and she's in love with me. Do you get all that ?"

" Oh, Hell !" Drog muttered, reverently, " George, please!"

" Look here," George felt a momentary qualm, " I'm sorry for you, and all that, but—here, just a minute—there must be an ideal universe for you, too. Had you thought of that ? Look at your pin-up picture, and think. Why go back at all. Why not just pick out your universe, and flit, with me—resign—why not—?" Drog's little red eyes clouded, and then began to glow. George smiled, shut his eyes, and let his imagination build up in full detail.

Again there was that ' no-sensation,' and he opened his eyes just as she swept into the doorway.

" Why, Mildred, dear !" he sighed, and was instantly fascinated by the new depth and timbre of his own voice.

" Ogrege, darling ! I'm sorry to have been so long fixing this dress—" she pirouetted, curvaceously, making the jewels swirl and flash. " Do you like it ? Isn't it just a trifle—daring ?" She giggled and blushed a darker green, writhing

her tail provocatively. . He felt his emotions begin to simmer. " Shall we begin—Ogrege, darling— ?"

" Begin—?" he rumbled, wonderingly, and she giggled again.

" There—you did say it was specially for a new pose you wanted to paint but I should know that twinkle in your eyes by this time—and—" she blushed even more emerald, "—you know I'm always ready—" She held out her silk-scaled arms in eager invitation.

George struggled back from a kiss that rocked him to his foundations, to see a bronze-green claw resting on her glossy shoulder. He had wiggled it twice, and been coyly reproved for tickling, before he realised that it was his own. As he was assimilating this surprise he felt a furtive tug at his tail—his *tail* !

Looking back, and down, he saw Drog, arm-in-arm with his demonette.

" Is it all right, George—I mean, Ogrege—?"

George-Ogrege glanced at his bronze-green claw-hand, felt the silk-scaled curves snuggling close to him, lovingly—thought a moment, then shrugged, and grinned. It was all right !

—**John Rackham**

DIAL 'O' FOR OPERATOR

Robert Presslie's plot formula in this story is a simple one—yet in a short space of time he builds up a suspense angle that not only keeps you guessing but will ensure you do not put the story down until you know the ending.

By ROBERT PRESSLIE

In government departments, high and humble, there is an edict which states that it is permissible to put the central heating apparatus into use as from the first day of October. This edict is nearly always misconstrued. The usual interpretation is that the heating *must* be put into operation on the specified date. In a telephone exchange this can lead to a high degree of discomfort, particularly for the night staff who must work when the windows are closed and the shutters are drawn against the darkness outside.

The life of a night operator is fit only for vegetables. From ten in the evening until eight next morning there is nothing to do but wait for the occasional call which the dialling system cannot handle. Yet in spite of its mind-stupifying properties the job is much sought after by students working their way through university. It is the regulars, men like Charley Groom, who tend to be moronic.

Charley is a type. Half the night staff are part-time workers such as students. Half the remainder are physically disabled men of average mental calibre. Charley is a representative of the rest. He can read, write and count as well as the next man. But his social and cultural interests are nil. His life

centres on the exchange. The night staff comprises his entire sphere of acquaintance.

He sat at the switchboard with no coat, his shirt sleeves bunched by frayed elastics. When the female day staff clocked out at ten, the men were allowed to shuck their coats. Charley cursed the muggy heat and wished he could strip off his shirt too. And he could have. There was no law against it. But nobody ever did it so Charley was uncomfortable and fretted because of it.

A light came alive on the switchboard. Automatically he reached for the ticket pad, scribbled in the number below the light and entered the time : Eleven-fifteen. His left hand plugged a jack into the hole corresponding to the light, he pressed forward the speaking key and asked morosely if he could help the caller.

He scowled when the only sound he heard was a deep shuddering wheeze. Kids, he thought. Damfool kids crawling home late after their first night on the beer. You could always count on at least one smart pup to play the fool about this time. He reversed the speaking key. In the backward position it made the calling phone ring. A jarring earful should teach the budding comedian.

The wheeze stopped. In its place, after a brief click of throat-catching, there came a sob. Then a voice. " Please !" it said.

" Please what ?" Charley mumbled irritably. " Run away, sonny. I've got better things to do than—"

" Don't go away !" the voice begged. It seemed to have slightly more control to it. " Please, please don't go away !" Charley's scowl became a frown. It was a woman speaking. Women did not usually play the fool.

" Do you want a number ?" he asked.

" No ! No !"

" What do you want, then ? Police ? Ambulance ?"

" Yes, anybody. I don't know—"

Make up your mind, Charley thought. Then he found a little sympathy. " If you'll just get hold of yourself and tell me what the trouble is, I'll put you through to somebody."

" No, don't go away !"

" I won't."

" You said you were putting me through—"

" If it makes you feel any better I'll keep the line open until you get whoever you need. Now, what do you want ?"

The woman started to cry softly. Charley was married. He knew it was best to let her have a minute of two of tears. Dogs and children vomit in distress. Women cry.

"I can't get out of the phone booth," she said. "I daren't go out. It's still there."

"What is?"

"I don't know. It came out of the water, I think. It must have. It was dripping wet. I ran. It chased me. I came in here. Dialled O. Couldn't think what else to do."

The information was too much and too muddled for Charley to absorb as quickly as she gave it. He was silent so long that the woman said, "Hello!" in a shrill voice of fear.

"Just a minute," Charley said. He added, "Don't worry, I'm not going to leave you."

He looked along the switchboard at the four other operators, decided they could not help much and buzzed for the supervisor. Sloane came through from the staff room with a cup of coffee in his hand. He was annoyed at being called in.

"A woman," Charley explained. "In a call box. Says somebody or something chased her into it."

Sloane checked the time. "Eleven-thirty," he said. "Where is she?"

"Dockside somewhere, I think. She mentioned water."

"She should know better than to be alone down there at this time of night. Get the police. No—let me talk to her first." He picked up a set of phones.

Each number is repeated on the switchboard every twleve feet. Sloane slung a jack into the call-box hole in the next section.

"Supervisor speaking," he said. "Do you wish the police?"

"Anybody. I told the other man. There's a black thing outside the booth. It's waiting for me to come out. For God's sake send somebody to—"

"Black thing?" said Sloane. "What exactly do you mean? Are you quite sure it isn't a dog? Describe it."

"I can't see. It's too dark."

Sloane looked disgusted. "If you can't see it, how do you know it is still there?"

"I know it is. I tried pushing against the door. It wouldn't move. The . . . whatever it is must be lying against it."

Sloane still thought it was a dog. He said, "I'll get in touch with the police. Don't you move. They'll be along shortly and get rid of—they'll see you safely home."

He tugged out the jack and nodded to Charley to take over while he consulted the directory. He found the address of the call box and rang through to police headquarters.

"Exchange supervisor," he introduced himself. "There seems to be some trouble at one of our booths. Corner of Coldwater Lane. That's right. No, I don't think so. Some hysterical female. Yes, ring me back. Got to make a report, you know. Yes, always something isn't there?"

He asked Charley, "Is she still there?"

"Weeping again. Quiet like."

"Probably drunk. You know what she is, of course? That's the only kind you get down at the docks at night."

Charley turned sharply to face the switchboard. He put his lips close to the mouthpiece to exclude external noise. "I missed that," he said. "Tell me again."

"The thing," the woman repeated, her voice high as an E string. "It hasn't gone. I saw it. I lit a cigarette. It was there. It comes more than half way up the side of the booth. All black and shiny. No shape to it."

Charley wanted to ask if she was what Sloane had said. But he stuck to more relevant matters. "The police will be along in a minute," he told the woman. "You'll be all right."

She screamed. Short, sharp, staccato. Cut off suddenly as if she had stopped breathing.

"Are you there?" Charley asked. Sloane strode down to the next position, picked up the number with a jack and switched in to hear what had made Charley sound so agitated.

The woman gibbered. Meaningless words drifted across the phone line. Sounds without sense, yet their tone was unmistakable in its prayerful pleading. Then she asked for God a dozen times and finished the garbled stream of words by saying, "Sorry."

Sloane said, "What is it?"

"The door. It was pressing against the door."

"They open out," Charley said to the Supervisor. "Nobody could push them inwards."

She heard. "That's all you know," she said. "The whole booth seemed to move. It has stopped now. I struck a match. It stopped pushing when I struck a match. Why don't the police come? You said they would."

"They have been notified," Sloane used his official voice. He pulled the jack and inserted it in the police number.

"They left immediately," the station sergeant told him. "Should be back any minute."

"Get the inspector to ring me."

A new light came alive on the board. Sloane cleared the station line and picked it up. It was the inspector ringing from downtown. He said the booth was empty and there was nothing outside it. Not even a damp patch.

"Wait," Sloane asked. He called to Charley. "What's that number?"

"One, four, seven, eleven."

It checked. Sloane leaned to the left, got the directory between two fingers and pulled it towards him. The page was still open. Opposite 14711 he read Coldwater Lane. He put an auxiliary jack into the number hole and pressed the listening key. The woman was still telling Charley about the door. Sloane opened the two keys under his hand at once and quickly closed them again.

"Hear that?" he asked the police inspector. "That's her. She's in the booth at the corner of Coldwater Lane. She's still there, as you can hear."

The inspector snapped at him. "And just where do you think this patrol car is?"

The exchange began to fill up. Every extra body seemed to add to the heat.

Since there are few manual calls after eleven, most of the night staff passed the time by pricing up daytime charge sheets for trunk calls. Only three or four are actually on the switchboard at any time, unless there happens to be an emergency in which case the tickets are dropped and the board fully manned. Nobody had left the board since Charley first picked up the call yet somehow the others had sensed excitement and had started drifting in.

Sloane elbowed his way through them to the central island which was an internal switchboard. He called the duty engineer.

"Crossed line," he told him. "We've got an urgent coming through on 14711 but it must be originating somewhere else. Of course, I'm sure. The police have been to 14711. All right, and hurry it up. We don't know what this

is but it sounds bad. Yes, we'll maintain contact with the caller."

" Don't lose that line," he barked to Charley. " Rubens will be across pretty quick. Keep her talking. Ask her where she is."

" I thought of that. She won't calm down long enough to tell me. Just keeps on about the thing at the door."

He had not closed the key in case she thought he had cut her off. She heard what he said to Sloane. " Listen," she whispered, " If you think I'm the kind that gets the heebies at nothing, think again. I've been down here every night for the past two years and nothing has ever happened to me before. Nothing I didn't want to happen. But I'm finished with it now. I'll never come here again."

" Where ?" Charley got in. " You'll never go where again?"

Upwards of a dozen pairs of ears strained for her answer. Phone jacks had picked up her number all round the board and the operators were listening with speaking keys closed. All they heard was another demented scream, a clatter as the phone rattled on the coin box, a scuffle, another clatter as she picked up the phone again, fumbling it.

" It's trying to come in !" she screeched.

" Take it easy, ducks," Charley begged. " Nothing can push that door in. And if it was anything with hands it could have pulled it open before now."

Sloane came across and hissed in his uncovered ear. "What the hell are you trying to do ? Send her up the wall ? Anything with hands ! Now she'll imagine she's being hunted by flaming monsters !"

" It *was* trying to get in," the woman insisted. " Through the crack where the door shuts. Don't ask me how I knew. I just felt it was coming in, struck a match to see low down and there it was. A bit of it, anyhow. Oozing through the crack like mud. It sucked back when I struck the match."

Any ideas about it being a dog or similar large animal went right out of Sloane's head. He told the woman, " It must be scared of light. So long as you have matches you have a weapon, something to keep it scared off. Don't waste them. D'you hear me ? Don't waste your matches unnecessarily."

Her wail, " But it's so dark outside !" was pathetic.

" So it's dark," Sloane said, keeping his voice hard. " Do what I said. Strike a light if there seems to be anything

happening. Otherwise save them. We'll get help to you as soon as possible. We sent the police to the booth corresponding to the number we have coming up on the board but the line is crossed. If you can tell us where you are calling from it will help a lot."

She told him : " I'm in the booth at the corner of Coldwater Lane !"

Rubens the engineer arrived, disappeared into the maze of wires behind the switchboard and came out again to confirm the woman's story.

" Nothing wrong with the selectors or relays," he said. " That's one, four seven, eleven calling. Nothing else but."

Sloane acted promptly. He got through to police headquarters again, asked for the inspector, told him the emergency was still on but gave him no details and asked him to come over to the exchange. He told Rubens to stand by in case he was needed again.

Charley looked wistfully at the clock. Twelve midnight. He should be having a half-hour break now, time for a cigarette and a cup of tea. He wiped the sweat off the back of his neck and wondered how much longer it would be before he got away from the board. The tea he didn't care about. The cigarette he could have used.

The way coincidences sometimes happen ! Sloane tapped his shoulder and said, " You may smoke if you want to, Groom. I'll make up your time later on but I don't want you to leave the board right now. You're the one she knows. It will be better if you stay on the line."

Charley nodded miserably. His cigarettes were outside in his locker.

The inspector arrived in a filthy mood. He too should have been off duty. He had been in the station when Sloane's first call came in and he had intended the police car to drop him at his house after attending to the call. But when he learned that both he and the woman had apparently been using the same booth he decided to stay with the case. There could be recriminations later if he didn't.

" Hazel," he introduced himself. " What's all this nonsense about ? I was in that booth. There was nobody else there."

" We're trying to work it out," Sloane hedged.

" Is the woman still on the line ?"

" The operator is keeping her talking. She must have mistaken her whereabouts. Groom is doing his best to find where she went wrong."

Hazel grunted. " Give me a phone. I'll talk to her."

" I wouldn't," Sloane advised. " She has got accustomed to Groom. Every time anyone else speaks she panics. Thinks we're cutting her off."

The inspector *humphed* and went across to Charley's position. " Has she told you anything yet?" he snapped.

It had been in Charley's mind to cadge a cigarette. One look at Hazel's face made him forget it. He said, " She passed Commercial Wharf about ten-thirty. Up one side of Fish Street and down the other after that. Waiting for the pubs to close, I expect. Hoping for a customer. She got no takers, went back up Fish Street, remembers the clock on the Seamen's Mission striking eleven as she turned into Portugal Place. That's as far as I've got."

" Carry on," Hazel said.

Charley wished he would stand back. He felt uncomfortable with a policeman at his shoulder. He took it out on the woman. " Well," he grumbled. " What are you waiting for?"

He heard her catch her breath and was sorry he had been so rough. She began to talk as if she was doing him a favour. " I thought I might as well take a turn along the quay. Maybe catch some of the boys going back to their ships. But it just wasn't my night. The quay was deserted. I was almost at the far end when I thought I heard something behind me. It made a noise like wet fish being dumped on the quayside. I couldn't see anybody or anything. I crossed over to make for home. Then I heard it again. I tried running. Stopped for breath. Heard it a third time. I was sure I was being followed. I don't mind being followed when I can see who is behind me. But I couldn't see anything. It must having been moving flat and low on the street."

She became agitated again, forgot and forgave Charley's shortness with her. " You don't know what it was like," she said. " Slap, slap behind me. When I walked quicker the slaps came quicker. I ran. When I got to the corner of Coldwater Lane I was never so glad to see a phone booth. I dialled O. You answered."

Her voice and control broke. "Why doesn't somebody come?"

"They will," Charley said. "I promise they will." He wondered what had made him promise. He caught a signal from Hazel and told the woman, "Just a minute. The police inspector is here with me. He wants to talk to me. I'm not going away."

Hazel asked what she had said. Charley gave it word for word. The inspector's eyes shuttered as he pictured the district.

"The timing is right," he said to Sloane. "If I hadn't been there myself a few minutes ago I would swear she must be in the Coldwater booth. Have you checked for a crossed line?"

"Before you arrived."

"Check it again. And give me a list of all the booths in the vicinity. She was in Fish Street at eleven. Rang you at eleven-fifteen. Get all the booths within a mile of the Mission"

Sloane knew them pat. There were seven on one side of the dock, three on the north side of the water.

"Get down to the car," Hazel told his sergeant. "Radio HQ. Tell them to check those booths. Tell them to cover the north side too. She may have crossed the bridge and forgotten to tell us." He made a mental note to slap a soliciting charge on the woman when he found her. He wasn't going to have his night ruined with nothing to show for it.

Somebody brought in a cup of tea for Charley, gave him a cigarette at the same time. Charley got two deep puffs and the woman swore.

"You're smoking," she said accusingly. "It's all right for you. My cigarettes are finished."

She spoiled Charley's enjoyment of the smoke. He nipped off the glowing end of the cigarette and put the stub in his shirt pocket. It didn't seem right when she didn't have a cigarette too.

"Any sign of the thing?" he asked for the sake of making conversation.

"Not since I told you."

"Maybe it's gone, whatever it was."

"I don't think so. I would have heard. Wait—" He heard her breathing stop. Then she went on: "No, it's still there. I tried pushing the door."

Charley could not contain his admiration. "You're pretty brave," he said.

"Brave! I'm like a jelly."

"I think you've got guts. Not many people would have tried to push the door with a thing like you described outside." What Charley really meant but could not bring himself to say was that he would never have been so foolhardy. He changed the subject and asked, "Can you see any lights moving? The police are cruising all round where you are."

"The only lights I can see are the one above my head and a street lamp about fifty yards down the lane. Round the quayside corner it's pitch black. Nothing to be seen at all."

Charley's experience helped him to picture the scene. He could tell by the faint rustle when she turned to look behind her. He even knew that she changed the phone from one hand to the other. But a squeaking noise puzzled him until he realised she must have been wiping condensation off the glass. He wondered if she was sweating as much as he was. Probably worse, he decided. A phone booth is no place for fresh air.

"You," the woman said. "Operator." Her voice had taken on a new shade of fear. Hysteria was gone. Mad panic had given way to an acceptance of doom. "Operator, the thing is climbing up the side of the booth. That's why I can't see the harbour lights. Can it . . . is there any opening on the roof of the box?"

Charley's skin prickled. He wished somebody else would take over. This was a job for somebody like Sloane. He was not clever with the smooth phrase. He was only an operator.

"You'll be safe enough," he said, doing the best he could. "There's a small ventilator, nothing big enough for even a mouse to creep through."

"It squeezed through the edge of the door!"

"Keep your matches handy. It was scared by the light."

"That's what your boss said but he was wrong. It may be dark outside but it's bright in the booth."

"It must be the heat then," Charley said, thinking furiously to keep her from hysteria again. "That's what it is, the heat of the match flame."

She tore up his explanation. "If it's scared by heat, why is it trying to get in here? It's a damn sight hotter inside than out."

Again Charley wished he had a glibber tongue. He was glad to catch sight of Hazel's man coming in. It gave him a chance to tell her to wait while he heard what the sergeant had to say.

The sergeant, Hazel and Sloane went into a huddle. It was Sloane who passed the information on to Charley : "She isn't in any of the dockside booths !" He did not sound happy. Charley wondered if it was possible that even Sloane wished there was somebody more competent to deal with the situation.

He amended the news before giving it to the woman. " I didn't mean to be off the line so long," he said. " But there seems to be some kind of a mix-up. Nothing for you to worry about, but—"

He frowned at the sudden suspicion that she was not listening. " Hello !" he said sharply. " Are you there ? Hello !"

He turned to beckon Sloane but the woman made a slight sound and he pressed his phone to his ear. She seemed to be moving around the booth. From the absence of breathing sounds he guessed the phone was lying on the coin box. He heard three quick threshing sounds, a tinkle of glass, the deafening clatter of the phone falling off the coin box and swinging at the end of its wire, hitting the side of the booth with each swing.

The noises became difficult to identify. Occasionally he heard a fleeting breath from the woman. He decided she was trying to catch the swinging phone. He wondered why it should take her so long.

" It's me !" she shouted suddenly. " Wait a minute !" And the phone rattled again. Then there were scuffling sounds and another clatter and she was back on the line.

" I'm done for now," she moaned. " It's coming in at the ventilator. I saw it. I forgot what you said about the matches. Tried to hit it with my bag. All I did was break the lamp. I can't see at all. It must be crawling down the wall to get me. God ! God ! God ! I wish I'd been a better woman !"

" Shut up !" Charley made a desperate attempt to steady her. " Have you got your bag again ?"

" It's somewhere on the floor."

" Find it. Use your feet. When you touch it, bend down, take out your matches. Light them one at a time. Get each

match as close to the thing as you can. As soon as it retreats, don't strike another match. It seems to take a while to recover from the effects of each flame. It shouldn't bother you again for at least fifteen minutes."

He waited while she found the handbag.

"The matches aren't in it !" she sobbed.

"Take it easy," Charley commanded. "They must be on the floor somewhere. Get down on your hands and knees. Sweep the floor with your hands. Do it systematically. Don't make wild swipes."

"I'm scared !"

"Do what I tell you !" Charley was surprised at his own firmness. The slender link between him and the lonely booth on the dockside passed on the sounds of her obedience.

"You were right," she said eventually, all out of breath. "Three matches did it." She began to giggle.

"Shut up !" Charley repeated. "I was trying to tell you about the police."

Then he wondered what he could tell her that had any gleam of hope in it. He fabricated a lie with a fluent ease that astonished him ; it was a thing he had never been able to do successfully with any woman, especially with his wife. What surprised him even more was that he did not care what the inspector thought as he lied :

"The police are fools," he said into the phone. "I distinctly told them where you are, yet they mucked it up and went to the north side of the dock. The inspector said to tell you he's sorry. He'll see they do it right this time. Just hang on a bit longer. Try not to panic or do anything silly again."

She giggled once more but it was gentle and not so insane.

"Just imagine !" she said. "The cops actually on my side ! Trying to help me. Me !"

Her voice went soft as she continued, "I don't know your name, mister, but I want to thank you. Nobody ever went to so much trouble on my behalf before. I don't suppose we'll ever meet. I don't suppose I'll ever get out of here alive. But thanks, anyhow."

"Stop thinking like that. It will be all over pretty soon. And you don't have to thank me. It's my job." He had never thought of his work objectively. It made a change.

"What time is it ?"

Charley lifted his head to look at the clock. He was amazed to see a ring of faces, every one hanging on the conversation. He swallowed and tried to be nonchalant but his new importance was too much for him. His voice shook as he answered, "Just gone two."

"That's nearly three hours I've been here," she said. "I didn't think it was so late. Funny, isn't it? It seems like years since I ran in here and yet its queer to think I've been cooped up for three hours."

"Yes, it's funny," Charley agreed. He turned at a squeeze on his shoulder and added, "They want to talk to me. I'll leave the line open so you'll know I'm still here. But don't say anything unless you must."

He looked at the inspector's hand on his shoulder and waited for the worst. However he quickly saw that the scowl on Hazel's face had nothing to do with his slander of the police. Hazel was just plain flummoxed, completely out of his depth in the face of something which could not be resolved by the book.

"You *did* go to Coldwater Lane?" he asked his sergeant. And when the younger man stiffened he said, "Yes, of course you did."

Sloane too looked helpless. "Check that line again," he told the engineer in an attempt to hide his confusion by doing something positive.

"I've checked it twice already," Rubens complained.

Sloane's mouth twitched. "Check it another twice!" he snapped.

Hazel was not to be outdone. He felt just as helpless as Sloane and was just as annoyed about it. Like Sloane, he vented his anger on his subordinate.

"Sergeant," he said, "get back to the quayside. Call the nearest patrol car, tell them to pick up every available man from the local stations. Set up a complete cordon around that phone booth. And don't move until I tell you to. Keep in touch with me here by radiophone."

"The booth is empty, Inspector." The sergeant's expression was deadpan. He was not being insolent or rebellious. He simply stated the fact in self-defence, just to let the inspector know it was no fault of his that the booth had been found empty. He turned briskly and was gone before Hazel could reply.

Charley said the worst thing possible when he asked, " What do you think is really happening ? I mean, how can she be there and yet not there ?"

" You pay attention to what you're doing," Sloane grunted.

Charley was not cowed. " I've got to tell her something." he said. " You'll have to give me something I can tell her. I can't just say we haven't any—"

" You concentrate on keeping that line open," Sloane ordered. " Leave the rest to us. We'll think of something."

The inspector saw Rubens come out from behind the switchboard looking grim and said, " What ? Exactly what are we going to think of ?"

The woman stole Charley's attention again. " Is it all right for me to talk yet ?" she asked.

" What is it ?" he said cautiously.

" It's been again. It was all round the booth like a wet newspaper. It tried to come in at the edge of the door down at the bottom and in at the ventilator too. I knew when it was squeezing in because it got cold all of a sudden and I remembered it got cold the other times too."

Her matter-of-fact tone affected Charley deeply. He marvelled that she had withstood the thing's latest assault without a murmur—and just because he had asked her not to speak.

" I tried not to use too many matches," she apologised. " But I'm afraid I'm down to my last two. I hope you don't think I wasted them."

Charley shivered. Sweated and shivered. He had some difficulty getting his words past the sudden constriction of his throat. " I don't think that at all," he said. He felt there must have been something better he could have said, an inspiring phrase, uplifting words to bolster her courage. He tried hard to think of something but nothing would come so he simply said, " You did fine. You did the right thing."

As he spoke, he shivered again because he knew what was shackling his mind and his tongue : it was despair. With the hands of the exchange clock advancing towards three, he realised it was too late now to save the woman. He had caught the infection of despair from the woman herself ; but it would never have taken hold if it was not for the fact that he knew—knew without a shred of doubt—that she was doomed.

He revolted against the thought. His revolt made him angry and gave him courage to voice his anger. He turned to

Sloane and the inspector and told them : " Somebody hasn't done his job right !"

Nobody argued with him and he went on, " The way I see it she *must* be in Coldwater Lane. She named all the streets, gave all the directions for getting there. The engineer has checked four times that I've got that booth on the line. Why haven't the police found her ?"

" They'll find her this time," the inspector said. But his voice had none of the conviction of his words.

The radiophone number lit up. Sloane took it, passed it to Hazel. Just by looking at him—without hearing a word of the conversation—Charley guessed the sergeant was reporting that the booth was completely surrounded. And still empty.

It was then that Charley went cold altogether. For all the effect it made, the central heating system could have been working in reverse. Charley shivered again. His despair enveloped him like a cold shower. And overlaying the chill of despair there was an icy frosting of dread ; he had a hair-bristling suspicion that the events of the night could only be explained by invoking the supernatural.

He voiced his suspicion to himself : " She might be calling from another world altogether—"

Any other time and in any other circumstances, the inspector would have snorted. But the best he could manage was a reflective nod and a concurring statement that it was adjectival uncanny.

" Isn't there anything else she can tell us ?" he asked.

Charley stared at the jack in its hole. He was getting to the point where he was reluctant even to hear the woman's voice again. She had nothing more to tell them. Already her plight sat like a weight on his shoulders—why make it heavier by hearing it again ? It would be better to accept the sergeant's word, pull the jack and forget all about the affair.

But still the new stature that had come to his small spirit fought. He refused to admit defeat—as yet, anyhow. He refused to take the easy way out.

" I'll try," he mumbled and put his mouth to the phone.

He apologised for making her go over the facts again. " You see—" he said, being forced at last to give her at least part of the truth, "—you see, the police have been where you said and they can't find you."

She could not recognise the truth when she heard it. "You're lying," she said.

"Why on earth should—"

She refused to have any excuses. "You're lying," she repeated. Her voice was flat, dispirited and full of cynicism. "I might have known it," she told Charley. "All that stuff you gave me about the cops wanting to help me! As if they would!"

Charley had no anger now. He was tolerance personified as he said gently, "They've done everything possible. When they couldn't find you the first time, the inspector sent them back. They're down there now. The booth is surrounded. They even got reinforcements—"

He counted the fingers that Hazel stuck in front of his nose. "There's a dozen of them," he said.

"Why don't they get me out, then?"

Charley swallowed. He saw that he must give her the whole truth. "They say the booth is empty."

He expected a thoughtful silence but her reply came quickly. "I get it," she scoffed. "You're just as bad as they are—you think I'm making it all up. You don't even believe I'm in trouble. You don't believe there's a thing outside, waiting to—"

"I believe you—"

She went on, heedless of his protestation. "You think I'm crazy or something. I bet you never even told the cops about me."

"You've got it all wrong. Everybody is doing his best to—"

She laughed—a short grim sound. "It has to happen to me. I would pick a booth that doesn't even have a vide-screen! You'd believe me all right if you could see me!"

It was Rubens, the engineer, who shone the first real light on the problem. When Charley had finished retailing the woman's complaint, Rubens was the first to speak.

"She *is* crazy!" he declared. "Or else she knows something she shouldn't know and she is using it to make us believe her story."

The inspector left Sloane to do the quizzing. The exchange supervisor took Rubens aside to do it. When he had heard what the engineer had to say, he began by reminding the

inspector and Charley that everything connected with the telephone company was subject to the Official Secrets Act.

He continued, "Knowing that this will go no further, I can now tell you that Rubens' information—which, incidentally, is news to me—is disturbing. And that's putting it mildly. It appears that only last week Rubens attended a technical conference which was convened to discuss the possibility of introducing a new system employing sound *and vision* telephony!"

The inspector immediately began to think of the implications as they would affect police work. Sloane mistook his silence for incomprehension. He said, "Don't you understand? The woman is talking about something which Rubens says won't have been *started* on for at least five years!"

"I wasn't far wrong," Charley put in. "I said she must be in another world." He sounded quite awed when he added, "But I didn't think it was a world of the future." And where trained experienced men were hampered by their convictions it was left to Charley to find the only explanation that ever forthcame.

"You know," he said, "maybe she forced herself into our time because she was so desperate. I mean—well, look at ghosts and things like that. They're always somebody who died in terror."

He fumbled for words to explain himself. "Look how ghosts are usually murder victims. Or people who were executed. Couldn't it be that when somebody is in agony or really terrified, their minds are so desperate for help that they can jump out of their own time into another?"

From the stony expressions he got, he realised that Sloane and Hazel already considered the incident closed; the woman was beyond help, beyond reach even and it was futile to continue going through the motions. The question did not arise as to whether Charley's explanation was valid or not. As far as the supervisor and the police inspector were concerned, there was nobody in the booth in Coldwater Lane. There was nothing further to be said or done.

Once again Charley revolted against the notion that the woman was doomed. He said, "I think I can do something. Is it all right if I try?"

The supervisor shrugged. "Please yourself. But don't be long about it. I'll need your evidence for my report."

For the tenth time Charley told the woman, " You've got to do as I say. It's your only hope."

And for the tenth time she answered, " I'm too scared. It must be all around me. Besides, what if there is a wind and it blows out the flame ?"

" It won't. Not if you tear the directory pages out singly. Don't have them in thick bunches. When you have enough to make a good blaze, smash the glass with your shoe and ram the burning paper through the hole."

" No. I couldn't ! It might come in before I got the flames near it."

Charley's patience was infinite. " I'll go over the drill again," he said. " You have the booth filled with paper. Right ? You take a handful, light it, break the glass, stick the flames into the hole. The thing backs off a bit. You use your other match to light all the rest of the paper. All of it, understand. Keep your nerve and stay inside until it's really alight. You might get burned but better that than the other thing. When you can't stay there any longer, come out on the run. The door should open all right because the thing will have retreated. Come out running and kick out as much of the burning paper as you can. If the thing isn't killed by the fire it will at least be scared. You should get a good start. Then run like hell, run like bloody hell ! Do you hear me ?"

She was silent. Charley checked the time. Five-twenty, the clock said and Charley prayed the woman would do what he had ordered.

He listened intently. He tried to analyse every little sound. He thought he heard her tearing up the directory. He willed her to hurry. He heard her come near the reclining phone. He heard the scratch of match on box. The sound of breaking glass. Then the rattle of plastic on metal as she fumbled for the phone on its shelf and used one of her last precious seconds to say " Goodbye !"

He kept the line open a long time, just listening. He pulled the jack reluctantly when Sloane signalled that he was wanted at the supervisory desk.

The inquest that followed was anticlimax. The exchange had grown as cold as Charley, whose tones were distant as he answered all the questions Sloane needed for his report.

He went out of his way to pass the corner of Coldwater Lane on his route homewards after the supervisor had noticed his pallor and dismissed him at six o'clock in the morning.

The police had withdrawn and he thought it was strange to see the booth standing there as if nothing had ever happened —with not even a faint smell of smoke when he pulled open the door and looked inside.

He wondered how the affair had ended. Had the woman's courage lasted out? Had she managed to strike her last match without the shake of her hands bungling it? And if her courage and the match had not failed her, had she been able to run fast enough? He wanted to believe she had.

Then he wondered what he would say to his wife when he went home two hours early. She would be worried. He felt an urgent, unaccustomed need to speak to her. He turned up his collar against the morning mist and began to hurry.

—**Robert Presslie**

Our list of contributing authors is becoming more and more international (a deliberate policy of ours, in case you are interested), and this month we introduce our first New Zealand writer, Leonard Hildebrand, with an intriguing short short story.

HEADNOISES

By LEONARD HILDEBRAND

They were just noises in the night, like water burbling in pipes in the depths of the house, or the beating of his own heart.

When he first heard the noises, one sleepless night, he did not take them seriously. His fancy went to work on them, but his reason was coolly aware, all the time, that they were just noises in the night, like the ticking of the alarm clock, or water burbling in pipes somewhere in the depths of the house, or the creaking of boards. Noises, not noticed in the bustle of the day, but magnified in the silence of the night. Normal noises, all the same.

They were odd noises, these, rather like an interrupted whistle, or air blowing gently through a hollow tube. Lying

awake, shifting uncomfortably in his bed, he idly discovered that, unlike all the other faint plops and buzzes in the house, these noises had no outside origin. They were inside his head, part of himself, like the beating of his heart or the hissing of air in his lungs. Somewhere around his ears they were, these noises, and they were eerie, come to think of it, for they had no clear location. Disembodied noises.

When he yawned or moved his head on the pillow, he could not hear them, for though they were quite distinct, they were not loud.

He lay and listened to them in the darkness, and his fancy wandered. He held his breath to listen to them better and yes, there *was* a pattern in them, rather like—and he smiled—morse-signalling. Amused at his own fancy, he drifted off to sleep. Tomorrow he would have forgotten them, being no more than part of those cloudy, insubstantial imaginings of the night.

The next few days, sleeping soundly after the business of living, he did forget, and if there were any noises, he did not notice them.

The next sleepness night they nagged at his consciousness till he paid them attention. They were the same noises, like the sound of a hollow whistle in a staccato pattern. All at once the imaginings of that previous night came clearly back to his mind. He smiled again, and held his breath, and listened. They were, indeed, not unlike morse. If they were . . . Idly, without purpose, the logical consequence of the idea followed, and he toyed with the idea of taking them down on paper. His reason rebelled, this time. What nonsense ! Headnoises ! Nothing but some neural activity in the occipital lobes, or in the cochlea. Cochlear microphonics, or some such thing.

But the pattern . . . The tendency of the mind to organise random noises, of course. Like sitting in a train and saying, *I'm going home, I'm going home, I'm going home*, to the beat of the wheels bumping on the rails. Of course ! Besides, the signalling—the noises were very quick, one would have to be a skilled telegraphist to be able even to follow them.

He lay and listened to the noises, and while reason relaxed on the verge of sleep, his imagination wildly speculated about messages and content and origin. Then he slept.

The next time he heard them, or paid attention to them—for, he reflected, they might be there all the time, lost in the bustle of the day—a nasty thought sneaked in. It came to consciousness quickly and though it was thrown out equally fast, it left a disquietening mark. As he listened to the noises it nagged at his mind, and sometimes it bobbed up. Hearing things, it said. Headnoises. Hearing things. Madness.

But they hear *voices*, he thought. They hear voices, he affirmed, but he knew that headnoises, plain headnoises, were a common symptom in psychosis.

The nagging feeling stayed with him. Morse-signals, indeed. Hallucinations are common in psychosis, too, designed particularly to explain the symptoms. Headnoises were a symptom. Headnoises became electronic enemy beams, or the voices of the torturing thing on the ceiling. Headnoises became . . . morse-signals ?

Balderdash ! He was as sane as the next man. He had no persecution feelings.

As yet ?

Angrily he turned over in the bed, but the thought had been planted and grew like mushrooms spawn ; myriads of long-running connections under the surface, bursting through into daylight here and there. He was angry with himself, and angry with himself for being angry with himself, for it showed that, to some extent at least, he was taking his crazy thoughts seriously.

Crazy thoughts !

He cursed, leapt out of bed, got paper and pencil. He left the light on and lay with his eyes closed, listening, pencil ready. He was sweating now, and perversely his heart pounded in his ears, blotting out the noises—if there had ever been any. But the glimmer of irrational hope was killed as he listened, and his pencil made dots and dashes, then ran off the paper, for he had his eyes closed. If he attended to the paper, looked at it, he could not hear the noises. The writing would have to be quite mechanical. These noises were quick, too, he would have to be a lot faster.

He turned the page sideways, closed his eyes and tried again. Ah, this was better, though he skipped, first individual sounds, then whole pieces. But he would learn. Hallucinations, indeed. He would fix that idea.

He forced his mind back to business, pencil hovering, then leapt angrily out of bed, and plonked the alarm clock on the

floor at the far end of the other room. He went to slam the door, but thought better of it and closed it quietly.

Then he really went to work. His fingers were poised like runners before the starting-shot. His pencil raced over the page, gradually covering it with dots and dashes, all run together, and certainly no true representation, for even now he was too slow and would get behind and start to think about getting behind and all the time the noises would go on.

But it was something. It would be enough. Grimly he forced his mind back to the job and he worked, gaining more skill as he went on. When the page was full he lit his pipe and tried to relax, but he had to get up to look for a morse-code. The thing must be finished now, once and for all.

In bed again, he began the arduous translation of the symbols. He worked fast, just translating letter by letter. When he had done five long lines, he sighed and cast his eye back to see what he had got. And then there was triumph in his mind, for what he saw was pure gibberish.

'*sjlerrdavsjaelrradrosjraeddedssjarrvaarraelraedsjel*'

Then he looked again, and was not so sure. Whatever it was, it was not *pure* gibberish. He noted the recurrence of the same letters down the line, and the vowels, and his imagination jumped and said, yes, they *could* be words. Come off it, old boy. How about some sleep, now? With a little imagination one can see a meaning in anything; facts and figures in the cracks in plaster, and sheep and men and boats in the clouds in the sky. But the letters *did* recur, and he *had* skipped bits, big and small, in taking down. If they were words they would be bound to be distorted. And everything *was* run together.

Again he worked. It was a little easier now, for, while writing he began to relearn the code forgotten since the days he was a boy scout. When he had done more than half of the page, he looked back and shrugged again. The same story, which, he told himself, is to be expected of random cochlear microphonics or whatever it is. The pattern was the same. The same letters, more or less. Then he started, for there was an unmistakable, sudden change in the pattern halfway through. The letters were different, but again recurrent.

'*retttnsresunetnsrreseeltetunseelrsrreseleretuns*'

All part of the random pattern, he told himself sternly. A perfectly random pattern *would* change here and there.

But the excitement he felt had strong overtones of worry. He must finish the page.

He wrote quickly, only looking up the symbols he did not know at all, not bothering to check on the ones he thought he knew. He did half of what was left, stopped as something about the last line of writing caught his attention.

He read, wiped the sudden perspiration off his forehead and looked again, and his eyes grew stary and there was a dryness in his mouth that had nothing to do with his pipe.

He knew now, without doubt, what the gibberish above and below meant, in whatever languages it was written ; and he knew, also, that they *were* languages—terrestrial or extra-terrestrial—senders dead or alive. His mind cackled hysterically, and his staring eyes red and re-read.

' *orsouls*,' it said in his own bold handwriting,

' *savrolsoursoussaveorlsolsavoursoursourssaveoursols* '

He fell back, bathed in perspiration. The noises now seemed to hammer in his head, adding to the tumult of his thoughts. What, how, and who, who ?

He forced himself to be calm, but there was no denying the incessant piping in his head. The questions piled up, so did the doubt, despair.

With trembling hands he picked up his pencil again, listened, then opened his eyes and stared in unbelief. The noises, those noises, were gone ! In the silence of the night there was only the beating of his own heart, and the creaking of boards. Normal noises.

Certain relief flooded him like a tangible thing, while far away in the darkness, the doomed, alien spaceship exploded in a burst of incandescent light, its frantic plea for help unanswered.

—Leonard Hildebrand

ME, MYSELF AND I

Just how active can one's subconscious mind be stimulated? With five sixths of the brain still very much of a mystery there is plenty of scope for a fantasy writer to produce off-trail ideas centred around this theme. For instance, have you ever tried *to be the person you would like to be?*

By JOHN KIPPAX

I

Gordon Beale knew that life was empty; that was inevitable, for Beale was Beale and would not change; would not . . . could not.

Today had been as other days. He had returned to his empty house, eaten the cold meal prepared by Mrs. Tomlin before she left; and then what? In moments of great clarity, he told himself that he was fastidious. He made no friends. He wanted friends, but he was too sure of the kind that he wanted. Now the evening was before him again, like just another stone along the empty avenue that wound away to eternity.

He wanted his newspaper. He remembered that it was in his brief case. And as he went out into the hall for it he remembered about the book.

He came back into the sitting room with both paper and book. He had picked it up in the train from town. No one in the carriage had claimed it, and he had intended to hand it in as lost property, on arrival at his destination. The cover was bright red, with lettering in black and white. It announced firmly, *BE YOURSELF.*

Beale gave a mirthless chuckle for his thoughts. He let his eyes travel round the room in condemnation of the way he lived in this comfortable little prison, and in the prison of his own mind.

He said aloud, " It must not go on." Then he said, " But it will go on, you are what you are."

The clock ticked ; the electric fire gave a little surging hum and subsided.

Sometimes when he spoke like that, it was as though another voice was trying to answer him.

" Can you take thought—and add another cubit to your—outlook ?"

No voice replied—but the book seemed to stir under his hand.

He opened it. The title page bore no author's name and no publisher's details. The print was small but very clear, and the paper was thin strong stuff that turned with an easy caress. On the next page was printed a warning, in capital letters.

YOU WOULD NOT HAVE HAD THIS BOOK UNLESS IT HAD BEEN WORTHWHILE. WORK THROUGH IT WITHOUT LOOKING AHEAD. OBEY ! AND KEEP THE BOOK SAFELY.

" Would not have had this book—" Why didn't it say ' bought ' ? Beale's mind paid sharp attention to the niceties of the usage.

But he turned the page. The first chapter was called " *You as you think you are.*" He began to read : soon Beale's world had contracted to two brilliant points of light—his mind, and that of the unknown author.

" At birth," he read, " the possibilities of personality development are infinite. It is only conditioning above the instincts, which are the irreducible fundamental personality

that changes us into what we think we are, and what we really are . . ."

Beale wanted to quarrel with that : he felt that it should have read simply ' into what we are.' But the writer of the book seemed to have a confident and engaging way with him.

He read on, and the book found him vulnerable at all points, set him thinking along paths he thought were closed. Suppose, he thought, suppose that I had not been brought up by parents who were so rigid in their outlooks, though they were so kindly ; suppose that at home our ways had been less fastidious and formal ; what might I have become ? What ! ?

He sat forward suddenly. The mental picture of Gregg, brash, aggressive and too-cheerful, had appeared. Why ? What could Gregg have that he, Beale, wanted ?

And a jeering voice from the infinite recesses of his unknowable self answered ' June Daly.' For a moment he watched a picture of the dark, desirable girl float across his mind, then he returned to his previous line of thought. So, he wanted June Daly ; and he wanted sufficient confidence to get on with the rest of the office.

Beale read on.

" Fasten your mind upon two or three constant, unshakeable things in your past life, preferably your parents, and then begin a self examination in the following stages. One . . ."

Beale's life began to change. Though he seemed to be the same as ever, though he did his work at the office as efficiently as always, there was nevertheless a flicker of hope at the back of his mind now. Every day he looked forward to getting back home to read more of the book, to work out something fresh about himself, to forge the new Beale who would, who *must* emerge. The book of life, he thought. In the meantime, while he was learning, there was some stalling to be done. He had managed to keep out of the way of Gregg, had avoided getting into old Anderson's bad books, and he had even managed a few minutes of pleasant conversation with June Daly. But he had not yet the nerve or the knowledge to make the advances he so earnestly needed. The book must be obeyed ; its steps and exercises must be followed. With its help, he had now completed the picture of himself as he thought he was, as he really was, and with *thinking* as

the primary dynamic of personality, he was now struggling with the beginnings of the person he wanted to be.

He sat alone.

He sought again, for the picture, just a hint—a vague beginning, of the new Gordon Beale. There had been times before when he had been unable to keep up the effort. He strained. listening for the voice from within.

It *had* to come.

" Beale ! "

So faint, yet he heard it, clearly. Beale started, and listened.

" Beale ! "

How did he hear it ? *Where* did he hear it ?

" Beale ! Go on. Talk ! "

" Talk ? "

" Yes. To me. You are beginning."

" All right," said Beale, and his voice rustled and whispered round the room. " I'll talk to you."

" Say who I am Beale."

" You," said Beale slowly, " are the man I want to be."

" Correct. And you must make me." The voice was like Beale's own. " Yes, you have already begun, you know."

" How ? "

" Think of all the times you have sat in this room, alone. Whatever you saw on television or heard on the radio, you tried to relate to me, the man you are not, the man you could be, because that man is buried within you. God is not the only creator."

" That is blasphemy."

" Do you recognise it ? Don't look now, but I think that your rectitude is showing."

" Jeers are cheap."

" And useful, Beale, if they help you find yourself."

" Myself ? "

" I mean me, don't you see that ? "

" Yes." Beale struggled with the reasoning for a moment. " Yes, I do see."

For a moment Beale had a dizzy picture come to him : it was like, yet it was not exactly, a thing he had seen when a child—the picture of a photographer taking the photograph of a photographer taking the photograph of a photographer

. . . .

"Talk to me, Beale : put me in order, build me up."

"That's the first thing," said Beale, trying to make his voice sound light. "I find it difficult to talk to people."

"But not to me. I am you, remember. And give me a name."

Beale said, "Oh yes, a name. As the book says. Would Harry do? It has a friendly sound I think : that's important."

"Harry, all right. Choose your words now. You were going to say that perhaps it is your precision, your pedantic manner that puts people off, or at least makes them respect you without liking you."

"Yes—so if I want to remake myself—"

"To remake yourself, you have to make me. Talk now, and go on talking : anything from your early childhood to your sex frustrations. Shape will come in time. Remember my sympathy for you is infinite, for I *am* you."

Beale no longer wanted to question.

"I'll talk about my parents. Father worked in a bank, and he became manager when I was about eight. I remember how important that was to us. Mother and father drank a glass of wine—a thing that they very seldom did. I remember that father was very stern about mother giving me a sip of it—"

Time was no more. Beale talked and talked. He did not stop to see if Harry, the Harry who was himself, was listening. He went on and on : he told about his schooldays, and of the struggle it had been to send him to a school which his parents could not really afford. Then he recounted his view of the stiffish summer holidays at a 'select' little resort where no ice-cream men were allowed on the beach and no trippers' bus ever disturbed the neat vacuity of the promenade. He told of the Sunday church services, where he absorbed the patterns and totally missed the meanings. Beale was held, hypnotised almost, by the sound of his own voice, until the clock striking eleven brought him back to the reality of a room which was cold because the fire had long gone out.

He did not say 'goodnight' to Harry. He dared not trust himself to do it. He found that he could not believe in his own creation, and he feared for what he had revealed—to whom?—to what? The book reassured him that he had found his own way. And that night Beale slept soundly, and did not dream.

II

Three weeks had passed since Beale had first broken the bonds of his mind. The phrase was his, he thought, and he was proud of it. One moment though—was it Harry's? It was hard to tell which was Harry's and which was his, for every night their conversations, long, rational, exploratory, built up the picture of the Beale that was and the Beale that wanted to be—only the latter was named Harry.

Beale put a key in the lock, and entered his house. He had to talk to Harry at once. Harry had become a witty and charming person to talk to, and Beale was intensely glad of it. He found his meal waiting for him. He ate and talked.

"My dear Beale, don't spear that ham quite so viciously. Relax a little: anyone would think that you weren't on top of your job."

"Why do you say that?" Beale's voice was edgy.

"Now don't get alarmed: I *know* you can do it. I must know, eh? But the world judges by outward appearances, and you have become a little slack in that direction lately."

Beale slammed down his eating tools and went and looked in the mirror.

"I look perfectly presentable. What do you mean?"

"My dear fellow—" Harry was all cheerful protests. Beale sat down and went on with his meal. Harry was beginning to worry him. At the beginning of this, Harry had always agreed with him, consoled him and made him feel at ease. Now, things seemed different. The book said nothing about such an attitude.

"Don't you realise, Beale, that you, in an executive position, can influence for and against you just by the way you walk through the main office, by the way you pause and glance round, by the way you raise your head when the secretary comes in?"

Secretary—his secretary, not Anderson's. That was June Daly. Beale thought, he's right.

"Certainly I'm right. After all, my dear fellow, if I'm to help—"

Harry's chatter was meant to be soothing now, but a small fear gripped Beale. Then he knew what it was. Harry was speaking with tones and mannerisms that belonged to Gregg! Striving to be calm about it, he said so to Harry.

"You are confusing yourself," Harry said. "And therefore you are confusing me. Gregg is disliked, for well understood reasons, but that does not mean that he is all bad. You want a certain ease and charm of manner, and Gregg happens to have those qualities."

"*Does that mean that I am becoming like Gregg?*"

"Be reasonable. Relax, I say. How do you expect to make progress if you get worked up like that? You are very much the same physical type as Gregg, and you *could* have been your—er—charming self and at the same time possess those qualities in him which you admire. Yes, face it—which you admire."

Pause, as the ticking of the clock seemed to come like thunder and Beale wrestled with himself. At last, he agreed.

"Fine. That means we are really getting on now. Look over here, at this chair."

In the deep armchair at the other side of the fireplace there seemed to be a shape. He watched, and watched. Then there was a dim face. Clearer. His own face—*Harry's* face. Yes, his face, but different. It was his face, looking people—the world—squarely in the eye; his face with the jaw a fraction more resolute, the mouth a tiny bit firmer.

"Well?" asked Harry.

Beale could not answer. Harry chuckled.

"That's not bad, is it? Don't looked so strained man. You're succeeding. How do you feel?"

"B-better. But the book doesn't say—"

"Book? What book?"

"Oh, never mind." He remembered that the book was not much consulted these days.

"Beale—can you manage to feel pretty confident about me?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Then go out and have a beer at the 'Goat,' now."

"I don't know anyone there."

"That doesn't matter. It's a simple first exercise. Go on."

Finally Beale agreed. As he walked to the door, he turned to Harry, still fairly visible. Harry chuckled, and Beale went out, putting on his hat and coat. It was a fine night, the 'Goat' was only a quarter of a mile away. It looked a nice pub from the outside, but Beale had never been in it. It was his 'local' he supposed. Well, this was an improve-

ment, eh? He was going out for a drink. Breaking new ground.

The pub was barely a hundred yards off, when Beale noticed his steps were going slower and slower. Then he stopped. He didn't want to go—what was the point of it? And who was Harry to give orders? He felt resentful. No he would not, he would not go.

As he returned to the house, he heard a whisper of mocking laughter as he shut the door on the outside world. But what of the labrynthine *inside* world? Whatever the answer was really, the short reply was that at that moment he wanted none of it.

He would consult the book. He looked everywhere, but he could not find it. Where, where had he left it? He needed his copy of *Be Yourself* . . . or perhaps he just needed Harry.

June Daly, being Anderson's secretary, should have been in her office next to her boss, but here she was in the main office, and Gregg had found time to talk to her. How dare he? That was the trouble with Gregg: he always dare—and he got away with it. Beale walked through the clacking office up to the end desk where they stood. Now, watch that voice: cheerful, firm, an upward inflection . . . When he spoke, his voice was as it always was; he felt flat, and could not help showing it.

"Good morning, Miss Daly, good morning Gregg." Damn your smooth face.

June wished him good morning. Her voice had that doubtful sound as it often had when she spoke to him—as though she didn't know how to take him.

"Morning Beale, old boy. You look a bit peaked. Been out on the tiles? They say we old cats howl best, eh?" Gregg gave his fulsome laugh, and two or three typists looked up and smiled, and June tittered. Beale held down the fist that he would have loved to have smashed into Gregg's face. How could June laugh at this oaf's inanities?

"I thought we were about the same age," said Beale evenly.

"That's right," chuckled Gregg. "Forty here we come. Fancy being twenty, eh, like this young lady here! Makes me feel young just to look at her."

June giggled again. Desperately Beale found himself wishing that he could evoke a similar response to something

—anything—witty. But all he could say was the stiff question, " Is Mr. Anderson in, Miss Daly ?"

" Yes. He's in conference."

" I see," said Beale. So that was why she had time to talk to Gregg. He wished that he could find some excuse to get rid of the fellow so that he, Beale, could talk to June.

" I've put those three accounts on your desk," he said to Gregg. " Dewey's, Fall's and Moskowitz's. Your recommendation has to go in with mine."

" What will you say about them ?"

Beale said stiffly, " You know that we have to report independently. Mr. Anderson will want your reports as soon as he is free this morning."

Gregg grumbled. " Oh, well, I suppose I'd better see to them." He patted June's arm. " 'Bye June." He gave a careless nod, and went. That smile, such an easy smile. Beale tried it as he faced June : God, how lovely she looked ! She always dressed so plainly, yet the simplicity of her dress only made her the more radiant, a dark jewel of a woman.

" Miss Daly, where do you lunch ?" Now, he thought, do you hear this Harry ?

" At the ' Tuns,' just round the corner."

" Oh, yes. Could we—that is, would you—may we have lunch together today ?" Surely, he told himself, I am smiling pleasantly now, surely I look as relaxed as . . . damn Gregg ! He called her June !

" I'd love to—Mr. Beale." Her lips curved in a smile that was wholly, deliciously enchanting. " Shall I look in at about one to see if you're free ?"

" I shall be," he answered gaily ? Yes, gaily. A burst of happiness took him : perhaps he had no need of Harry after all. Or was it Harry who was making him do this ?

He was in a better frame of mind that morning than he had been for weeks. He even hummed a little as he worked. Just after the junior typist brought him a cup of coffee, Gregg lounged in, cup in hand, and seated himself on Beale's desk.

" Hallo, old boy."

" Hallo," said Beale, looking past Gregg.

" Er . . . about those reports . . ."

Ah, thought Beale, this is where he gets caught, if he's not very careful. We have to assemble the evidence and then let Anderson know, eh ? Yes, and Gregg is trying to pump me.

Cunning brute ! He knows that the time for the appointment of the assistant director is near, and he knows that it is on this sort of thing that we shall be judged. And by implication, Gregg was recognising Beale's superior knowledge. Gregg tried a few questions, and Beale evaded giving him any answer that would be of any use.

" Oh well, anyway," said Gregg, " I shall recommend that we continue with them. I think that a bit more rope will pay off in the long run."

Beale gave a non-committal grunt and kept his face straight, but secretly he exulted that Gregg had so decided. He knew that Anderson would agree with Beale's decision, and that was important. Beale could see himself in that new position . . .

At a quarter to one Anderson sent for him, told him to sit down. He was a blunt greying man with a heavy jowly face and thick eyebrows.

" I see that you have recommended that we deal no more with these three firms."

" Yes, sir. I think it would be wiser if—"

" Then I think you must be a damned fool."

Beale felt his stomach contract.

" Sir, I—"

" Don't you read the stuff that's sent you ? There was a report on their transactions put into your tray three days ago, and a confidential ! The smallest exercise of your foresight would have shown you—"

Now an awful hardness settled on his heart and mind. He had been feeling so depressed that he had not even seen the reports ! He stared dumbly at Anderson.

" I agree with Gregg," said his chief. " It seems clear that we should continue to do business with these firms." When Beale did not answer, he rapped, " What's the matter with you, Beale ? "

Beale rose shakily. He whispered, " Excuse me, sir." He stumbled out of the office out of the building. He would walk, he must walk. In the park he wandered, his mind in a frightened turmoil. At half past one he remembered that he was supposed to be taking June Daly out to lunch. It seemed that he did not need her ; what he needed was the real confidence to remould his life—what he needed was Harry.

III

He was home. Just inside the door, he leaned on the post and uttered a great sigh.

From inside the sitting room Harry said, "Yes, I know."

Beale took off his hat and coat, walked into the sitting room. He said, in a tone of unsurprised weariness, "You know?"

"How can I help knowing? It was tough, but no more than you might have expected. You've had your mind on that flighty piece of goods far too much, for one thing."

Harry was clearly visible, and somehow Beale felt comforted. The face was as he had seen it before, only sharper in detail now. Harry had on a blue pin-stripe suit that became him. Of course it did; it was like one of Beale's suits. Beale thought he's my height, my colouring—he *is* me. I must always remember that.

"Did you call June Daly flighty?" asked Beale.

"I did. She's a main chancer all right. Can't you tell? Or don't you want to tell?"

"I love her," whispered Beale.

"Do you? Is it love, or something simpler? Why don't you eat? You've had a hell of a day."

Beale postponed the argument in favour of food, though he hardly noticed what he ate. There *was* something different about Harry. He was smarter, sprucer. His lines in Beale's mind—where else could they exist?—were so much more definite than before, and there was a positive air about him, an intimation of a rapidly developing personality. He sat and watched Beale with a smile that was and was not Beale's.

"You think I'm cynical, don't you?"

"Yes," said Beale.

"It's one of the cheapest armours a man can put on, and one of the most effective. Most of the events of everyday life serve to strengthen it. You ask Gregg."

"I'm damned if I'll ask Gregg for anything!"

Beale spoke hotly, rising a bit out of his seat. But Harry, now an almost tangible entity, sat unmoved. Beale thought, he belongs now, he really belongs.

"To beat Gregg," said Harry persuasively, "you have to become just a little like him—or I shall have to. You must. Can a submarine fight a tank?"

"Shut up!"

" Not taking my advice, eh ? You should have. If you had done to the ' Goat ' when I told you, you might have met Anstruther, the neighbour to whom you've never spoken yet, though he's walked behind or in front of you to the train so often. It might have been a good start. All right, you think that you shouldn't—or I shouldn't—become like Gregg. What's your answer then ?"

Beale did not reply. He had finished and was reading a note he had discovered on the end of the table.

' Dear Mr. B.: Sorry there was no blue cheese in the pantry tonight but I will get you some for tomorrow night, I was a bit rushed so please excuse, Yrs. Mrs. Tomlin.'

" But—" Beale stared at the table. " I had some blue cheese. There it is, under the cover."

" Yes," said Harry, " I went out and bought some."

Very slowly, Beale got up.

" You didn't," he said, stressing every word. " You could not have done. I remember now—I bought it at the corner shop near the station. I remember now."

" I bought it," said Harry. " Of course, you might have known about there being no blue cheese—if I knew, then you knew—"

" Take that damned smirk off your face !" Beale shouted. " You couldn't have done, you couldn't ! I tell you I bought it—I bought it !" He took off the cover and stared at the cheese. " I remember—I remember," he told himself. " I knew that she'd forget it again so I bought some as I came in—"

For a time he stood leaning over the table, his arms stiff, staring at the cheese, constructing the incident of buying it in his mind. He began to speak to Harry.

" You see—"

He looked up then, and Harry was gone.

He cleared away the things, washed up and put them away, glaring abstractedly the while. No sound of Harry. Of course there was no sound of Harry. What did he want with Harry?

He came back into the sitting room and sat down. Harry could have been right. Main chancer he called her. But whatever she was, Beale knew that June Daly's attraction was very strong for him. He wanted success, and he wanted her ; and how could he get both without Harry's help ?

" Harry ?" he said, softly.

No answer.

He thought that he would look for the book again. He went through the bookcase and then into several cupboards but it was not to be found.

" Harry ? "

Silence.

He closed his eyes, and carefully he began to think. He concentrated all his thoughts upon Harry. At last there came a distant echo of Harry's voice, aggrieved, petulant.

" You want to grow up, Beale."

" Yes—I know. I'm sorry I doubted you."

" You should be. If you doubt me, you doubt yourself, and then where will you be ?"

" That's right," said Beale.

" You won't act like that again ?"

" I promise I won't."

" Very well." Then, slowly, as though reluctant to quit the shades of Beale's mind, Harry was there again.

" I was lonely," said Beale. " Can you wonder ? Just look at today."

" Life is what you make it." Harry's mouth twisted in a sardonic grin as he mouthed the platitude.

" I admit that I'm neurotic," said Beale. " I admit that I'm desperate for—"

" Company ? So—it might as well be me, eh ? All right, don't try to apologise. I'm just a manifestation of your neurosis. I suppose I might as well be allowed to exist on those terms. Though if you're neurotic, I might be too."

" Oh, no, no !" cried Beale. " I shall see that you're not."

" Thanks," said Harry. " I'd be grateful if you'd try to get me really integrated. But, it's difficult with you the way you are—tired, and so on. What sort of a job can you be expected to do like that ? You need a rest."

" With the assistant directorship to be decided ?"

Harry did not answer immediately. He got up and walked about, fingered the glass ornaments on the low mantelpiece, gazed long at the Van Gogh reproductions, drummed on the glass pane of the television.

At length he said, diffidently, " You *could* have a rest, you know."

To Beale, now, there was no doubt about the reality of Harry ; his firmer, more resolute self. Himself. *Be Yourself.*

"How?"

"Simple. Let me go to the office for you."

Harry's smile was thin, yet confident. Beale was hit by the simple enormity of the suggestion.

"Let *you* go?"

"Certainly. Would anyone be the wiser? I'm the man you want to be, remember? Or at least, I'm not very far from it. You stay here and take it easy. You will know everything that goes on, because you are me. Well?"

Beale thought about it, and then the notion came to him that the best thing was not to think about it—the thing to do was to accept.

"What have you got to lose, Beale?"

Beale did not know if he was a man finding himself or losing himself. But he nodded.

"As you say."

"Then let me stay around overnight, eh? You don't want the trouble of building me up again in the morning. I'll manage down here tonight, but tomorrow perhaps, as you're here, you'll consider getting the bed in the other room ready. I'm the one who'll have the heavy day. you know. Agreed?"

Beale agreed.

IV

After breakfast, Beale watched Harry go down the road. As he saw the confident stride he felt quite happy, and then he turned to the business of setting up the bed. At any time he could be with Harry, and see through him what was going on. Even now he could see that Harry had turned the corner, and that he intended to buy a paper before he got into the station yard. A slight variation that: Beale always bought one from the station bookstall.

Then he remembered Mrs. Tomlin. Should he put her off? She might want to start fussing around him if she found him at home. He worried about that until a small boy came and delivered a note saying that she would not be coming in today because she was ill, and she hoped that Mr. B. would be able to manage and there was some nice tinned stuff and she'd put everything right as soon as she got back. Beale took down blankets and sheets and a pillowcase to air, and set an electric heater in the spare bedroom. Not once did he doubt the

sense of what he was doing. He stopped in his work to see Harry on the station, waiting for the train. He was not standing with his head in his paper as Beale did. He was talking to old Anstruther ! That, more than anything else showed Beale how far he had come with the creation of Harry.

As he did the household chores, a glow began to steal over him as he kept watch on Harry. He even began to hum a little tune. Harry was keeping his word, and throwing in one or two demonstrations for good measure. Harry got out at Waterloo and parted company with Anstruther. He gave an admiring glance at the face and legs of a pretty girl and his twitch of an eyebrow, so simple, but done just right, brought a smile to her face as she hurried past. Harry tilted his severe bowler hat just a fraction and the slightly rakish effect pleased Beale.

Harry was early. He swept through the main office, distributed jaunty and confident ' good mornings ' to the girls and clerks who were there already, and received in reply some cheerful if slightly mystified greetings.

Then he settled down to work. He dictated to his secretary in a crisp style that with Beale would have been just that bit slower, and then he turned his attention to some estimates. He did not accept the figures as they stood, but to satisfy himself he worked them out all over again. He was halfway through when Gregg walked in.

" Hello, old boy. I say, that was a bit of a clanger you dropped yesterday, wasn't it ? I mean—"

" Did you knock before you entered, and did you hear me say ' come in ' ?"

Gregg was taken aback. The tone, the words were not . . .

He stammered, " No."

" Then get out, until you hear it."

" Look here—" bristled Gregg.

" You heard me. I'm busy. Too many times you come lounging in here in the course of a day. Just because I made a mistake yesterday doesn't mean you can patroniseme." Harry was looking at Gregg with a severe expression. "You're not all that smart yourself. And who told you I made a mistake ? Have you been pumping my secretary ? Or did you come in here when I was out ?" Gregg staggered back, but Harry went on. " I warn you, Gregg, you'd better keep your nose out of my business and your hands off the girls in office hours."

That was a shot in the dark, but the ready purpling of Gregg's face showed that it went home. Beale hugged himself with delight.

"Why, you—" began Gregg, and Harry rose, and said in a hard, menacing voice, "There's the door."

Gregg backed towards it.

"And don't slam it as you go," said Harry.

Gregg left.

After half an hour's work, during which time Beale could not have separated himself from Harry if he had wanted to, Harry had discovered three mistakes which could in sum have cost the firm about two thousand pounds. He gathered up the documents, went to Anderson's door and knocked.

"Come in." Anderson glowered when he saw who it was. Beale would have entered humbly, with protestations about his inadequacies of the previous day. Harry brushed them aside by inference and went straight to the point.

"I've been right through these estimates, sir, and I find that—"

In ten minutes he had captured the castle. Anderson was beaming.

"That's excellent, Beale. Very pleased to know that you are so zealous. I seem to have misjudged you. You must have very wide knowledge to be able to run those figures to earth."

I have, thought Beale, I have, but until Harry did it I never . . .

"Well, this is first rate. Thank you, Beale. I shan't forget this."

"A pleasure, sir." With a confident smile, plus just the right amount of deference, Harry withdrew. He walked out through the main office, lit a cigarette and looked down the well of the stairs. He addressed himself to Beale.

"What about that?"

"Wonderful," said Beale. "But don't overdo it."

June Daly was coming up the stairs. The broken dinner engagement! What could Harry do?

She saw him as she turned the length of stair.

"Hallo," said Harry, and smiled. "Did you get the flowers, June?"

She said in surprise. "No. No flowers arrived."

Harry looked puzzled in a very convincing manner.

" Eighteen Fulford Mansions ?"

" No." If she had meant to be angry when she first saw him, there was no anger now. Harry's smile begot a smile on her face. " Eighty Fulford Mansions is where I live."

He drove his fist into his palm.

" Oh, I'm a fool, June ! There's someone with a beautiful bouquet of flowers that should have come to you. I sent them to say that I was sorry for missing our lunch date. How about lunch today for sure ? You can't say no."

She came up another step. She was still trying to evaluate this new Gordon Beale who stood before her.

" All right then : at a quarter to one ?"

She reached the top step, a high heel skidded and she slipped, but in a flash Harry had his arm round her waist, and saved her from falling. It brought them very close together. In a sweeping movement Harry brushed his lips against her hair. Then he set her on her feet. Beale thrilled—here was achievement ! Harry *was* indeed the man Beale wanted to be.

She gasped, " Oh, thank you."

" Twelve forty-five." He smiled broadly. " The clock can't run round fast enough."

The meal had been a huge success. Harry had talked and had charmed her with just the right mixture of deference and pushfulness. He had a bantering, subtly complimentary kind of conversation and it exerted a hold upon June Daly. Fascination might not have been too strong a word.

And then, from Beale's point of view, Harry overstepped the mark. It was when they were ready to go.

She said, " And thank you for a lovely lunch Mr. Beale."

" Mister ? Call me Harry—June."

Beale at home, was filled with rage. He dare not communicate with Harry in her presence, but as soon as they were alone back at the office, Beale told him off.

" *You should have said Gordon* !"

Harry shrugged.

" All right, so I should have. I'm sorry, it slipped out. But what's the difference ?"

Beale insisted, " You should have said Gordon." He fumed.

" Oh, come off it. I came here to stand in for you, Beale. Now, what do you think of this morning's work ?"

There, of course, Harry had him.

"I'm very grateful. You've done a good job."

"You've done a good job on me. I feel very complete. Now, if you want me to carry on, I should try to fill in my background a bit clearer, if I were you." He laughed. "How do you like that?—if I were you? Anyway, I must get on with the work. See you at home at about half past six, eh?"

And for the rest of the afternoon, Gordon Beale watched Harry wade into some arrears. After a time, Beale thought that he would like to have a sleep. He really did feel tired, and he had every reason to take things easy for a day or so. Why, with things so well organised at the office, there was no reason why Harry should not go there again, for a few days, until Gordon Beale, confident in the knowledge that he had gained of *himself*, came along to take up the good work and the workeable personality that he had created. In the meantime, a nap was ideal.

When Harry made the suggestion, Beale was willing.

"I don't mind at all. Mrs. Tomlin's still away, so I can just let her know that I shan't want her for a bit, and I'll stay here and potter around and really recuperate. I shall like being at home and watching you do all the things for me. It will pay me to do it."

"Glad you see it like that." Harry was expansive.

"And, of course, I know all the time what you're doing."

"That's right," replied Harry. He rose from the table. "Shall we wash up together?"

They did so and chatted amicably throughout the operation until Beale remarked, "I thought that you were a little free in your manner to Miss Daly—June."

Harry slammed down a plate.

"You did? Now look here, I will not have my methods criticised. If I get results, that should be enough. You think they want Sir Galahad, don't you? Well, unless they're as badly adjusted as you are they don't. A mixture of John D. Rockefeller and August the Strong is about right for most of 'em. Bring your ideals down to life size. Now, no arguments. You have to pay for everything, and readjustment is the price that *you* pay. And another thing, do you know what you've been missing by not talking to Anstruther? He's on the stock exchange—and chatty. He's got contacts all over. Give me a bit of time to talk to him and there'll be some market tips coming in; you watch."

"You didn't talk to him about that this morning," said Beale.

"No, it was when we were coming back tonight."

"I must have been asleep," said Beale. "I didn't know."

"There you are you see. Opportunity right under your nose." From a harsh tone, Harry became consoling. "Aren't you glad of me now?"

"Oh, of course I am."

"Then this time, get smartened up and go along to the smoke room of the 'Goat.' You'll meet Anstruther there. He plays darts, he says. Go and stand him a drink and a couple of games, and see that you lose. You've got to try out your new wings sometime."

And this time, Beale found that he could do it. He spent a pleasant evening with Anstruther, and they stayed until closing time. His house was on a bend in the road, and as he and Anstruther walked along, the older man pointed to the back bedroom window.

"Looks as though you left a light on, Beale."

"Oh, that will be—" began Beale, and then he said, "So I have. How very careless of me."

He bade Anstruther goodnight at his gate, and went in. He went upstairs, knocked at Harry's door. Harry was in bed reading.

Harry said, "You should be more careful about lights. He might have thought you had a—friend up here."

Beale looked at Harry for a few seconds before deciding that Harry was indulging in deadpan humour. He smiled and said goodnight.

V

In the days that followed Harry, and therefore Beale, was chiefly interested in the wooing of June Daly. Though Beale refused to adopt entirely the cynical outlook that was part of Harry's armour of conquest, he had to admit that the affair was going as well as he could have wished. It seemed reasonable, thought Beale, that as soon as June said she loved him (Harry) then he (Beale) could dispense with the front he had created and become Harry entirely. Perhaps it was not a bad thing that June knew *Harry* Beale.

In business matters, there was little doubt that Gregg was out of the running for the assistant directorship. Beale

chuckled at the way in which Gregg had been so completely discountenanced. You had to fight these people with their own weapons. Meanwhile, he felt sleepy ; a nap would do fine. He hoped that he would dream about June, and how beautiful she looked when Harry—yes, Harry had taken her out to dinner that evening. A nap . . .

He did not know how long he slept, and he did not know if he had dreamed the thoughts with which he now arose, or if they had been rational, waking, the results of . . . Harry was looking at him. Beale glanced at the clock.

" Half past ten," said Beale.

" That's right," said Harry carelessly. " We went out to a cinema—that little continental place, and had a coffee and a sandwich afterwards."

He slung off his hat and coat carelessly, as Beale sat up.

" But I didn't know," said Beale slowly.

" If you were asleep, how could you ?"

" Now, why," growled Beale, " should I go to sleep and miss that ?"

" You're your own master."

Something in the tone irritated Beale.

" *And* yours," he snapped.

" Oh, yes, and mine."

" Don't sneer when you speak to me."

Harry's expression hardened.

" Beale, don't go looking for trouble, please."

Beale arose and looked with querulous anger at the other.

" *Looking for trouble* ? Pot calling kettle. Harry, I don't think you're playing fair with me."

Harry sighed.

" This bother again ? I thought we'd grown out of it. Why should there be these difficulties in the relationship of ours—could anything be more intimate ? If you've been to sleep, all right, that's your affair. You've made a good enough job of me to carry on for you."

Beale relaxed somewhat, but he was not happy.

" There's something else Harry. I was thinking, of the way these days have gone by. I began to try to work out how long it was since I went to the office. *I didn't know.*"

" We can soon find out—"

" That's your doing, that I didn't know." Beale raised his voice again. " I don't like it. I don't like it at all."

Harry said, quietly and evenly, " Well ? "

Beale faced Harry resolutely. "It's been a long time since you were *not* : I think I should get rid of you for a while."

"Now, be reasonable. You know that it will take you a long time to—"

"What else have you been doing that I didn't know about?"

"Beale, to build me up again would mean a great effort—"

"No !" Beale was breathing heavily. "It's time I took command. Harry, I don't want you."

"Until tomorrow morning."

"*You are the man I created from my own mind, to take my place and to be the man I wanted to be. But that's all you are, do you hear? NOW GO !*"

Beale glared, then shouted again. "GO !"

And Harry remained where he was. For a few seconds it seemed that his outlines wavered, and then he returned, steady as ever, steady as—life.

Beale gasped. "You're defying me ! Go, GO !"

Harry said, with grim determination, "Go on then, get rid of me if you can ! Try, try ! You know the answer? You can't ! You need me too much, that's why I remain ! If you were *really* convinced that you could carry on from the point we've reached now, you'd dismiss me like a puff of smoke !"

Beale sank into a chair, groaned, covered his face with his hands. The comfortable house, this comfortable room, were like a prison. He looked up at Harry, expecting anger, but he saw only kindness.

"Don't you see? I *must* carry on." It was as though Harry was sorry for the trouble, as though he were admitting it was his fault. He said persuasively, "Now, what is there to be frightened of? You are me, remember? To the ordinary world, there is only one of us, and that one is doing better than ever he has done. I'll tell you what. You get a good night's rest, and you go to the office tomorrow, that's Tuesday, and see how you get on. You'll do fine, I'm sure, if you take care. What about that, Beale?"

Beale's eyes shone. "You think I could?"

"I'm sure you could. Now, sleep, and off to the office in the morning, eh?"

Beale found a smile. "Yes," he said, "I'll do that."

Beale did not know how long he had been in bed, but he was sure that it was a noise on the stair that woke him. He

switched on the bedroom light and got out of bed and went to his door. He saw Harry just going to bed.

" What's the time ?" he asked.

Harry turned with a start and said, " Oh, about two in the morning, I think."

Beale felt a little dazed and heavy headed. Questions bubbled up in his mind and then subsided. He was very sleepy.

" Good night," said Harry. Beale went back to bed.

In the morning they parted, Harry staying at home, Beale off to the station. Down the road he fell in with Anstruther.

" Morning, Beale. Did you see Jameson ?"

" Er—Jameson ?"

" The stockbroker."

Beale realised that he would have to stall.

" Oh, er—yes. Very satisfactory."

" Good, I knew that it would be. Wish I'd begun to talk to you before, Beale."

With the mystery weighing heavily upon him, he talked guardedly of other things. Now why didn't he know about this Jameson ? Here was something else that had been kept from him.

They chatted until they arrived at the platform, and Beale excused himself as he went to get his paper from the bookstall. He glanced at the back page, and noticed that the football betting forecasts were in. Curious—he thought that this item always appeared on Wednesdays. He looked at the front page, and he shivered suddenly. The date on it was Wednesday the eighteenth.

Beale stood as though struck by a paralysing blow. The chatter of the waiting travellers seemed distant, unreal. He had gone to bed on Monday night, and here he was, waiting to go into town on a Wednesday morning. Where was Tuesday ? What had happened to *his* Tuesday ?

He saw Anstruther threading through the press of people, looking for him. He dodged away, waited sweating in an obscure corner until the train arrived. Then he found a spare carriage in which no one knew him. Spasms of icy fear gripped him. When Beale got home that evening, Harry was for dematerialisation, complete and final, a relegation back into nothing ! He had gone too far : Beale thought of those times when he, Beale, had slept, when Harry had been at the office. He must have been crazy to have let Harry out of his mind for a moment. Out of his mind ? . . .

A fresh terrible thought struck him. Had he slept all through Tuesday? Had he? It was not an impossible explanation, for all others led to madness, and madness Beale rejected, would finally reject when Harry was gone for ever. That must be it : Harry was the cause of those sleep periods ; who else? What else? Why, when he had awakened during the night, and had heard Harry coming in at 2 a.m., it must have been 2 a.m. Wednesday morning, not Tuesday !

Gradually Beale became calmer, and as he approached the office building he knew that whatever difficulties and doubts perplexed him at the moment, he must not lose any of the ground made—which Harry had made—no which *he* had made. With an effort he breezed through the main office, calling good morning and receiving greetings which seemed to show that no one saw anything different about Mr. Beale. What was he worrying about? There *was* no difference.

He went through his correspondence, then turned to some financial statements. Time passed smoothly. He wondered about June, and thought that no doubt she would look in when she was free of old Anderson's work.

The phone rang.

" Mr. Beale?" A woman's voice.

" Beale speaking."

" Darling !"

Beale gripped the phone and like a fool said, " Who is that? "

There was a little gasp from the other end, and then a chuckle.

" Well, well ! Do all the girls ring you up like this, my sweet?"

" Oh, no, but—"

" You get home all right, sweetheart?"

" Oh, yes, thanks."

" We mustn't be as late as that again."

" No, indeed." Did his voice sound warm and affectionate? Why didn't it?

She asked, " You don't regret it, darling?"

" No, no, of course I don't." What should he do? Play her for time, go and see her? Certainly they must not carry on a conversation like this over the firm's phone.

" Can you get out for a coffee, June, dear?"

" Yes, I think so. Mr. Anderson's out from now until eleven. Will the *Scala* do?"

" Yes. In about ten minutes."

" See you. 'Bye, darling."

Beale replaced the phone slowly. That explained why Harry was so late last night—this morning. And Beale knew no details of their evening together. Evening? Why bother about that? What *had* Harry been doing in the daytime, yesterday, the day that Beale had lost?

Five minutes searching the files revealed that it had been a dull ordinary day. None of the copies signed ' G. Beale ' in writing that was just that bit firmer than Beale's usual hand contained anything of which Beale would not have approved. Anything else then? Nothing—and the only thing which puzzled him was a note on the memo pad which said ' Bonds 275 - 298 incl.' He glanced at his watch : June —his June, would be waiting.

VI

When he entered the coffee bar he saw that she was at a table near the window. She rose when she saw him, and extended both her hands. He took them in his, gazed boldly at her.

" Harry, darling," she murmured, and the name cut him like the lash of a whip. She saw at once. " What's the matter?

" Oh, nothing really. Just a twinge of headache."

" Dearest, I'm sorry : I have some aspirins—"

" No, don't bother." He ordered coffee. They held hands over the table. Whatever it was that June Daly and Harry had shared the previous evening, she was obviously in a melting mood this morning. The possibilities seemed strictly limited to Beale : *and he hadn't known* !

" Darling," she said, " you don't think any the worse of me ?"

" No, of course not. How could anything come between us now ?" He summoned his courage and asked, " Tell me, did I remember to propose—er—properly ?"

Her eyes danced, and the chuckle grew to a happy laugh.

" Harry, my love ! How much did you drink ? What about this ?"

She held up her hand. On the third finger flashed a ring.

He knew what he must do : with terror clawing at him, with memories of Harry's face that was so like his own and

yet was so like Gregg's, with the knowledge of the awful struggle for power that was to come, he laughed.

"I'm a fool. Darling June, will you mind marrying a fool?"

"No," she whispered tenderly, "I shall adore it."

And then there seemed to be no more need for words. The coffees grew cold as they held hands and looked at each other. Desperate as he felt, Beale nevertheless knew that he was managing to mask his feelings, and that knowledge was a vast comfort to him.

"The time, darling!" she rose suddenly. "I must fly Mr. Anderson will be back." She came closer to him and whispered, "Tonight? Again?"

Beale strove with all his might to appear at ease, and succeeded.

"Of course, my dear."

She squeezed his hand, gave him a final adoring glance, and was gone. Beale wished that he could have hurried out with her, but he did not have the courage. He paid for the drinks, and went slowly out. A terror clutched at him, seeming to drag at his every movement.

He reached his office by the backstairs, not wanting to go through the main office—the pretence would have been more than he could manage. In his own office, he sat with his head in his hands, and then he sat staring at the telephone.

The telephone.

Suppose he were to ring up Harry and ask him—!

Suppose he were to ring up—

Suppose—

With the number of his own house jumping in his brain, he reached out a hand. Then the office intercom buzzed.

"Beale here."

"Ah, Beale," said Mr. Anderson. "Will you please bring me those bonds from safe number four? Two seven five to two nine eight are the references. Within the next ten minutes please."

"Yes, sir." He broke contact. Routine, just routine. Thank God for routine. He took the right key, slid back a panel in the wall, and opened the safe. With his mind whirling around other things, he gazed uncomprehending at the contents. But—no bonds.

Feverishly, he tumbled out the other things.

No bonds.

He remembered the pearl necklace that June had been wearing . . .

Softly within his mind, like the opening of a blossom cankered in the bud, the next part of the pattern showed itself and the door to a nightmare of infinite dimension opened for Gordon Beale. Now he knew how Harry had entertained June, how he had bought her expensive presents. Harry—the man Beale had wanted to be ! It was the cream of insanity. That Beale could do such a thing ! But he *had* done it ! Harry was Beale—yet Beale had not known.

Beale understood that explanations would not do. If he were to avoid capture he must go now, this minute. Yes, he must go . . .

Now he was walking out down the stairs into the street. He must walk and think and hide, until he had got this right in his mind ; no good expecting anyone to understand about Harry. In the meantime keep walking, keep hiding, for there is no safety at home ; as soon as they find no bonds, and no Beale, his home would be the first place they'd look. They wouldn't find anything—*not even Harry* ! Ha, that was rich : only Beale could find Harry, only Beale could put him to death. And Beale would do that, as soon as he dared go home as soon as he dared, as soon as he dared . . .

He had no count of time. He had meals in strange restaurants and cheap places, and he slept in hotel beds. Some he could remember, others not. But keep on the move, Beale, you need a new shirt, yes sir, fifteen neck and keep going Beale . . .

" Are you all right, guvnor ?"

A wizened little man was peering anxiously at him.

" What ?" asked Beale.

" You was swaying about and muttering something awful," said the little man.

" Yes, I'm all right," said Beale sharply.

" No offence," said the other, and wandered off.

Beale did not know where he was ; he did not care. What day was it ? They had not caught him yet . . .

Then he made up his mind. He would show himself that he was really master of his fate after all. He went into a telephone box : he dialled the number of his house.

Click, whirr, buzz, buzzing of the phone ringing. What *could* there be at the other end?

He waited. The buzzing stopped.

"Hallo?"

Beale made a whinnying noise, then got himself under control. Striving to keep his voice steady, he said "This is Gordon Beale here."

A pause.

"You again!" said Harry.

"H-have the police been round? I know all about you now, you swine," Beale told himself. "You'll get what's coming . . .

"They've been. Found nothing of course. House deserted they think. We're all right here, Beale."

Beale felt that he was going to scream, but only a hoarse whistling sound came from his throat.

"*What do you mean? WE?*"

"Being like you, Beale, I'm neurotic. But I found that book of yours called *Be Yourself*. It taught me a lot, put me right. I took its advice, and I got a friend for myself. Nice quiet chap. I've called him Sam. Just the sort of fellow I'd like to be . . ."

Police constable Hollis, on duty at the corner, was suddenly hailed by the approaching sergeant.

"Hey Hollis, look behind you!" He ran up. "Man just fallen out of that telephone box!"

Hollis and the sergeant went to the figure which lay face downward, and turned it over. They looked into the blank staring eyes of a man who had been Gordon Beale, but who was now nobody—nobody at all.

—**John Kippax**

There is always more than one way of converting people (or aliens) to a definite way of thinking, but the most specific methods are either emotional or intellectual. The method used in this story, however, while extremely effective is not recommended for general use.

THE CONVERTS

By BERTRAM CHANDLER

Often that voyage Captain Henry thought of the monarch who, exasperated to the limit of endurance, uttered the fateful words. "Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?" The old English king, thought the shipmaster, was lucky—he had had only one priest to contend with. Captain Henry had no less than two, and both of them were seated at his table. Normally Captain Henry looked forward to his meals, even when they consisted, in the main, of the processed algae and yeasts that were the staple diet in a star ship of the Delta class. It was the company and the conversation that were the sauce for even the most insipid food—but theological arguments were not the Captain's idea of a fitting sauce.

It would not have been so bad, he thought, if the two missionaries had been members of the same denomination—then, perhaps, they would not have argued and would have given the others at the table a chance to get a word in edgewise. But one of them, Pastor Jones, was a member of the Evangelical Foundation and the other, the Reverend Mr. Courtney, had been ordained by the High Anglican Union. It was on the question of conversion that they could not see eye to eye. Jones, the fiery Evangelical, believed in the approach through

the emotions ; Courtney not only believed that the only permissable approach was through the mind but that emotional conversion was not—although he did not phrase it in quite that way—worth a damn.

Captain Henry was, like most spacemen, religious, although not in the conventional sense. Like the majority of his profession he did not like missionaries. He had seen too many worlds ruined by well meaning zealots who had foisted their own codes of ethics upon peoples who already had their own religions that had grown up with them and that were altogether suited to all the conditions obtaining upon their planets. There were worlds on which all adults who had reached a certain age had been put quietly and painlessly to death, and the interference with this custom had resulted in economic chaos and wide-spread misery. There were worlds on which the consumption of alcoholic liquors had been, by Terran standards, staggering—and the conversion of the natives by various sects preaching and practicing total abstinence had led to heavy death rolls from the diseases kept at bay by alcohol.

He did not like missionaries, and he liked them still less when they made his ship an arena in which warring sects battled bitterly. The crew had too little to do, and the passengers had nothing to do, and they took sides. From the speakers, when the Second Communications Officer, who was a Jones convert, was on watch, rolled a continual stream of hymns of the Moody and Sankey variety. When the Chief Communications Officer, who was a Courtney adherent, was on duty all hands were treated to Gregorian plain chants and Bach organ recitals. Henry could have put a stop to it, but was too wise a shipmaster to do so. He hoped that once the missionaries had disembarked life would revert to its normal, inoffensive impiety.

Even so, he was not sorry when the last night of that particular leg of the voyage rolled along.

He fortified himself before dinner, that evening, with two stiff gins. He felt that he needed them as he would have to lie—and he did not like lying—when he said how sorry he was that the two missionaries would be leaving. He had a third gin to keep the first two down, then left his flat and made his way through the alleyways and down the companionways to the dining saloon.

The others at his table were already seated—Jones, Courtney the Colonel and his wife. Jones looked at the Captain's flushed face, sniffed audibly. Henry grinned at him.

" We were discussing various matters before you came in, Captain," said Courtney.

" Indeed ?" said Henry.

" As you know," went on the Minister, " there is a little difference of opinion between my friend and myself as to the correct technique to use in the conversion of the Shaulans. He, as you may have gathered, favours the emotional approach. I maintain that when one is dealing with reasoning beings the only possible approach is through the power of reason . . ."

" I'm sorry," said Henry. " I can't advise you, any more than you could advise me in matters pertaining to interstellar navigation."

" But, Captain," said Courtney, " you have been to Shaula VI many times. You must know something about the natives."

" Surely your books will have told you all you want to know."

" But books do not give the *feel* of things," said Jones.

" The books may be a little out of date," said Courtney.

" There's nothing special about Shaula VI," said Henry. " It's an Earth-type planet. The natives are humanoid. Their imports are meat and other animal products. Their exports are radium, uranium and radio-active isotopes."

" So they import meat ?" asked the Colonel. " Have they no meat animals of their own ?"

" No. There are big, wingless birds and a few lizards."

" But the natives are humanoid. I take that they're mammalian."

" They are. According to their legends they're a lost colony of some Galactic Empire of eons ago. Too, there are all sorts of fancy virtues that, so far, have made it impossible to build up any herds of livestock. The natives are immune."

" What about *us* ?" asked the Colonel's wife.

" The shots we all had on Antares V will cover us."

" Would you describe the natives as human ?" asked Jones.

" Yes. There are a few minor differences, and interbreeding is impossible, but they're human rather than humanoid."

" Are they . . . emotional ? "

" Really, Jones," said Courtney, " it's time you people realised that an emotional conversion is valueless. Emotional

conversion is no more than entertainment. It's people like you that have discredited the Faith throughout the Galaxy."

"It is you that's discredited the Faith!" retorted Jones, his sallow face flushed, the wing of black hair falling down over his eyes. "You have tried to make a science of all that is holy. Science! Science is the Devil, man, and you are in league with it!"

"Science is taking you to Shaula VI and will deliver you there tomorrow morning, ship's time," Henry pointed out.

Courtney ignored the Captain's interjection, gave Jones no time to reply to it.

"On the contrary, Mr. Jones," he said, "it is *you* who are in league with the Devil with your appeal to the grosser emotional side of Man's nature. You are tampering with forces of which you know little. You are neglecting the God-given power of reason, by the exercise of which any intelligent being can be brought to the realisation that he has his part to play however humble, in the grand scheme of things."

Continued on page 124

" How can he realise it if he doesn't *feel* it ?" demanded Jones.

" Feeling, as you so crudely put it, will come after—or with—closely reasoned realisation."

" Feeling and realisation are the same."

" They are not, Mr. Jones. Feeling, without realisation, is an ephemeral phenomenon."

" What are the natives *really* like, Captain Henry ?" asked the Colonel's wife with determination, ignoring the glares of the small, cadaverous Mr. Jones, the large, plump Mr. Courtney.

" As I said, Mrs. Grice, they're humanoid. Their social system is rather archaic by our standards—the planet is divided up into at least thirty kingdoms, between which wars were, in the past, frequent."

" Why aren't they frequent now ?" asked the Colonel.

" Because interstellar trade has done much to remove the main cause of war. I told you that the planet has no meat animals . . ."

" Surely you don't mean . . ."

" Yes, I do. After all, you must remember that a similar state of affairs existed centuries ago on Earth, especially in the islands of New Zealand."

" And what is their religion ?" asked Jones.

Courtney glared at him.

" It's based on astrology," said Henry.

" A typical example of the errors into which the intellect can lead you," remarked Jones.

" I don't agree," retorted Courtney. " It shows that the people will be amenable to the intellectual approach once their feet have been set upon the right path."

" Do you know any of the natives personally ?" almost shouted Mrs. Grice.

" Yes. The King of Thrale, in whose territory we shall be landing tomorrow, is quite a friend of mine. He's Earth educated—he has a string of degrees from Oxford University."

" I wonder," said Courtney, " if I could presume to ask you, Captain . . ."

" Careful, now !" snarled Jones. " Friendship has its emotional basis, you know. Surely you wouldn't want to start off on a new world on the wrong foot, man !"

" It is logical," said Courtney, " to use whatever tools come to one's hand."

" The King is an absolute monarch," said Henry. " He is a very busy man."

" We serve a greater Power," said Jones.

" You in your way, I in His," said Courtney.

" Exactly." Then, with delayed realisation, " Mr. Courtney, I resent that."

" What is he like ?" asked the Colonel's wife desperately. " The King I mean ?"

" You'd take him for an Earthman of Negroid stock. He . . ."

" I was assured by the Commission," said Courtney, "that you as Master of this vessel, would do everything possible to facilitate my task."

" And," said Jones, " mine."

" If King Mandor wishes to meet you he will do so," said Henry shortly. " I may be Master of this vessel, but I have no jurisdiction over reigning monarchs."

" From what you have told me of his educational background," said Courtney, " I feel that we should have much in common."

Jones sulked.

Three months later *Delta Eridani* dropped down to the Thrale spaceport from her orbit around Shaula VI. Vaguely, not caring much, Henry wondered how the missionaries had made out. Less vaguely he hoped that they would not be returning to Earth in his ship.

He dealt with the native port authorities in his cabin, greasing the wheels of interstellar commerce with the usual smokes and drinks. He learned that the vessel was scheduled for an overnight stop. He was not surprised, when his business was over, to receive from a gaudily uniformed Court functionary a handsomely engraved card that informed him that King Mander III of Thrale would be pleased to enjoy his company at dinner that evening.

Business occupied him fully during the day—the fact that there was, at the time, no Trader stationed at Port Thrale meant that Henry had to handle everything himself. He was tired and in a bad humour when he returned to the ship late in the afternoon.

He felt much better after a hot shower, and better still after he had arrayed himself in the finery of crisp linen and his resplendent dress uniform. He allowed himself one drink

in the Smoking Room with his admiring and envious officers whilst waiting for the royal car to take him to the palace.

The car was waiting outside the airlock at the exact second. Henry gave last instructions to his Chief Officer, walked slowly down the ramp. A palace official whose uniform outshone his own threw open the door of the vehicle, waited until the Captain had boarded and then sat in front with the chauffeur.

Henry relaxed, sat well back in the softly upholstered seat. He enjoyed the ride from the spaceport to the palace. It was all so like Earth—and so different. The trees bordering the broad smooth avenue along which they rolled could have been palms, but palms do not have bright orange foliage. The things fluttering around the tree tops could have been birds, but Henry knew that they were lizards. There was a crescent moon low in the western sky—but there was another, almost full, rising in the east.

They were approaching the palace. The city was composed, these days, largely of prefabricated buildings imported from the more progressive worlds, but, regarding his own home, Mandor was a conservative. The palace was plain—but it was the plainness of the primitive rather than of the sophisticated. Like a huge, long shed, it was, with a thatched roof. Inside, the Captain knew from past experience, it was not so plain ; it lacked nothing that could contribute to the comfort of its tenant.

Mandor himself was waiting on the steps to receive his guest.

" It has been a long time, Captain," he said, " since you have deigned to set foot in my humble house."

" It has been a long time, Your Majesty, since you have deigned to set foot aboard my humble ship."

" It has been too long." said the King.

" It has been long to wait," said the Captain.

" It must never be as long again. And now that we've got that over and done with, Henry, come on in. The drinks are cold and waiting. It's a pity you dressed—there's just ourselves. Oh, and three of my wives, of course."

" Thank you, Your Majesty."

" And you can drop that ' Majesty ' business as soon as we're out of earshot of the guards."

It was a simple meal, but pleasant. The meat—an excellent roast of pork, was cooked to perfection. Captain Henry was very fond of roast pork and was averse neither to crackling

nor apple sauce. He had a second helping and, when pressed to do so by the senior queen, a third.

The two junior wives removed the dishes. As was established Shaulan custom there was a long pause between courses. The King, his senior wife and the Captain lit cigars, relaxed and sipped their wine. Yet there was something—a small thing, yet an important thing—nagging at Captain Henry's mind.

"Mannie," he said, "are you playing fair with the Commission?"

"Really, Hank, must you discuss your employer's business at table?"

"It's *my* business, too. You know, Mannie, that I have a very retentive memory. I can remember just what cargo we discharged here on our outward passage. There was beef, and there was lamb. There was no pork. (There was a serious outbreak of swine fever on Antares V when we loaded)."

"So?"

Continued on page 128

"The meat that we've been discharging today we loaded on Kashmiristan."

"So?"

"The only meat caters there are Moslems—and you know what *they* think about pig in any shape or form."

"So?"

"We have the contract to bring meat here, Mannie. I know that no other Interstellar Transport Commission vessel has called here since our last visit. I know that with no Trader here to keep his eye on things for the Commission . . ."

"I should be offended," said the King. "I should order you thrown out of my palace and kicked back to your ship. I do neither of these things for two reasons—firstly, you are a friend of mine ; secondly, I have a clear conscience."

"I believe you," said Henry slowly. "After all, hermetically sealed, sterilised meat will keep for generations. I should never have asked. I trust that you will accept my apologies."

"Of course. And I was pleased, rather than otherwise, to see that my old friend was capable of exercising so much professional zeal."

"Some more wine, Captain?" asked the senior queen, refilling his glass.

"Thank you, Marita. You know, Mannie, I rather envy you your way of life. You've always impressed me as being, cares of state notwithstanding, a perfect example of the happy hedonist. Which reminds me—how did you get on with those two missionaries I brought here last time? One of them, Jones, was a wowser. Where are they now, by the way?"

"In the interior."

"That suits me. The worst of them was the way in which they were always quarrelling at table. One of them, Courtney, belongs to a Church that believes in intellectual conversion. Jones, the wowser, is a strong believer in emotional conversion." He laughed. "Did they make any headway in the city? Did either of them convert *you*?"

"On the contrary," said the King.

"What! You converted them? Tell me, Mannie, what method did you use, what technique? Intellectual or emotional?"

"Physical," said the King, belching happily.

—**Bertram Chandler**