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CITY OF THE TIGER

John Brunner's latest contribution to our pages is not quite all it would seem to be—we have to confess there is something of a sting in the tail, dragon's or otherwise. It might mean reading the story a second time to get the full impact !

BY JOHN BRUNNER

I

He grew slowly aware of a gentle rocking motion, like that of a boat on a choppy sea, but less yielding. For a while he let his body go with it, unresisting.

After a time, other thing impinged on his consciousness : cold, that ate into his hands and feet, and a firmness about his body ; distant shouting ; and a smell that is like no other smell that ever was.

Finally a booming bass shout from a few feet away jarred him into wakefulness, and he opened his eyes. " This, then, is Tiger City ?" he said.

"From the way you were sleeping, Hao Sen," said the man with the bass voice, " it could as well have been the city of your ancestors that you were travelling to. It surprises me you do not fall off !"

" Starlight would never let that happen," said Hao Sen, reaching forward to scratch the top of his mount's head. " Eh, darling ?"

The magnificent she-camel he rode answered him with the derisory curl of the upper lip which passes for expression among camels, and both men laughed.

" What have you to do in Tiger City, Kuo Ming ?" Hao Sen added, checking his belongings with the routine of many years' experience. They were all there : the brazier and charcoal and the cooking pot ; the block of tea-dust and the cake of milk ; the cape of camelskin that served him as coat and blanket ; the long pike with the jointed haft that drew apart into two ; and most important of all the short broad sword that was his special pride, safe in its brass and leather scabbard at his side.

" I have money to spend," said Kuo Ming negligently, patting the pouch at his belt. It jingled pleasantly.

" And after ?"

" Who knows ? There's a rumour that the emperor intends to levy an army against the bandits in the hills southward—"

" Camel-droppings," said Hao Sen bluntly. " Since I can remember he has been saying that, and still there is a call for caravan guards—without which, where would we be, you and I ? Would you join such an army to go deprive yourself of your living ?"

He reined Starlight to a halt as the whole long snaking caravan paused before the gates of Tiger City.

Though night was almost fully on them, and stars twinkled through the frosty air, there was still a faint stain of blue on the western sky where the sun had sunk behind the mountains, and in the dusk they could discern the black walls of the city ahead clearly enough to make out the black puppet shapes of soldiers marching back and forth along the ramparts. Above the gate was a balcony, on which guttering torches revealed rows of round shields bearing the stylised black and yellow emblem of a tiger's head.

The travellers, footsore and tired from six days' hard marching, were silent in the gathering dark. They numbered mostly traders, with some itinerant families and wandering entertainers. Now they paused and rested on their heavy burdens—bundles tied up in once-gaudy cloths, yoked shoulder loads of personal belongings. One old woman just ahead had nodded to sleep almost before she halted. Those more

prosperous urged their mules or camels onward slowly, hoping to reach the city gates a few yards ahead of their rivals.

Together Kuo Ming and Hao Sen did the same, and their steeds moved in the slow ungainly walk that, speeded to a gallop, can wear down the most tireless of horses. They rode along the flank of the caravan, sitting their mounts easily, heads up and shoulders squared, an occasional torch new-lit by a traveller glinting on their harness and helmets.

" And you ?" said Kuo Ming when they had gone a little way. " What do you do here in Tiger City ?"

" I have an—errand—to perform," said Hao Sen. " After that, who knows ?" He broke off to exchange a ribald greeting with another of the soldier mercenaries who had escorted the caravan through the bandit country of the hills behind them. This man's camel had a sore pad, and for the past day he had limped beside her like a common wayfarer. His mood was irritable and his answer crude.

The city ahead grew more distinct, and the sound of its busyness, which carried in the still air, came more strongly to their ears. " Ah !" said Kuo Ming, stretching himself a little with satisfaction. " Tiger City ! Many times I have been here, yet every time I have found something new."

" Hao Sen," said a soft voice from one of three travellers standing on the track, all wrapped indistinguishably in furs against the cold and huddled in the tiny amount of shelter afforded by their flea-bitten mule. He pulled Starlight over to the group, reached down from her lofty back, caught up the girl who had addressed him in one strong arm, and kissed her chilly face soundly.

One of the men beside her said in a jocular tone, " Much more of that, Hao Sen, and we shall begin to suspect that your intentions toward our sister are honourable."

" And is not the fair Lin Ten almost enough to wean my affections away from my one true love ?" countered Hao Sen, lowering the girl back to her feet.

" You have a true love ?" said the second man, who, in spite of his frosty fingers, was juggling with four little coloured balls while he spoke. " I thought men-at-arms such as you had no time for lasting attachments."

" I mean of course the one female who shares all my wandering," laughed Hao Sen, and jerked his thumb at Starlight's

head. The beast turned and curled her lip again in what looked for all the world like a sneer of contempt.

" You go too far comparing our sister to a camel," said the juggler.

" There is *no* comparison," asserted Hao Sen. " And that, O moon of my delight, is a compliment."

" Thank you," said Lin Ten gravely. " For whatever the other likenesses may be, I cannot curl my lip as she does. Look." She demonstrated, and achieved only an enchanting *moue*, which Hao Sen kissed away. Then, bidding them goodnight, he eased Starlight onward.

" You'll see us in the market-place tomorrow ?" the juggler called after him.

" Assuredly !" Hao Sen shouted. " But expect small pay for your performance !"

He urged Starlight into her racing gait for the short distance separating him from Kuo Ming. When they fell in together again the latter grumbled, " The one woman in this caravan worth a second glance, and you cut her out for yourself."

Hao Sen looked down at himself with some complacency. He was tall among the others of this race—just short of two metres—broad-shouldered, deep-chested and strong in the arm. His face was squarely handsome, with a short crisp beard that was now spangling with frost.

He answered peaceably, " Can I help it that she is attracted to me ?"

Kuo Ming boomed out a deep resounding laugh, and said nothing more as they forced a passage through the walkers slowly filing into the gate of the city. They exchanged soldierly insults with the men-at-arms lounging on the balcony over the entrance, saluted the master of the caravan who sat his camel next to a high officer of the city guard and watched the motley procession going by. It was this master's custom to pay his guards not when they entered the city but when they came in sight of it, so they had spoken their last with him for the time being.

Then they were pressing through the gate, and neither of them noticed the officer of the guard tilt one finely-plucked eyebrow at them as they passed, and then fall deep in talk with the master of the caravan.

Tiger City ! To many people the name was like magic—and of course in a sense it *was* magic, for at its founding the emperor

had wisely decreed that the name of the second most powerful beast in all the world should be bestowed on it as a charm against ill-wishing. But to most people the magic was of a less subtle kind, implying glamour and excitement and gaiety and a press of men and women.

At once Kuo Ming and Hao Sen found themselves in the middle of the city's kaleidoscope, lit by enormous flaring torches at the eaves of the low stone houses. Here and there in the narrow alleys charcoal braziers glowed deeply red, and people paused beside them for a little warmth before rejoining the hustling throng. There were sharp-eyed merchants awaiting the coming of the caravan, hoping to snap up bargains before they had to haggle in the competition of the open market ; stall-holders, spreading their wares on low wooden trays, selling hot rice and steaming tea to the cold and weary newcomers ; nobles strolling casually among the crowd for a thrill, their confidence being accounted for by the heavy swords at their sides and the presence of tall broad men-at-arms who followed them like trained dogs ; jugglers, conjurers, entertainers of all sorts ; dancing girls swaying to high thin piping music, their bodies white with cold in their thin open-fronted jackets and cotton trousers ; and the street-walkers shrewdly sizing up the passers-by. On one corner an itinerant storyteller was loudly recounting the fable of Young Ryin and the dragon, halting at the most poignant moments to demand further payment from his listeners ; on another, an aged greybeard bent almost double over a lute.

Noticing the way Hao Sen gazed about him, Kuo Ming seemed struck by a thought. " Have you never been to Tiger City before, Hao Sen ?" he inquired wonderingly, and Hao Sen shook his head.

" Well, then," Kuo Ming exclaimed, " you have much to look forward to ! First, let us find a tavern before the rabble fills every room that is to be had. Last time I was here I found lodgings in a good house, with few fleas and a fine line in dancers, but I had words with the landlord regarding his daughter, and he waits for my return with a bowl of poisoned rice. This time I wish to try the tavern of the Silver Fountain, but I have no idea on what street it is to be found."

He swung down from his saddle to shout at the greybeard with the lute. " Which way lies the tavern of the Silver Fountain, venerable sir ?"

The greybeard did not reply, and Kuo Ming was on the point of shaking his sword under his nose to teach him. " He may be deaf, Kuo Ming. Why not ask that lotus-flower yonder ?"

" Deaf ?" grumbled Kuo Ming. " A deaf musician ?" But he followed Hao Sen's pointing arm and needed no further convincing, for the lotus-flower was young and slender and had long lustrous black hair and dark almond eyes and lips like a glowing coal. He urged his camel a few paces towards her and repeated his question about the tavern.

The girl looked him up and down and answered casually. " On the Street of a Thousand Felicities, near the market."

" Know you the street, Hao Sen ?" Kuo Ming demanded with a wink. Hao Sen obediently shook his head, and he turned back to the girl with a helpless shrug. " You see, blossom of the water-lily ? My friend and I are strangers, and would surely run astray in looking for the street. Would you not condescend to guide us ?"

The girl laughed a high clear sound like temple bells, and said, " Who could fail to take pity on your ignorance, soldier ? Who could resist your pleading ?"

" Many," muttered Kuo Ming ruefully under his breath, but only Hao Sen read the movement of his lips. He swept the girl up into the saddle before him, and said, " Which way, then, O beautiful as rare jade ?"

" Straight from here, along the Street of Many Kites," the girl answered, and leaned back against his chest as the camels trotted forward.

II

During the ride, Hao Sen's mind was busy analysing and absorbing impressions of the city ; without seeming to, his eyes took in every detail as they followed the tortuous route to the Street of a Thousand Felicities. This one was ablaze from end to end with gaily-coloured paper globes.

They found the inn without trouble, and gave their camels into the charge of the stable-boy. Kuo Ming swung the girl to the ground and dropped lightly after her, and they entered the low-ceilinged, stuffy main room of the inn, which was full of a smell of people and wine and the smoke of the open fires that burned on the floor. Joss-sticks smouldering in front of

gilded idols in niches in the wall thickened and sweetened the air almost to the limit of breathability.

Hao Sen purchased one of the sticks from the nodding, toothless vendor at the door, lit it, and placed it at the feet of the plump-bellied god of laughter, whose round face was eternally fixed in a wide-mouthed bellow of merriment.

" Why do you choose laughter ?" asked Kuo Ming, setting a stick of his own before the patron god of travellers in recompense for a long journey safely completed.

" Is it not written that if thou laugh three times a day and be glad, thy stomach, the father of affliction, shall never trouble thee ?"

" Where is that written ?" said Kuo Ming with a frown of puzzlement. " It is not among the sayings of K'ung Fu Tze."

Hao Sen shrugged, trying to pass it off, and cursing himself under his breath. " It is something I have heard said, nonetheless, and I pay heed to it, for by following it I have found it true." He broke off to return the bow of a plump man, almost the colour of a ripe lemon, who bent before them.

" My humble greetings to you honoured gentlemen," he said. " The resources of my lowly establishment are yours to command."

" We wish accomodation, food and drink," said Hao Sen shortly, and the lemon-coloured man bowed again, naming a price. Hao Sen beat him down to half, ordered bowls of hot fish, rice and wine, and seized the chance afforded by the departure of three swaggering merchants to find them a place to squat beside the fire.

They tackled the food and drink with the serious voracity of active men who have been cold and rather hungry for a week on end, and the girl matched them bowl for bowl, her chopsticks sometimes moving so fast the eye could barely follow them.

Kuo Ming regarded her with astonishment. " Have you not eaten for so long, bloom of the peach ?" he inquired, and she shook her head. When her mouth was empty enough to talk with, she replied.

" Times have been lean in Tiger City these three months, and your caravan is the first we have seen in all that time. The emperor himself has come hither with an army, and they have sat and eaten and drunk their fill without doing anything about the bandits who have plundered us."

Hao Sen leaned forward. " Yet we saw no sign of a bandit on our journey ! Why should this be ?"

" The winter is passing, of course," said the girl. " For two months of every year the only road to this city which is open is that from the north-east, which runs through the worst-plagued districts. Yours is the first southern caravan of the spring."

" And it is along the north-eastern trail that the bandits gather thickest at any time," said Kuo Ming, nodding. " Yes, I understand."

" The next caravan to follow your route will not have such an easy time of it. The bandits follow mountain passes, and they will still be snow-bound, but as soon as thaw sets in, they will take the road and harass the southern trail again."

" What does the emperor's army, then ?" demanded Hao Sen. " Have they not guarded the north-eastern road ?"

The girl shook her head again ; the gesture made her hair swoop round her shoulders like a raven's wing. " Two caravan's have been lost completely, and I have heard it said that some of the soldiers, disgusted with their idleness and tired of doing nothing more than patrol the streets, have themselves turned bandit."

Kuo Ming chuckled reminiscently. " And I am not over-surprised," he said. " I remember—well, no matter."

" Were you not talking of joining this army ?" Hao Sen put in maliciously. " It is then your ambition to police the streets of the town and go to bed drunk every night ?"

" Perhaps the second," said Kuo Ming, glaring. " Not the first."

" Well," Hao Sen commented, setting his fourth rice-bowl empty on the floor, " ours was a rich caravan and reached here intact. Perhaps things will be more lively tomorrow."

" Indeed yes !" The girl smiled. " Tomorrow's market will be the finest for a very long while."

Kuo Ming yawned hugely. " Well, one will need to rise early to see the best of it. For myself, I am not over-worried. A mercenary like me has small need of goods which clutter the back of one's camel."

He leaned back, putting out his left hand to support himself, and an instant later let out a yell of annoyance. " Why do you

not look where you put your feet, oaf?" he bellowed, and scrambled up to face a thick-set, pompous man in a gorgeously embroidered robe.

" Feet belong on the floor," said the man who had trodden on his fingers. " Hands don't. Let me past."

" Why, you walking bundle of crow-carrion !"

The pompous man's eyes glinted dangerously. " I am not accustomed to such words from a common soldier. Make your apology, and be quick about it."

" I will *not* apologise !" He let his hand fall to the hilt of his sword. The pompous man watched the movement unblinking, and his composure discomforted Kuo Ming, who hesitated and asked, " Who are you, anyway, that you're so arrogant ?"

" I am the wizard Chu Lao," said the pompous man solemnly, and Kuo Ming threw back his head and laughed.

" If you're a wizard, friend, why do you not conjure yourself a place to lodge better than this flea-ridden hole ? Why must you come here associating with us rabble ?"

" You amuse me," said Chu Lao bluntly, and shook the sleeve of his robe. From it struck a snake, black and vicious and as long as a man's height. Kuo Ming let out a yell of terror and jumped backwards, not fast enough to prevent the reptile dropping across his shoulder and coiling round his arm. The other people in the inn stopped talking and eating and edged away as far as they could until, seeing that the snake was fully occupied with Kuo Ming, and that Chu Lao was standing with his arms folded and a slight smile on his face, they let out a roar of amusement at the soldier's ineffectual attempts to deal with his problem.

Hao Sen, watching with narrowed eyes, reflected on the situation. A wizard. Interesting. Now the question was : a wizard who could actually (he did not take the trouble to ask himself what he meant by actually) work magical effects, or someone nothing more than a conjurer ? The trick with the snake could have been either ; indeed, a snake was as good a weapon as any in some cases, and possibly Chu Lao carried it as a pet which offered personal protection. Warm in the full pouch of his sleeve, it would lie comfortably torpid, but would resent being disturbed.

At length Kuo Ming managed to get hold of the snake behind its head ; one gigantic squeeze with his thumb and fore-finger, a cracking noise as the bones of its skull were crushed,

and it began to writhe itself loose from its hold. He unreeled its sinuous length furiously, and the crowd, reading real anger in his expression, stopped chuckling at his plight.

As if it were a whip, he slashed it at Chu Lao's face ; the wizard was faster than he, caught its tail in mid-air and made it vanish—presumably into the same sleeve that it had occupied when living.

" A snake this time," he said. " Perhaps it will be a dragon next time—and you will be even less happy with it."

He took advantage of the space which had cleared around them to stalk past Kuo Ming and disappear into the smoky recesses of the tavern.

Kuo Ming, rubbing his still-sore fingers, sat down and grew voluble in his description of what he would like to do to Chu Lao next time they met. Hao Sen paid no attention ; after a while, he got to his feet, yawning ostentatiously, and bade them goodnight.

The room to which he was taken was no more than a cubicle partitioned off at the rear of the house by wooden screens ; still, they were opaque enough to afford visual, if not auditory, privacy. He defeated the landlord's attempt to sell him the use of a dancing-girl for the night, and then squatted down on his camel cape by the light of the smoky lamp.

For some time he sat cogitating, his eyes unfocussed. At length he stretched himself and undid his belt, taking from a pouch attached to it a dozen miscellaneous objects : a coin, an opium pipe, a length of cord, a small wooden box, and other things.

Now how—?

He thought back carefully over basic principles, and selected the length of cord as the most likely choice ; then a possibility of danger occurred to him, and he changed his mind. Suppose this one turned out to be poisonous ? He did not want to be defeated by his own ingenuity, and he knew that in his present situation, he was as much at his own mercy as at anyone else's, although he was quite alone.

He turned the objects over, puzzling, seeking some sort of likeness or superficial similarity of nature which would aid him in his experiment. Then an idea struck him. Inside the wooden box was a piece of crystal. It was warm in the room, but the crystal, which had been insulated from the heat by the box and the thick leather of his belt, still retained a little of the chill it had acquired during a week of below-zero journeying.

He took it up meditatively, and set it in the bowl of the opium pipe. Then he spoke a gentle word to it, and put the pipe towards the lamp as though he were about to warm a piece of opium for smoking. He concentrated ; he had—he had to have—an excellently disciplined mind.

In a few moments he knew that his task was far harder than he had expected ; he knew that Chu Lao was a very dangerous man, for he was a real wizard, and moments before he flung it at Kuo Ming the snake was probably no more than a thread from the frayed hem of his sleeve.

For the one word he had whispered to the rock crystal was " ice," and now, with the warmth of the lamp, it was melting and trickling in a thin stream of clear water through the mouth-piece of the pipe.

III

He slept badly that night ; his brain was whirling with new possibilities, and for a while he even considered going back where he had come from. Tiger City was dangerous.

Nonetheless, the sun was up somewhat before himself, and when he descended to the main room by the rickety wooden ladder which served as steps to the sleeping gallery, there was no sign either of Kuo Ming or his girl. He paid the landlord for his night's lodging and reserved his place for the next night in case he should need it, and went out into the street.

It was a clear, cold morning ; the air, thick though it was with city-smells, was still cleaner than that inside the tavern, and he drew deep breaths as he turned towards the market-place. He had no trouble locating it—the clamour which rose from it was sufficient guide.

The market-square was a broad stretch of hard-beaten earth in front of the biggest of the many temples in Tiger City. Before the main portal was a flight of ninety-nine wide steps, of which the lowest dozen were now monopolised by traders in meat and fish. Its many pagoda roofs were painted brilliant hues of sky-blue, crimson and gold, and ornamented by hundreds on hundreds of fantastically complicated carvings. A faint aroma of burning incense drifted from it to mingle with the smells of the market.

For a while he simply wandered through the press of bargainers haggling with the newly-arrived merchants from

the caravan. He exchanged greetings with a fur-trader whom he recognised, and with a seller of gods from the south, and with a group of hard-faced mule-sellers whom he had travelled beside the whole of one day. For a while he paused to listen to a singer accompanying himself on a crude dulcimer, but the song was a dull one, and he moved on to join the group about a thick-set gypsy with a performing dragon.

The dragon was a poor specimen, half-starved and less than three-quarters grown, its scales patched with a mildew-like fungus disease, but its vicious three-inch teeth were still clean and white and very sharp, and it bared them in ineffectual snarls. The gypsy was making it move its legs in a kind of clumsy dance, goading it with a sharply-pointed *ankh* which he heated at intervals in a brazier.

Hao Sen studied the baleful look in the beast's eyes. This, he suspected, was one dragon which was not going to stand much more treatment. He said as much to the gypsy, who answered with a string of curses and then ignored him.

A little uneasily, Hao Sen made sure that his sword was running free in its scabbard, and walked away. Close by a barber had set up his stool and his stove, on which steamed a pan of hot water, and was calling for customers. Hao Sen touched his beard, for he was not a little vain of his appearance now, and then took the stool, telling the man to trim his beard and comb out his long, soft, plaited hair.

The task was finished, and the barber was importuning him to have his nostrils and ears cleaned also, when there was a scream. He leapt to his feet, seeing a wave of catastrophic panic begin to break across the market like a bore in a river-mouth. Shouting began, and in a moment it made sense.

" The dragon ! The dragon !"

The barber incontinently joined the rush, forgetful of what Hao Sen owed him ; the buyers and sellers alike streamed outwards from the square, overturning booths, scattering merchandise and trampling old people and children underfoot. But Hao Sen was not minded to join them ; rather, he wished to go the other way, and by shoving and pushing he shortly managed to break into clear space surrounding the dragon.

The beast itself was no longer the sullenly submissive thing he had seen before ; it was an incarnation of menace, and stood on three of its sharp-taloned legs above the inert body of a man in gay silk clothing, slashing at his face. Hao Sen at once

recognised one of the jugglers he had met on the trail, the brothers of Lin Ten. But that meant that she herself—

He scanned the neighbourhood, and saw her lying in the ruins of a merchant's stall, where the crowd must have trampled her down. She seemed unharmed, though unconscious, for he could tell by the way her hair stirred over her mouth that she was breathing, and she moved slightly even as he looked. But she was in deadly danger, for the dragon was tiring of the motionless body as a plaything, and its yellow eyes were hunting for a new prey.

Its gaze passed over the body of its master, who lay with his head buried in a pile of red-hot coals from an overset brazier, ignored Hao Sen, who stood with his sword unsheathed and watched it warily, and looked still further.

Hao Sen knew something of the ways of dragons. He knew that, although they might be half-crazed with fear or pain, they would not attack unprovoked. But they hunted men as they would hunt anything else—for food. And this dragon was hungry.

In a few seconds it would start to move among the bodies on the ground, for it hated to eat any but living prey—if it could, it would never do more than stun a victim before it fed. And if it found Lin Ten—

Hao Sen shrugged, and wished for his long pike, which would have spitted this dragon in mid-rush, but that was far behind at the tavern. Besides it was not good policy to take the offensive against a dragon, this time it would have to be done, and for that a sword was wieldier than a pike. Luckily, the disease which patched its hide would have made vulnerable points in its armoured body.

As he had feared, the dragon now began to move, its body rippling from nose to tail. It sniffed at the nearest carcase. Hao Sen stepped closer, moving sideways at the same time to get it if possible away from Lin Ten.

Its head came up after dismissing the corpse which had drawn its attention, and for the first time it considered him as prey. Its nostrils twitched. But it was weak with starvation, and went on looking for unconscious food.

By now the square was virtually empty, and from the comparative safety of the temple steps and the mouths of the streets a crowd watched anxiously.

The dragon tried more corpses without success. Then with a burst of energy which took him completely by surprise, it scuttered past him and was snuffing at Lin Ten.

Hao Sen's patience snapped ; he seized the broken shaft of a tent from close at hand and hurled it like a javelin at one of the mildew-weakened spots in the beast's plated skin. The disease must have made it abnormally sensitive, for though the sharp wood barely made a noticeable gash, the creature howled with pain and spun round to charge at him.

On the first attack, he had time to throw himself aside and let it go past him, but the second time it had mastered the smart of its superficial injury, and although he dodged again it cunningly curved its tail in mid-air so that it caught his shoulder and spun him round, gasping. The whole dragon must have weighed as much as a man, and its tail was thick, muscular and spiny.

But it had misjudged the length of its leap, and it fell into a tangle of cords on a rope-seller's stall, which delayed it long enough for Hao Sen to recover his balance and devise a tactic to meet its next pounce. This time, instead of leaping sideways, he flung himself backwards, in the same movement bringing up his sword point foremost so that it sank deep into the dragon's underbelly.

The hilt was wrenched from him with such force it nearly sprained his wrist, and the violence of the impact made his helmet ring on the frosted ground. Shrieking with pain, the dragon scrabbled with its clawed hind feet and triple lines of pain told him where the blind slashes had penetrated his leggings.

He brought up one booted foot with all his force and kicked at its belly close to the place where the sword had stuck fast, its point buried in a rib-cartilage. That hurt the dragon, severely enough for it to waste a few moments trying to double its neck back under its body and pull the blade out with its teeth. Dark blood leaked down the hilt, but slowly.

Hao Sen rolled half clear, and risked losing his fingers in a desperate attempt to gouge out one of its eyes. But his hand touched only the bony skull, and then it had pinned him to the earth again.

This time it did not make the mistake of standing directly above him and leaving its belly exposed ; it stood off to one side, holding him with one foot while bending its head towards his throat.

Just in time he got his right arm, palm upwards, straight against its lower jaw, so that to bend any further the dragon would either have to tire him out or dislocate his elbow. But

he could not hold out for long. At any time, even now, a dragon this size was a match for an unarmed man, and before the sword in its vitals drained enough of its strength to dull its determination, it would have fatigued his arm to the point of bending.

No, this could not go on for long.

Hao Sen took time to curse himself elaborately for a stupid fool. Then he cursed the dragon, but before he had finished there were running footsteps in the market-place.

The pressure on his arm relaxed perceptibly, for the dragon was turning its eyes to see what was coming now. A familiar voice cried out ; a bright sword crashed down on the dragon's skull with a jar that ran clear down his arm. Instantly he went limp, as if dead, knowing that the dragon would at once turn to face the new adversary.

It did. The moment the weight came off his chest, he rolled over and stood up. Summoning the last reserve of strength in his body, he grasped the dragon's tail as it faced his rescuer—he saw briefly that it was Kuo Ming—heaved, and lifted it bodily off the ground. For one fantastic second it seemed that it was trying to climb down its own tail to get at him, and then he began to spin on his heels, the weight on his arm giving place to an outward tug.

Four times—five—six times the market whirled giddily ; the dragon's blood spattered an ever wider circle on the earth, and it cried in a voice of terrible agony. Then he added one last ounce of violence to its course, swinging it upwards, and let go.

Across the ruined cord-seller's stall it flew, above the spilt chest of coins of a money-changer, and fell, its head twisted at a strange angle, against the lowermost of the temple steps.

Then Hao Sen fainted.

He was unconscious only for a few seconds, and he recovered to see the familiar and very welcome face of Hao Sen bending over him. He was saying admiringly, " Ah, but that was a bold trick, Hao Sen !"

" The dragon !" Hao Sen demanded, struggling to regain his feet. " What of the dragon ?"

" Dead," said Kuo Ming with much satisfaction. " I did not even have to give it a final stroke, for its fall broke its neck. Here, let me help you." He hoisted Hao Sen bodily to his feet. " You feel well enough ?"

Hao Sen nodded. " But what of Lin Ten ? She was lying—" He tried to regain his sense of direction, achieved it, and immediately identified the spot.

Kuo Ming hastened across to her, examined her swiftly, and gave Hao Sen a reassuring nod as he came up. " She's unhurt, barring that bruise on her head. Look, she's wakening."

Hao Sen barely noticed that the square was again filling with people, some going to wonder at the dead dragon, some to see the man who had mastered it, until some of the latter offered him congratulations. " Go see to the injured !" was his curt response, and he himself got a wet cloth and applied it to Lin Ten's brow.

" Hao Sen," said a soft voice, and he glanced up to see the girl's brother. This was—Lin Soo, that was it ; the other juggler, of course, was dead.

" She lives," he said roughly. " Though not your brother."

" I know. I saw him die," said Lin Soo. " And I had thought my sister dead also. But you have saved her, and henceforward, whatever you require of her or me, is yours for the asking."

" Attend to your sister till she is better," said Hao Sen, a little embarrassed. " I'll go and find my sword."

Still swaying a little on his feet, he made his way over to the dead dragon, amid the exclamations of the curious and the moans of stall-holders whose goods had been ruined in the panic. He rolled the beast on to its back, and braced his foot against its breastbone, grasping the protruding hilt.

A glance told him that his effort was wasted, and he let go again. In its final fall, the hilt had been bent almost to a right angle with the blade, and even if it were straightened it would never be reliable again ; it would fracture in use.

" Are you not the companion of that man whom I threatened with a dragon ?" a familiar voice inquired of him, and he looked up to see Chu Lao the wizard pushing through the crowd.

" I am," Hao Sen admitted. " Was this dragon of your doing, then ?"

The wizard half-laughed. " Think you *my* dragons are disease-patched yearlings ? *My* dragons are a match for ten men, let alone two. But it was a good fight and a neat trick by which you overcame him. Your sword, I see, has suffered."

Hao Sen nodded, his eyes on Chu Lao's face.

" Draw it out," said the wizard. " If you can."

Hao Sen gave him a brief glare, put his hand to the hilt again, and heaved. The blade came away with a sucking sound, and blood crept from its tip.

Fastidiously the wizard drew his robe aside, and then told Hao Sen to hold the blade before his body. Hao Sen did so, and Chu Lao made a ring of his forefinger and thumb, which he passed the length of the blade, from tip to hilt.

The blood curdled and fell away, leaving the metal clean and bright ; the dented edges became sharp and even. When the wizard's hand reached the place where it was bent on itself, the sword quivered in Hao Sen's hand. He grasped it with all his strength, and it sprang suddenly to straightness, singing.

" It is better than new," said the wizard negligently, and made his way off into the crowd.

IV

Now why do that ?

Obviously, out of the people Hao Sen had met so far on this trip, Chu Lao was the most significant. Was it possible that Hao Sen's action in killing the dragon had stamped him also as a significant person ? Well, that was inevitable, of course ; one could not hide one's individuality in a place like this.

But to have received special attention in that way meant that he had drawn too much attention. He would either have to be bold about it and openly admit the fact—and he felt that it was too soon to do that—or relapse into the background and trust to Chu Lao and anyone else of major significance whom he ran across to ascribe it to chance.

Well, one thing was certain ; if he wanted a sword he could rely on, he would still have to get himself another, for what Chu Lao's magic could do by way of strengthening this bent blade, it could certainly undo. He knew from last night's experiment that he could probably reinforce or counter-charm the blade, but he dared not use magic openly, for that would instantly confirm his real significance as an individual.

What would be the logical thing to do ? Answer : give this sword to Kuo Ming in gratitude for saving his life.

When he returned to the place where he had left his friend, he found Lin Ten recovered and standing by herself. On seeing him, she prostrated herself, going on her knees before him and vowing eternal indebtness. He dissolved the mood by picking

her up and kissing her, and demanded to be led to the tavern to have a drink and recover his strength.

" And, Kuo Ming," he said, " do you recall that wizard with whom we had words last night ?"

Kuo Ming nodded, and Hao Sen explained what had happened. " So—since your intervention saved my life—take it," he finished, and handed over the newly beautiful sword.

He overcame the other's protestations, accepted Kuo Ming's old weapon in exchange, and went off with him to the tavern, leaving Lin Ten and Lin Soo to seek the body of their brother and take it up for burial.

In the tavern, Kuo Ming retailed the story of the fight twice over with embroidery, and the landlord said he was flattered to have such a distinguished man-at-arms as Hao Sen lodging with him and told him that he could have his room and board for today without payment.

Whereupon Hao Sen promptly went off to the room to squat on his camel cape and consider the situation.

It was his custom to order the people he met, so far as he could, in relative significance, but he had seldom been forced to do it so soon after his arrival. Now it seemed imperative, for he had been caught up in such a web of tangled circumstances that he needed time to think them out.

Chu Lao he had already nominated as most important. Add to him, the emperor, the commander of the city guard, and the master of the caravan, relative seniority unspecified. In all likelihood the emperor would also be a wizard, and so might one or more of his generals—assuming that this army of his had any objective reality.

Kuo Ming next ? After all, he had saved Hao Sen's life, which made him at least superficially significant. But the difficulty there was that the reflex response to impending death in Hao Sen's mind might well have *created* that significance in the moment of need. Did the same thing go for Lin Ten and Lin Soo ? He did not think so ; he suspected that their protestations of gratitude might be individual.

But their brother was dead. And that complicated things.

He stretched out on the cape at full length, mentally reviewing—his memory was nearly perfect—everything that had happened since he came to Tiger City. The complete analysis took him some hours ; it left him very little wiser than when he started.

No, he could do no more than see what happened next.

Effectively, that was nothing, for he passed the three days following in peace, undisturbed by anyone except the landlord of the tavern and Kuo Ming, who took him around the town to show him the sights and embarrassed him exceedingly by introducing him to everyone they met as the dragon-killer.

After the three days, he judged himself fairly safe; apparently no one had realised his individual significance. Therefore he would be able to investigate somewhat further, and the first person to call for his attention would be Chu Lao.

He debated for a long time as to the best manner of tackling his problem. Ultimately, of course, it was simple : to eliminate the most significant individual involved, to take on the central motivation himself, and—piece by piece—to destroy it. The intrusion of real wizards, who could operate real magic, trebled the complexity of the task, for magic might work according to any laws or none—though broadly speaking there were two principles which were never transgressed.

But the worst aspect of the appearance of real magic in Tiger City was that it protected the most significant person very thoroughly indeed. It meant that the man wielding the real power might not be the emperor, might not be a general or chief counsellor, might be—the greybeard on the street playing the lute.

He resolutely bet himself that human vanity was against the last possibility, and went to talk with the landlord of the tavern.

Two pieces of gold bought him the knowledge he wanted, and he added two more in the hope that it would guarantee the man's forgetfulness of what he had asked. Another piece went to Kuo Ming's girl on the understanding that she kept him very thoroughly occupied and if possible drunk that night, and he considered he had prepared as thoroughly as he could.

It was well after midnight when he left the tavern—not the one where Kuo Ming was drinking—in which he had installed himself until the crucial time arrived. It was some distance from the market-place, in a quiet district, which meant that it was not over-well patronised and he risked being remembered; but by the same token the streets were empty and the only light came from a moon two days short of its first quarter.

Silently, his feet muffled in fur boots, he made his way towards Chu Lao's home.

As Kuo Ming had tauntingly suggested on the occasion of their first meeting, the wizard had somewhere better than a flea-ridden tavern for his abode ; he had something near to a palace, in fact, standing on its own in a garden through which a brook ran chuckling. It was beautifully laid out ; there were lawns, bowers and paths which were thickly shadowed but afforded Hao Sen all the more concealment for that.

The wall around gave him no trouble ; a convenient tree stretched a branch towards him, and he hoisted himself up and dropped inside the grounds. He paused, listening keenly, and heard nothing.

Across the garden he fled like a shadow, until he came to the rear of the house, and there studied the blank wall facing him. Wooden shutters closed the windows against the cold night air; the doors, beyond question, would be heavily barred. He pondered ; then he saw a flicker of light through a chink in a shutter, and put his eye to it.

Beyond was a kitchen ; the stove, with its many different fires to suit the needs of a skilled chef preparing a meal of many courses, was dying into darkness. A single lamp shone dimly, revealing that there was no one, not even a kitchen-maid, within sight.

He had to take a risk, and immediately.

From his pouch he fumbled the little wooden box which had contained the crystal. The catch worked smoothly, and it opened and shut without a squeak. He wondered if the same would hold for the shutter, but he had to try it.

Withdrawing to safety ten paces away, he looked at the shutter and the window which it closed. Then he took up the lid of the box, whipering to it and concentrating fiercely.

Every shutter that he could see—and there were half a dozen within a few yards—began to creak open.

Hastily he shut the box again and waited for someone to be awakened and come looking for him. Nothing of the sort happened ; at length he did what he should have done in the first place, and broke a piece of wood off the bottom of the shutter he was interested in, where it was rubbed into splinters against the sill of the window, to put in the box. This time he got the results he wanted, and clambered stealthily into the kitchen.

The draught made the lamp gutter alarmingly, and he was startled to see what looked like a tall man moving in the shadows behind him. A second glance reassured him ; it was a

statue carved in stone, and the movement of the flame was all that made it seem to be alive.

He noiselessly reconnoitred a small room leading off the kitchen, finding a gentle snoring which came from a youth of twelve dozing in a corner. Safe enough ; he was probably so overworked he wouldn't hear anything short of thunder.

He returned to the centre of the kitchen, and looked for the entrance to the rest of the house. It was opposite him, behind the statue, and completely in darkness. He would have to go carefully.

He gave a final glance into the alcove where the boy was asleep, and started to creep towards the exit. The statue raised its arm to bar his way.

He froze instantly, possibilities crowding his mind. This was not a statue, but a guard dressed as one ; no, for he could see distinctly that the arm it had raised to bar the exit did not wrinkle at the elbow as would clothing or canvas. It remained as smooth and round as before. Therefore this was a statue, and he had been stupid to remember to use magic for his entrance and forget that it was probably also employed to guard the house.

It made no further move for a while, and he wondered : what sense does it use to track me ? Something that is independent of special organs, for it must be solid stone. He pondered, and decided that it was probably hearing, for the vibrations conveyed through the air and the ground would provide sufficient information for it to recognise a stranger.

He stepped backwards, and it followed him with a single huge stride, raising its arm to strike across where his body might be presumed to be. He barely escaped the blow, but when he froze again it also halted.

It could move very swiftly, then. That was worse still. He had half-hoped it would be slow and ponderous, which would enable him to elude it long enough either to get into the body of the house or out through the window again.

He turned his head, barely daring to breathe, and saw that standing against the wall was a large jar with a dipper hung to the rim. It was directly below the flaring lamp, which made him suddenly hopeful that it might contain oil. He thought he could see a few drops shining on its sides which confirmed the suspicion. In any case, he would have to try.

Judging his movements exactly, he leapt for the jar and overset it with a splash ; the heavy liquid it contained *was* oil, and the statue's ponderous foot slipped and slid as it strode forward. On the second stride it lost its balance, and came down with a thunderous crash, breaking into two pieces across the waist.

He seized the lamp from the wall as a cry from the alcove told him that the boy had been awakened, and dropped it into the pool of oil. Bluish flames spread at once across its surface; thick black smoke chokingly veiled his departure.

Outside, he dashed across the lawns and paths with more attention to haste than to concealment, while lights flared up and shutters were flung open in the house behind him. He had memorised the route which led to the convenient tree, and he followed it directly.

He was within a few paces of the wall when it began to grow. It stretched upwards until it was more than twenty feet taller than before, thicker and apparently stronger. But his reason suggested that it might only be apparently stronger—that its substance might in fact be more tenuous because more expanded. He drew his sword and slashed at it, finding his guess confirmed. The wall was now tough, but he could hack chunks from it if he was determined enough.

He carved a hole large enough to let him through, sheathed his sword again, and dived head foremost through it. As he dived, so the wall began swiftly to shrink to its original size, and before he was all the way through the hole—big enough for his shoulders when the wall was expanded—was too small for his feet, so that he was caught by the ankles with his face in the dirt.

He was still stuck in that ignominious position when Chu Lao and his retainers came to find him, cursing, and striving vainly to break loose.

V

On the whole, Chu Lao behaved in a very restrained fashion. He decided (or affected to decide) that here he had no more than a case of a common soldier with ideas above his station, who had been sufficiently ungrateful regarding the favour done for him in the matter of the sword to come burgling.

Accordingly, he sent for the city guard, and delivered Hao Sen to them bound hand and foot and looking much the worse

for his night's experiences. Face down across the back of a camel he was brought to the gate of the city and there thrown into a cell built in the solid wall. A single barred window, far too small to afford anything but a glimpse of the outer world, was the only other opening beside the door.

A one-eyed man with muscles like a horse was his jailer, and sat on a low wooden bench beyond the door, staring unblinkingly at Hao Sen as though he was an unidentified germ in the field of a microscope. Hao Sen ignored him.

Plainly, he berated himself, he had been over-confident. Now he was in the tightest possible corner, with a choice of two alternatives. One was to attempt to escape by magic, in which case run the risk of over-reaching himself and finding that someone else knew more about its laws in Tiger City than he could guess at. That, effectively, would finish him. The other choice was to wait until they executed him, and he fancied that least of all. He had been executed once before, on a much earlier trip and in entirely different surroundings, and it was not an experience he wanted to repeat.

Of course, it would apparently eliminate him, and perhaps make a second try simpler. But it would involve delay, and every day that passed was a serious waste of time. It would not be possible for him to come back at once after his execution ; he would have to wait, or someone else would have to take his place and laboriously go through all the stages of investigation he had already performed. And that would be a blow to his vanity, too.

No, magic it would have to be. But he was sorely handicapped by the fact that everything had been taken from him except his clothing ; even the pouch on his belt had been emptied. Without money or weapon, even assuming he did get free, he was going to be labouring under major disadvantages.

The one eye of his jailer stayed firmly fixed on him ; he did not dare start right away. Disciplining his tumultuous mind as well as he could, he lay down on the palliasse in the cell and composed himself to an uneasy doze.

A question ran all the way through it : was it pure chance that Chu Lao should be the instrument of his downfall, or was the wizard indeed the most significant person in Tiger City ?

Bright sun and a blue sky showed beyond the window when he woke up. His jailer was standing at the door, holding a bowl of hot rice and a mug of water to the grille. Hao Sen got quickly to his feet and reached for them.

" What will happen to me today ?" he ventured, seeing that the jailer was somewhat less unprepossessing by daylight than he had been last night.

The man answered in a coarse country dialect which Hao Sen barely understood, but he managed to make out that he was to be tried, at least, before execution. In that case, he reasoned, he might as well delay until the trial was over, for it would yield him further knowledge and might prove useful.

When he had eaten, there was nothing to do but sit on the palliasse and stare at the wall, or at the jailer, who took up his post again patiently. The patch of light from the window had crept three-quarters of the way round the wall before anything happened.

Then there were footsteps, and an officer of the guard whose face seemed familiar to Hao Sen came tramping down the corridor towards the cell. With him were two muscular men-at-arms.

" Is this the man who was found breaking into the wizard's kitchen ?" demanded the officer ; Hao Sen now recalled that he was the one who had been talking to the master of the caravan as it entered the city. The jailer nodded, and the officer addressed Hao Sen directly.

" On your feet, you ! The emperor heard about your exploit in killing the dragon, and wants to have a look at you before you're put to the sword."

The jailer opened the door ; it creaked protestingly.

" Going to behave yourself ?" said the officer, in a not unfriendly tone, and Hao Sen nodded. " That's right ! More dignified to enter the emperor's presence on your own two feet than dragged by these fellows." He indicated the two men-at-arms with him.

A gesture to the jailer, and the officer, with Hao Sen beside him, began to tramp back the way he had come. As he strode along, he talked casually.

" Heard about what you did to that dragon myself. Sounds quite remarkable. Brave. Never been able to understand why brave men in general, saving the names of the greatest heroes, haven't got more brains. Now take yourself, for example. I don't know if you knew whose house you were trying to break into, though if you did you must have even less sense than I suspect. Still, I presume you found yourself short of cash—happens to all you mercenaries after you've been in town for a short while. That's why I think the emperor's idea of keeping

the army in Tiger City for a few months is a good one. Usually a soldier set down on the Street of a Thousand Felicities is as able to look after himself as a new-hatched fledgling. His money goes, he wakes up in the morning with an aching head —just not used to city ways. So he goes off and does something stupid, like burgling a wizard's home.

" Now if I'd been in your position, I'd simply have got hold of a companion or two and gone around the market pointing out that you'd just performed a major service to the people of the city, and wouldn't they like to recognise the fact with a small gift ? You'd soon have found someone who did feel grateful enough to toss in a few cash, and after that the others would feel dishonoured if they didn't copy." He shrugged. " Still, it's foolish telling you now."

They had passed through several passages during this long speech ; at this point they emerged into daylight and found themselves on a steep flight of stairs leading from the top of the ramparts to the ground. A detachment of soldiers waited patiently at the foot ; they fell in around Hao Sen and the officer and proceeded to escort them through narrow alleys for a mile or more.

They emerged into the grounds of an imposing building, but instead of entering it, they crossed a lawn towards a summer-house whose nearest side was open to the fresh air. Twenty paces away the soldiers halted, and Hao Sen felt himself thrust to the ground. As well as he could, he followed the movements of the officer beside him, who was performing the elaborate imperial kowtow.

Stealing a glance upward, he saw that a slender man with sharp black eyes was facing them from a couch half-covered by his vast and gorgeously decorated silk robe ; around him stood slim girls and stout officials, and behind his head, almost exactly framing it, hung a huge bronze gong.

On his left, on a lower couch, sat the wizard Chu Lao.

" You may advance," said one of the officials in a fat and wheezy voice when they had performed their obeisance, and— prodded by the men-at-arms—Hao Sen did so.

" So this is our dragon-killer." The emperor spoke thoughtfully. " A man presumably of more brawn than brain. What do you know of him, Chu Lao ?"

" Very little, august majesty," the wizard answered. " I crossed a companion of his in a tavern a few nights ago ; I saw

him kill the dragon—with some assistance from this same companion. And last night he was caught escaping from my house after breaking in."

" And for what reason did you do this stupid thing ?" the emperor said, speaking directly to Hao Sen.

Hao Sen thought furiously. " I was in drink," he said humbly. " And there was a certain kitchen wench . . . It was not for the purpose of stealing—the honourable wizard will testify that I had money in my pouch when I was trapped."

The emperor glanced at Chu Lao, who seemed taken aback. " I do not know," he admitted, and gestured to a retainer of his own who stood somewhat apart from the emperor's companions. This man stepped forward, bowing.

" Indeed, there were several gold pieces from the south in his pouch, which I do not recollect seeing the like of."

" That alters things somewhat," admitted Chu Lao. " I had not thought to inquire."

The emperor's sharp black eyes searched Hao Sen's face. " I like the look of you," he said suddenly. " You would make me a good soldier. For your effrontery you deserve punishment, but I am not one to deal over-harshly with mere fools. I give you a choice : go free, and be a soldier in my army or stand your trial and face certain conviction."

Hao Sen looked at the wizard, not at the emperor ; he was almost certain now that the emperor was of little importance. It was worth taking a very great risk to be sure.

" I am a fighting man," he said boldly. " I should not like to join an army that does nothing but sit in a walled town eating up, drinking and smoking away the resources of the populace!"

There was dead silence, except for a hiss of amazed horror from the officer of the guard at Hao Sen's side. Then the emperor leaned forward where he sat.

" It is of *my* army you are speaking ?" he demanded. Hao Sen nodded. The emperor's face darkened.

" And that from a man who breaks into a house after a—a kitchen wench ! Take this—this insolent windbag away !"

Immediately the men-at-arms seized him, and before he was forcibly turned on his heel and frog-marched back the way he had come, Hao Sen had a glimpse of Chu Lao studying him with an expression of amused triumph.

No more than an hour later he was back in his cell, with the one-eyed jailer patiently watching him again. He returned to his place on the palliasse and leaned against the wall.

So it *was* Chu Lao he had to face. And time was getting very short. Tonight at the latest, he would have to make his bid to conquer him.

The hours crept away slowly ; at dusk, the jailer lit a torch a few paces down the passage, and returned to his post to eat a handful of rice and sip some tea, but there was nothing for Hao Sen. Then he composed himself to rest, closing his eye but seeming not to sink more than fractionally below the surface of sleep. The least noise from Hao Sen brought his eyelid up, as the prisoner proved to his own complete satisfaction.

That was the first obstacle, then : to put the one-eyed man completely to sleep.

Hao Sen cogitated. So abstract a concept might prove his most difficult task yet. But many men must have slept—some of them deeply—on this filthy pile of straw under him now. He took one of the straws, the longest and straightest he could find, and whispered over it ; then he poked it through the grille of the door, and gave it a flick with his finger.

It twisted as it flew, but it struck its goal ; it brushed lightly across the jailer's face, and he relaxed on the instant, his mouth dropping open and determined snores rising from it.

Hao Sen clattered at the door ; the jailer made no move.

Satisfied, he turned his attention to the window. By pulling himself up to the sill and chinning himself, he could see that he was twice the height of a man or more from the alley which ran outside. The bars were thick, solid bronze ; the embrasure itself was far too narrow for his shoulders.

But there were the straws in the palliasse, and he could pull the bars loose with them.

He chose six straws which matched the bars for length near enough, tied them with hairs from his coat until they formed a rough imitation of the barrier in the window. He hauled himself up with one hand and clung there, sweat running on his face with violence of the effort, while he held the straws against the bars.

Closing his eyes, he concentrated, whispering. And the bars broke with such suddenness that he fell sprawling to the floor. The hand with which he had been holding himself up now

grasped only straws ; the hand which had held the straws clutched the bronze grating.

He reassured himself that the jailer had not been disturbed even by the noise of his crashing fall, and set about finding an answer to his final problem : how to enlarge the embrasure and get through it.

The chief quality of the hole in the wall seemed to be its vacancy now ; but it would be hard to expand the hole and compress the surrounding stone to make way for it. Better, perhaps, to destroy the mortar which held the stones in place.

He worked a crumb or two of it loose, cupped it in the palm of his hand, and rubbed it until it was friable, speaking to it the while in a gentle whisper. The sound of dust falling from between the stones above him told him that he was having some success.

He scrambled up to try tugging loose the first stone below the embrasure, and found himself looking directly into the eyes of someone outside the window.

VI

" Hao Sen ! Hao Sen ! Is that indeed you ?"

It was Lin Ten's voice.

When he recovered from his astonishment, he whispered to her urgently. " Yes, indeed it's Hao Sen. But how—what are you doing here ?" He craned his neck and managed to look down at the ground, discovering that she stood on her brother Lin Soo's shoulders and he in turn on someone else's, though whose Hao Sen could not discern. It was a trick he had often seen them practising on the journey, with the other brother—he who was now dead—taking the full weight.

" We heard what had happened to you, and Kuo Ming sought out one of the city guard who knew where you were. So we came. But is there anything we can do ? You are shut so fast in this prison !"

" You can save me breaking my neck when I jump to the ground," said Hao Sen. " I shall be free from here in another few moments. Here, if you can, help me push some of these stones loose."

" What's happening up there ? This is tiring work !" came a furious whisper from below, and the voice identified the lowermost of the three as Kuo Ming.

" Hola, my old friend," Hao Sen whispered back. " A few more minutes and it will be done."

With Lin Ten pushing so vigorously she all but lost her balance, the loosened stones came free rapidly, and Hao Sen soon judged the aperture wide enough for him to get through. Telling Lin Ten to drop to the ground, he backed his body carefully into mid-air, placed his feet on Lin Soo's shoulders, and then lowered himself to the earth.

As soon as he was standing beside her, Lin Ten flung her arms about his neck, and he was surprised to find that the cheek she pressed to his was wet with tears. " Oh, I was so frightened that we might not be able to save you !" she exclaimed. " What did you do to be imprisoned, Hao Sen ?"

" I'll explain later," he promised, gently disengaging her and turning to face Lin Soo and Kuo Ming, the latter of whom was rubbing his shoulders with a rueful expression.

" I was never an acrobat !" he complained. " Well, my friend, now you're out, what are we going to do with you ?"

" Come away as soon as we can and as far as we can," Hao Sen answered. " I laid a charm on my jailer, but I do not know for how long it will keep him sleeping. Which way do we go ?"

" We know all the alleys," said Lin Soo. " Through there to the right. I know a tavern where no one will ask questions."

Smoky, disreputable, the tavern proved ideal for Hao Sen's intentions, and over cups of wine he explained what had happened to him. When he again referred to the charms he had used in his escape, Kuo Ming interrupted.

" I did not know you were a wizard, Hao Sen ! If you have the art, why are you a soldier like myself ?"

" Because I like not magic !" said Hao Sen emphatically. " Is it right that one selfish man should be able to command all the doing of a whole people ? To command the emperor himself ?"

The others exchanged glances. Lin Soo voiced their common thought. " I do not see you as a man who makes such accusations wildly, Hao Sen. You have knowledge to support them ?"

" I have," said Hao Sen grimly. He recounted what had happened when he was brought before the emperor and Chu Lao. "You have all heard," he concluded, " how the emperor's army sits idle here in Tiger City, while the bandits ravage the

country and rob the caravans. Think you that the emperor is doing this willingly? Not so! I am convinced that Chu Lao is pandering to his vanity by keeping the emperor in this town, at his own beck and call, heedless of the needs of the populace."

"It fits," said Kuo Ming heavily. "It is certain that the army is discontented. I have drunk with many of the men-at-arms since we came here, and they are all sick of doing nothing."

"But what can we do about it? Chu Lao is a very powerful wizard," Lin Ten pointed out. "Would it not be dangerous to cross him?"

Hao Sen hesitated for a moment, and then brought out his suggestion.

"What say you to turning bandit for a while?"

Kuo Ming was the first to answer. "With such an emperor and such an army as we have in Tiger City, a bandit's life should be an easy one. I remember—well, no matter." He coughed, and hid his confusion in his wine-cup.

Lin Soo glanced at him, and then back at Hao Sen. "There is something more than a desire for plunder in your proposition," he said shrewdly. "Explain."

Hao Sen did so, and they listened with rapt attention.

"It is much to ask," he finished. "But it might prove worth it."

"If it was no more than a passing whim, we would still fall in with you, my sister and I," Lin Soo stated. "Have you forgotten our vow to you? But it is a bold plan, and may well serve. You, Kuo Ming? How say you?"

The bass-voiced soldier set his wine-cup down. "As you may perhaps have guessed, I was not always a respectable mercenary as you see me now. I once passed a brief time with the H'ung H'udze—the Red Bandits . . . I think I could call back to mind sufficient of what I learned then to serve us in good stead."

He looked at Hao Sen. "You will need Starlight," he said. "Likewise a sword, since I see yours was taken from you. I think I run least risk if I show myself around the town now. I will meet you at the broken place in the wall to the east—Lin Soo also knows it—at dawn. If your charm on the jailer lasts the night, we should be well into bandit country before they discover we have left the city."

He rose smoothly to his feet and was gone.

* * *

The north-eastern road lay between very steep hills, on whose summits the snow was still crusted thick. Dawn mists swirled around the legs of their camels as they put the miles behind them, and it was not long before the shape of Tiger City was completely blotted out.

They halted at about mid-day, and made a fire to warm themselves. Squatting around it, they discussed their best choice of direction.

" As I read the situation," said Kuo Ming, to whom they looked for information garnered from drinking companions and the soldiers with whom he had talked in the city, " the bandits have been much emboldened throughout the winter by the inactivity of the army, so much so that whereas they formerly only ventured as close as three days' march from any great town, they have been seen less than one day's march even from Tiger City. There can be few passes open yet, in this sort of country, but when we find one the chances are that we will come across bandits simply by following it."

" That is what we must do, then," said Hao Sen. " But we must not be precipitate in our action. I need a little time to practise my skill in magic, for Chu Lao knows very much more than I, and the chances of finding a first-class wizard content to live a bandit's life when there is so much more wealth and comfort in the city are small."

He plucked a brand from the tiny fire, blew on it and muttered a couple of words ; the licking tongue of flame which clung to it burst into a jet like a blow-lamp, ten metres long, and boiled the snow from the crevice between two rocks. He dropped the brand again, and his companions looked at him with awe.

" Where did you get your skill in magic, Hao Sen ?" asked Lin Ten timidly.

" Far to the south, many years ago," said Hao Sen, and thought what an interesting double meaning the perfectly factual statement contained.

Of course, there were probably no bandits at all. But his own individual significance was at least as great as Chu Lao's and he had by now decided that with him were the three other most significant persons he had yet met.

Between them, they should be able to finish the task.

Somewhere, deep in his mind, he found himself regretting that it should be over so soon. The regret mingled with a contrasting pride at having—despite his own arrant care-

lessness at one or two points—mastered the situation so thoroughly in that brief space of time.

Had Chu Lao really made himself over-conspicuous ? Or—nagging doubts assailed him—had he himself been too hasty in jumping to the conclusion that he had identified the most significant person ?

Human vanity was on the side of his decision, he told himself. After all, in a place such as Tiger City (and he had been to many, most of them less impressive), there could be only a few major foci of significance at any one time ; he had seen towns, when he was much less experienced and had to undertake comparatively simple tasks, where one might turn one's head and find that a house was nothing more than a shell, uninhabited and ruinous.

Yes, the chances were in his favour.

He got abruptly to his feet. " I scent bandits," he said. " Let us take the first hillside pass which we find open, and I think we will meet what we want."

They re-mounted as they had been before : Lin Ten astride Starlight, clinging with her arms around Hao Sen's waist, and Lin Soo, teeth chattering, behind Kuo Ming. Before they departed, Kuo Ming scooped over the site of their fire, and they took care not to let their mounts tread anywhere but on hard-frozen ground which would not show a spoor.

It was logical that they should soon come up with bandits, given the postulated situation ; Hao Sen scanned the trail ahead and gestured that they should swing off to the right between two rocks and scramble up a cleft. The winding path soon took them out of sight of the road, and Hao Sen was just thinking, " Somewhere around here ?" when a cold voice commanded them to halt.

Two bearded men, wrapped in heavy skin jerkins, were regarding them from a higher point of vantage. Each of them bore, strung and levelled, a bow with a red-feathered arrow.

" Tsien Po !" said Kuo Ming suddenly, and flung up his arm towards the nearer of the pair. " Surely the gods of luck are with us !"

Uncertainly, the man he had addressed lowered his bow, though his companion did not follow suit. "That is my name," he admitted. " And you—are you by chance Kuo Ming ?"

" That I am !" chortled Kuo Ming in his bass voice. " Sick of belonging with an army that sits in towns and has no bigger prey than a fat-bottomed street-walker ! But who would have thought that we would chance directly across the H'ung H'udze when we grew tired of idleness and decided to take a share in the rich pickings the emperor is nowadays permitting?"

The other man spoke out of the side of his mouth. " He is known to you, Tsien Po ?"

"He is. He was a good swordsman once. He turned caravan guard when times were bad some years ago, and went south."

" And I'm a good swordsman still," Kuo Ming boasted. " I have prevailed on these people with me to quit their soft way of living and return to a life of sport and adventure. He who rides beside me is Hao Sen, not only a soldier and a killer of dragons "—plural, now, noted Hao Sen wryly—" but a skilful wizard into the bargain."

Tsien Po hesitated. " The Chief may not be kindly disposed towards a man who left his band when times were lean and now wishes to wriggle his way back," he said warningly. Hao Sen spoke up.

" Any man would welcome news such as we bring," he said calmly. " For we have come to offer him the chance of sacking Tiger City."

The man whose name they did not know drew his breath in sharply. " A bold design ! To sack a city is a thing which has much occupied the Chief lately. If you truly have the key to Tiger City, you will be welcome. My name is Ho Chan."

" We are honoured to become acquainted with the distiguished Ho Chan and Tsien Po," said Hao Sen. " But we crave more the privilege of encountering your leader."

The two bearded bandits exchanged glances. They seemed to come to a decision simultaneously, and dropped from their higher rock to the cleft below. " Through here," they said together.

A few minutes brought them to the bandit encampment, and Hao Sen was both surprised and pleased to see how extensive it was. Hide tents to the number of two or three hundred—almost the amount of a small army—were grouped in a bowl-like depression among the hills ; riding camels and pack-mules were tethered beside them, and women went between camp fires with bowls of food and buckets of snow to melt for drinking water.

There was one tent larger than all the others, which even had a certain barbaric magnificence ; part of its door-flap was a

badly weather-stained Turkey carpet, and dull brass ornaments and charms hung from its poles.

" Wait here," said Ho Chan curtly, and pushed his way inside.

They attracted surprisingly little attention as they dismounted stiffly and stood with Tsien Po awaiting the reappearance of Ho Chan. A few curious glances was all that they received.

Then the flap of the tent swung aside again, and Ho Chan came out with another, smaller man in garish clothes, whose hair was foppishly long and heavily oiled. Brass earrings gleamed through the locks of it. He was wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, removing some sort of oily broth from his lank moustache.

" You I remember, Kuo Ming," he said abruptly. " And you have brought a wizard with you ? I like not wizards."

His eyes fastened contemptuously on Hao Sen. " Show me a trick," he commanded, and Hao Sen nodded without speaking. He walked brazenly to the side of the tent and detached from it a polished metal mirror ; holding it so that it cast its reflection of the tent from which it was taken to a point on the ground a few yards to the side, he muttered an improvised charm.

Another tent, slightly distorted but quite recognisable, sprang into being alongside the original.

" A good trick," agreed the Chief grudgingly. " What purpose does it serve ?"

" You know that the emperor's army grows fat and lazy sitting on its behind in Tiger City," said Hao Sen.

" Of course. One could hardly overlook the fact," said the bandit leader with heavy irony.

" Suppose now that I were to double—treble—quadruple the apparent size of your band ? Suppose it should seem that the city was besieged by thousands and not by hundreds ? Do you think such an army would not panic ?"

An avaricious gleam showed in the Chief's eyes. " Come into my tent," he said grandly. " For once I meet a wizard who speaks sound sense."

Before night fell, they had come to an agreement. Hao Sen felt it hardly worth while to haggle about conditions, since this stroke they were planning would put a permanent end to Tiger City if he had sized up the situation correctly, but for the sake of appearances he bargained for a respectable share of the loot.

They feasted and drank with the bandit tribe around the fires when their plan was settled, and then the Chief ordered the best and most wind-proof of his tents vacated for them. Sounds of laughter and shouting still rose from around the camp as Hao Sen threw himself down happily on a heap of soft furs. In a way, it was an admission of weakness to go outside the city in his search for the solution, but now he was sure he had found the key.

He was on the verge of drifting into a contented slumber when the flap of his tent lifted and dropped, and a warm lithe form stretched out beside him on the furs.

Later, he regretted more than ever that his task was nearly done.

VII

Effectually, of course, it would not matter whether the army panicked or not. The reflection crossed Hao Sen's mind as he watched the bandits form up preparatory to marching on the final leg of their approach to Tiger City. The army meant nothing. What was necessary, was to put Chu Lao sufficiently off his stroke—to disconcert him by demonstrating that there was more to the world than simply Tiger City—and to take advantage of his even momentary loss of self-control. The one thing that made the problem seriously complicated was the fact that Hao Sen was having to work in accordance with his opponent's rules. But he was used to that.

And it was at least an even chance that Chu Lao knew very little more of the real laws governing the conflict than Hao Sen did.

The gongs began ; the banners were lifted up ; the barbarian army of conquest took the trail.

Hao Sen had insisted on leaving Lin Ten behind in the camp, although Kuo Ming had been surprised at his attitude, pointing out that it would be useful to have her along to bandage him if he was wounded and in general to console him. Hao Sen had laughed it off with reference to his magical invulnerability—something he was only too acutely aware did not yet exist and might only exist for a few seconds some time in the not-so-distant future.

Now he eased Starlight into a gentle walk alongside Kuo Ming's mount, a few places behind the Chief in the procession.

" How does it feel to be taking the warpath as a bandit again?" he inquired.

" Much as it ever did," said Kuo Ming, idly following the beat of the gongs by drumming with his fingers on the pommel of his saddle. " How do you feel, doing it for the first time ?"

" Much as you did, I imagine," Hao Sen answered, and they both laughed.

Hao Sen had chosen the hour before dawn for their final approach, arguing that for the night-watch to see an army of tents and banners facing them as soon as it was light would play havoc with their already low morale. More to the point (though he did not mention this openly), for Chu Lao to be called from his bed and find his city besieged would render him that much more apt to lose his head.

So, with the first hint of sunlight staining the sky, the bandits deployed all round the city, pitching tents and taking their mirrors to do with them as Hao Sen had instructed. He did not want to risk duplicating men—such experiments were likely to backfire—but banners and other inanimate objects he intended to copy wholesale.

When the first shout of amazement went up from the sleepy guards on the gate-houses and the ramparts, there seemed to be thousands of tents in view.

" Good work, wizard," said the Chief with satisfaction. " Now let us see if you can fight as well as you can throw a spell !"

He turned his camel and yelled at his main war-party, and with gongs beating thunderously the armed men galloped towards the eastern gate.

Kuo Ming and Hao Sen followed, Kuo Ming eager for action, Hao Sen wishing to get as close to the city as he could. He scanned the walls keenly to tell whether—so far—there were any signs of the panic he hoped for.

The attackers drew up in half-moon formation facing the gate, to await the arrival of the first reply from the besieged. It took the form of the officer of the city guard whom Hao Sen had met before, shouting at them to demand who they were.

The Chief signalled to a bowman beside him, who sent a red-feathered shaft whining into the wood of the tiger-head shields ranged on the balcony.

" We are the H'ung H'udze !" he shouted. " The Red Bandits ! Tell your idle and dissipated emperor that he has

one half-day to surrender his city to us. When the sun crosses the zenith, we shall attack."

The officer shouted back a coarse insult, and could be seen having a hasty discussion with one of his aides. Hao Sen caught the Chief's eye.

"It is not good for them to be able to study our formation unmolested," he remarked.

"Well taken," nodded the Chief, and a hail of arrows drove the officer and his companions from the balcony.

The morning leaked slowly away. Every time a head showed above the ramparts, a watchful bowman loosed an arrow, and before noon there were twenty or thirty memorials to the incautiousness of soldiers accustomed to idleness bleeding down the walls.

Impatiently, Hao Sen rode back and forth around the city, wondering if this mere inaction betokened confusion on Chu Lao's part, and whether he ought to seize his chance now. He might, for all he knew, have missed his opportunity.

But he would know soon—and even as he quieted his restless mind, the boom of the great war-gongs thundered out. The first flight of fire-arrows soared over the ramparts into the city, and menacingly the army of bandits began to close in.

Suddenly, there was a response from the city. A figure clad in full armour strode on to the balcony over the east gate, and shouted loudly for the attention of the bandits. The Chief rode cautiously forward, and halted at such a distance that only a superbly well-aimed arrow could find him.

"Your emperor wishes to surrender?" he yelled.

"Are you the leader of this band?" the armoured man cried.

"I am!" the Chief agreed, and Hao Sen, seized with a sudden premonition, urged Starlight hard forward. As he began to move, the armoured figure—whom he guessed would be Chu Lao, confident of his ability to protect himself—signalled a bowman who had been crouching out of sight behind the wall. This man let off his arrow almost without aiming it; it flew high and straight and true, obviously enchanted so that it would not miss.

Alarmed, the Chief spun his camel on its hind legs, but the action would have been in vain—the arrow swerved to compensate, and a howl of horror went up from the bandits. Rising in his saddle, hoisting his shield aloft, Hao Sen seemed almost to

fly the last few paces, and the shaft sank deep into his shield scant feet from the Chief's broad back.

Before the audience in and outside the city could recover from their amazement, he had loosed the arrow from its place, caught up the bow laid across the Chief's saddle, and sent it whining back towards the city. Perhaps the word he had spoken was not enough ; perhaps the man in armour was not really Chu Lao—in any case, this time the spell was weak, and the arrow fell a man's height short of the balcony.

The seeming miracle acted as a signal to the bandits, and under the protection of a shower of arrows aimed at the balcony they charged towards the gate. The armoured man had ducked from sight ; his place was taken by a group of men-at-arms who proceeded to put down a withering fire on the attackers.

Hao Sen ignored the thanks, grudgingly given, of the Chief. Things were not going quite as he had anticipated. Instead of a confused panic reflex, the defenders seemed to be settling down to a concerted plan of action. Hao Sen was sure—naturally—that the bandits would do their utmost ; he was not worried that they would prove coward or inefficient at their task. But he had always to remember that he was working in accordance with Chu Lao's rules, not his own, and Chu Lao might well have his own ideas of the relative abilities of his army, even after three months' soft living, and a bunch of nomadic bandits.

He wondered what had driven a person like Chu Lao to this course. Personal inadequacy of some kind was the standard answer—desire for power ? Kuo Ming was comparatively simple : a need for colour and violent action explained him sufficiently. But what could be regarded as inadequate about the ruler of Tiger City ?

Two hours passed, and the bandits withdrew an arrow-shot from the city, leaving fewer dead than could be clearly seen hanging on the ramparts, while under cover of their bowmen a group of pack-mules were driven towards the gate with loads of brush and dried wood. Several men fell as they struggled to heap the stuff against the heavy wooden gate, but at length the Chief gave the signal, and fire-arrows were showered on the inflammable pile.

A peal of thunder burst out in the clear sky, and it suddenly began to pour with rain. Hao Sen had visions of the clouds depriving him of illusory additions to the number of tents, but

that fear was spared him, for the rain lasted only a few minutes, and then the city gates were hurled wide over the smouldering sodden brushwood to let out the vanguard of the defenders. Mounted and on foot, they charged forward yelling, and the fight spread by degrees all round the city.

It was tough work ; particularly around a huge and gorgeous silk banner bearing an embroidered tiger was there a violent melee. Seeing this, Kuo Ming shouted to Hao Sen that they should work their way towards it, and Hao Sen gave himself up to the sheer exhilaration of physical combat.

The time for arrows was past ; now it was sword, axe and occasionally pike. He let Kuo Ming lead the way, finding that they worked well together as a team ; Kuo Ming would distract the attention of a soldier who was proving too much for a bandit, and Hao Sen's long pike would reach past the hind-quarters of Kuo Ming's camel, swipe sideways and drive down. Four or five times they repeated the same tactic, and Kuo Ming grinned back over his shoulder at his companion to shout something congratulatory and incomprehesible.

Then they were pressing close to the tiger-gaudy banner, and Hao Sen knew that Chu Lao was aware of his presence. Star-light stumbled and cried when there was no one near her, and twice her feet seemed to be tangled by invisible ropes.

Now he could see his opponent plainly, his round face shiny beneath his pointed metal helmet, ear-flaps giving him polished metal cheeks. Idiotically, he rose in his saddle and screamed Chu Lao's name ; the wizard flung up his arm and shouted a command, and half a dozen of his closest personal guard thrust their way forward.

" With me, Hao Sen !" cried Kuo Ming, and he waved the sword that the wizard had repaired for Hao Sen after the death of the dragon. He swung it at the helmet of the nearest of the enemy, and in that moment Chu Lao bethought himself of the spell he had wrought—and countermanded it.

Instead of crashing through the soldier's neck, the blade in Kuo Ming's hand bent, before it struck, so that the hilt was at right angles. The startled man-at-arms whose life had so narrowly been spared wasted no time wondering about the fact —merely cut the throat of Kuo Ming's camel. One of his companions thrust upwards over his shoulder with a pike, and Kuo Ming slid to the ground over his mount's head, coughing blood.

Purposefully, the other guards made for Hao Sen.

He, seeing there was too much risk in staying mounted now, leapt from his saddle ; relieved of his weight, Starlight kicked furiously, and heavy pads knocked the two foremost of the attackers flying, ribs bruised, wind knocked out of them.

" O wondrous beast !" whispered Hao Sen.

But the distraction afforded before the camel was herself slashed to the ground with wild sword-cuts was only enough for him to take a few steps towards Kuo Ming's body. One thing was clear to him now : there was a law governing Chu Lao's magic which was the same as for all magic, and it had not been broken. He had to get his hands on a sword—not the one he held, though it was straight and still keen, but the bent, apparently useless one which Kuo Ming even in death clung fast to.

It seemed that the three strides separating him from the twisted weapon were the longest journey he had ever had to undertake. He slashed and thrust and caught blows on his shield ; twice glancing swords made his helmet ring, and twice he himself felt his sword-point slow and then free itself in a way which meant it had cut clean through human flesh. A dismembered arm seemed for one wild moment trying to catch hold of him by the beard ; he beat it aside with his shield.

Then he made his dive for the bent sword, wrested it from Kuo Ming's dead grasp, and straightened up. Taken aback by his unexpected action, the attackers gave him a moment's respite.

" Chu Lao !" Hao Sen shouted. Chu Lao ! *I name your city* !"

The wizard, as if struck by a premonition, wavered where he stood ; all over the battlefield men seemed to lose heart for the fight and turned to see what would happen. Hao Sen rushed on.

" The city is Tiger City ! That tiger is your city ! The tiger is less powerful than the dragon !"

All eyes turned towards the city ; how it happened could not clearly be seen, but where it had stood was a green-eyed striped cat, crouching and snarling, its claws unsheathed and huge beyond imagining.

" My Tiger !" cried Chu Lao. " That is my tiger !"

" And this sword has drunk of a dragon's blood !" Hao Sen shouted. " *This sword is my dragon* !"

He whirled the blade once around his head and flung it sparkling into the air ; as it twisted, it changed, and as it fell it fell on four gigantic taloned feet. It raised its spiny head and waved its monstrous tail ; from its open jaws it roared defiance at the tiger.

It reared up ; it slashed, and its talons added stripes of blood to the tiger's striped hide ; it bit, and rivers of blood stained the earth. Vainly the tiger's claws tore at its impenetrable scales ; there was no chance for it. In moments it fell, with a thud that shook the world. The world was riven apart, and with it, Hao Sen's mind. For an instant he saw the tents of the bandits, the gory ground, the men-at-arms and the dying, and then . . .

. . . and then he was Gerald Howson, Psi,D., curative telepathist first class, World Health Organisation.

As he always had been.

The nurse waited until his eyes were fully open and taking in the room around him before she began to detach the artificial feeding machine which had kept him alive during his journey. She said nothing ; she had attended to Howson before, and knew he disliked being spoken to directly he returned.

For a long time after he awakened he lay quite still, until the door of the ward slid back and Pandit Singh came in. His green hospital gown swished quietly as he approached the bed.

" Congratulations," he said at length. " It must have been tough. But they're coming out of catalepsy now, one by one, and I think they're all going to be all right."

Howson didn't look directly at the doctor's serious brown face ; instead, he glanced through the window at the great white towers of Ulan Bator. " Yes, it was tough," he admitted. " But not quite in the way you mean."

The nurse brought a chair to the bedside, and Pandit Singh sat down. " Gerry, there's something I want to ask you—off the record, before you have to do your report. It's been puzzling me. What makes these people do it ? Why do they react that way ? Do you know ?"

" You mean, what impels a transmitting telepathist to invite people to join in a fantasy world, and why do they accept a subordinate position in it apparently less attractive than their real existence ?" Howson smiled faintly. " Odd you should ask me that. It was occupying me on this trip. The stock answer is personal inadequacy, isn't it ?"

" Yes, but that's not the quarter of it !" Pandit Singh spoke emphatically. " Hugh Choong—the nucleus of this lot—we *need* men like that. He's a first-class psychiatrist and one of our top industrial disputes arbitrators into the bargain. There's nothing patently inadequate about him—he handles two of the most difficult jobs in the world with supreme confidence !"

" No wonder his Tiger City was such a polished job," murmured Howson ; then, noting the expression of noncomprehension on the Indian's face, he added, " Tell you later. No, there was nothing incompetent about his fantasy-building. He must have a superlatively disciplined mind. And yet, as you say, he preferred to run off into the role of a barbarian Mongolian sort of grand vizier . . . A strange mixture of primitive actualities and modern concepts, his particular universe . . ."

He spread his hands. " No, I would rather not offer explanations for such behaviour. Now my case, on the other hand, is rather different."

" Your case ?" Pandit Singh frowned.

" Yes, my case. Some of the less significant individuals in one of these fantasies are comparatively easy to account for. There was a man called Kuo Ming—I doubt if I could identify him. In his case, it was a need for violence which lured him, persuaded him to join with Choong—how did he choose to start his own group off, by the way ?"

" Typically. He walked them into that square facing the hospital, sat them on benches, and sent them into catalepsy."

" Knowing that there of all places they were bound to be spotted before they starved to death, brought in and cared for. I see. Well, Kuo Ming's need for violence was satisfied—by a barbarian's pike. He died. I should imagine that will cure him.

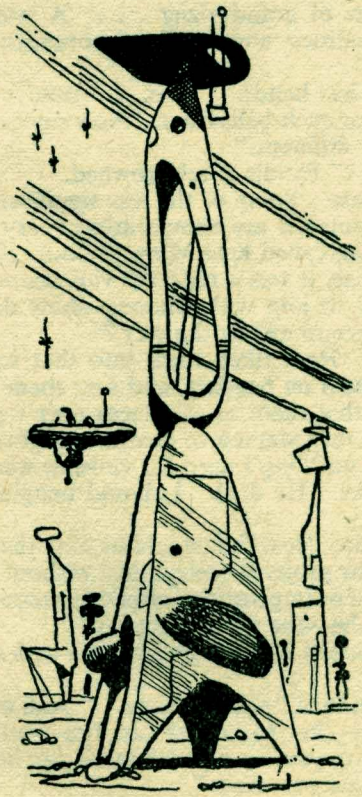
" But my case. Now that would be one where the actions of the nucleus—the projective telepathist without whom a fantasy grouping would be impossible—would be more easily explained than those of the—the supporting cast."

" Are you jealous ?" said Pandit Singh with sudden horrified realisation.

" Yes, I'm jealous," said Howson. " And why not ? There was a girl there—her name was Lin Ten—well, it wasn't real, anyway. I'll give you my report later, if you have no objection I—I need to rinse my mind."

He got down from the bed ; Pandit Singh's eyes followed him as he went towards the door. He had to reach up towards the handle, of course. It was slightly stiff, but when the nurse made to help him he glared at her, and redoubled his effort. After a second try he managed it, and Gerald Howson, four feet three inches tall, went limping slowly through the corridors towards the modern world.

—John Brunner



WHO STEALS MY PURSE . . .

For a newcomer to science fiction and fantasy writing, Mr. Reed has settled in extremely well—this is his fourth consecutive story in Science Fantasy *and he has also appeared in* New Worlds *during the same period. He shows considerable versatility of plot, too, as you will realise from the following story.*

BY CLIFFORD C. REED

Simply because the world at large has not heard of a matter transmitter does not mean that there is no such thing. There is. It has been tested, and it has been proved. Because the proof was convincing the authorities wasted no time in paying Elijah Anvil the modest sum that Myra insisted it was worth to them. Provided, they stipulated, that Elijah never made another, duplicated the plans for one, never did anything that might lead anyone to believe that there was such an instrument. When the obliging Elijah agreed they heaved a concerted sigh of relief, gave him the money in one pound notes, as Myra demanded, ushered the two off the premises, and then sat back to worry where the safest place was to hide their purchase.

The thing that caused some of them a certain amount of annoyance was the uselessness of Elijah's discovery. It enabled the operator to move things, but only in one direction; over a short distance, and only if the objects did not exceed a certain weight. Possibly, if the Governor of the Bank of England had not been a humane man, he would have advised that Elijah and Myra should be executed out of hand. As it was, he agreed instantly, the moment Myra named a figure, and carried the other directors and the Treasury officials with him.

Outside, on the pavement, halting at his parked car, Elijah's face showed uneasiness. He put down the two suitcases he carried. " I'm still not sure we should have kept quiet about Max," he muttered.

Deliberately Myra hacked him on the ankle. " Will you stop worrying ?" she scolded. " Let Max worry. He'll have good cause to, the rat ! When we've finished with him."

" Suppose," Elijah ventured, " suppose he's suspicious ?"

" Smells a rat, eh ?" Elijah nodded, and the girl grinned. " He probably would do," she agreed. " But, we won't be seeing him. Only the lawyer. And when the lawyer sees the cash, actual money, on his desk, *he'll* drop his guard." She put her hand on Elijah's huge fist. " Poor Fido," she said. " Poor worried Fido."

Elijah grinned. " I suppose I am a fool," he admitted.

She nudged him with her shoulder. " Don't try to change," she told him. " I like you that way."

But, Elijah reflected, that *was* his trouble—never being sure of himself. Not enough to stand against what other people were convinced he ought to do. Myra, for instance, believed that *she* knew best how he should act. He did not resent this. Probably because, deep down, he agreed with her ideas. As he had never agreed with his father's, although he had lacked the power to stand out against him. He had always resented the way in which his tentative suggestion had been dismissed.

" Scientist !" Anvil Senior had snorted. " Nonsense ! You'll take my place in the business. And you'll see to it that your son, in his turn, does the same. The name 'Anvil' *means* herbalist so far as the public is concerned, and it's your duty to carry on when I go."

That was all there was to it.

He'd kept up his interest in science. But only as an amateur, a part-time devotee—handicapped by the demands of the

business. With the inevitable result that he had drifted into impractical backwaters. He pursued will-o'-the-wisp ideas which proper discipline would have labelled as time wasters from the beginning. Such as the wild dream he had of directing and controlling solid materials by other than normal agents.

" Energy," he argued. " That's what it has to be. Using it to attract or repel."

Over a period of four or five years he experimented with his private Philosopher's Stone. Sometimes his sense of proportion gained the upper hand, and he shamefacedly crammed his notes and diagrams into the incinerator. Another time, when his feeling of rebellion against the business surged up and overflowed, he began again.

Until, one night, after making a final connection, he twisted a knob, and the splinter of wood on the focus plate vanished. His eyes widened. He made a croaking noise, and peered nervously over the edge of his apparatus. It—couldn't—be ! But, there against the machine, held to it by an invisible force, was the chip.

He sat back in awe at what he had done. He shook his head. " Never *really* thought it could be done," he muttered. " Of all the crazy things !" He craned forward again. The chip hadn't moved. " Try it again," he said. He twisted the knob in the opposite direction, and watched the splinter fall away as the force was cut off. He picked it up, and replaced it on the plate. Then, slowly, twisted the knob.

" It works," he said.

He stood up. " And now, what ?" he asked. " What happens now ? Announce this ? Or—go on ?" He grunted. " I think go on." He pinched his chin. " It's not likely anyone else'll discover this also. They wouldn't be so daft as to waste time on such a dam' fool notion. Not genuine scientists."

Methodically he switched off, covered up his apparatus, and went to bed. But not to sleep.

" If I'd got the money," he thought as he lay awake, " I could develop this properly. But the business is pretty well dead." He sighed. " That's my fault, of course. I'm not really interested." He sighed again. " If it weren't for her I'd sell up, and get a job." He twisted in the bed. " Not that I'm getting anywhere this way." He growled in anger at himself. " A fine thing when a man hasn't got the nerve to

tell his secretary how he feels about her. But—how the devil can I when I don't make enough to keep her properly?"

He took the problem to work with him next morning. It didn't make him feel better. So that when Myra McKenzie smiled, and greeted him, he shuffled, and mumbled, and did not look her in the eye. So that he did not see her expression which was compounded of affection, and amusement, and a good dollop of exasperation.

"There's a Mr. Duggan waiting to see you," she announced.

"Duggan? We haven't got a creditor by that name," Elijah reflected. "Who's he acting for?"

"For himself, I'd say," she answered. She pursed her lips. "Better pretend you've never learned to sign your name," she advised.

Elijah snorted. He wasn't altogether a mug. He stalked through to where his visitor waited.

"Mr. Anvil? How do you do." The stocky, aggressive man pumped Elijah's hand. "I'm Max Duggan, Mr. Anvil. I've been looking into your business, Mr. Anvil." He shook his head. "It's not good enough, Mr. Anvil."

"Eh?" Elijah blinked.

"That's it, Mr. Anvil. Profit and loss. Not enough of the one. That sticks out a mile. And a good chance of the other."

"Look here— !" Elijah bristled.

"I have, Mr. Anvil. I don't waste my time. I'm not wasting yours. Not if I step up your sales, eh, and increase your profits? As I've got to do if the firm isn't to go on the rocks." He smiled a quick smile.

"You a pilot?" Elijah enquired with mild nastiness.

"I know the ropes." Max Duggan would not go on the defensive for a man of Elijah's calibre. "I've done it with others. I'll do it here. All you've got to do is to give me a free hand, and a percentage of the *increased* profits. No fees. No retainer."

"How?" Elijah knew he was hooked, but this man offered him something he wanted, something he felt he could not accomplish for himself. He could at least hear his idea.

"The approach," Max Duggan replied. "That's *my* speciality." He nodded. "I'll move that desk over to that window," he declared. "Give me half an hour, and I'll have the details of the first ad. ready."

"Ad? Advertisement?" Elijah frowned.

Max Duggan looked at him. In that look Elijah read a sad weighing-up of his own incapacity, a patient tolerance for his weak, out-of-date, inefficient failure to move with the times. He blinked, and withdrew.

" He's going to increase sales," he told Myra. " On a percentage basis."

" What percentage ?" Myra demanded.

Elijah blushed.

The girl stood up. " One of us might as well know," she said, and went in to Max Duggan.

" Twenty," she reported when she came back. " He wanted twenty-five. He pointed out how another year ought to see us bust. If we didn't get organised. But I said that, seeing the business was paying for the publicity he'd suggested, there were limits." She sat down at her desk. " I'll get that typed, and you can both sign it," she told him. She looked at Elijah. " I don't like that sort either," she murmured, " but if he can do what he says I'll try to make an exception in his case."

Elijah advanced one step. " You don't want to see the firm fail ?" he dared.

" Of course, I don't," she answered. She looked away. " I mean, it's my job, isn't it ?"

" Yes," Elijah answered. He felt dampened. " We mustn't let that happen."

He went across to the other desk, sat down heavily, and ploughed into the scanty mail. Until Max Duggan came bustling in, slapping down a sheet of bold, arresting matter which drew a squawk from Elijah.

" There !" announced the publicity virtuoso.

Myra rose, came to peer over Elijah's shoulder. " Goodness !" she exclaimed.

" We'll get it in," Max Duggan told them. " To-day. If you'll make out a cheque, Miss."

Elijah looked up at the girl, appealing to her.

" It's good," she reassured him. " It's very good, Mr. Anvil. Don't you think so ?"

Elijah felt a rush of warmth. It was kind of her to make it sound as though *he* were to decide. He nodded. " Yes," he said. " It's—" he stumbled. " Very effective, Mr. Duggan. Very ! I congratulate you."

" For a beginning," Max Duggan returned, " it will do. When I get into my stride— !" His chest rose.

Elijah shuddered at the vital self-confidence of the man. Then consoled himself with the thought of what such power could mean for him. If Max Duggan's scheme worked.

He would be able to speak to Myra. He would be able to go ahead with his discovery—develop it—improve it. He would, after all these years, achieve his boyhood's ambition. He would be a scientist—a recognised, acknowledged scientist.

" If you will write out a cheque," he told Myra, " I will sign it."

" That's the idea," Max Duggan approved. " And don't make any mistake on it, eh, miss ?" he added to Myra.

He was nasty, Myra grumbled to Elijah. He was bumptious and ill-bred, and one day he would get the surprise he deserved. Elijah sympathised. But, when he suggested that he should tell Max Duggan that he did not wish to continue with the association the girl vetoed this.

" He'll do it," she said. " I can't stand him, but I've got to admit he knows what he's doing."

" Well," Elijah murmured, " if that's what you think—"

After a month there was no question about whether Max Duggan was going to succeed. The post was twice as large. After a second month Myra engaged another assistant.

" Good-bye, Carey Street," she announced.

Elijah chuckled. Soon, if things kept up, he would cross into the Promised Land. The sun was shining, and a whole opera company of birds was tuning up on the rooftop stage across the street. His good humour lasted until the arrival of Max Duggan.

" It's paying off, eh, Mr. Anvil ?" He nodded several times. " I'm earning my per cents, eh ?" He slapped the books on Myra's desk. " Getting it all down, eh, miss ? That's right." He touched Elijah's coat sleeve. " A little bird tells me you've maybe been holding out on everybody, Mr. Anvil."

" Eh ?" Elijah stared down at the chunky Max Duggan. " How ?"

" One of these backroom boys. Brains. Science. Discoveries." He jiggled one hand among the coins in his pocket. " Inventions. There's money in that sort of thing, handled properly."

Elijah drew back. " I've never made any money."

" Not on the things you've done. No. I know. I've checked. Three patents. Nothing anyone can use." Elijah frowned. The fellow was impossible. " But—what about what you're working on now. Miss here knows. The way you act." Myra flung an apologetic look at Elijah. " She can tell when you're pleased with what you're doing. But—she can't tell you how to turn it into a smile from the bank manager. That's what I'm here for." He nodded some more. " Making hay for people. And me, of course. But, who's going to grudge that, eh ? Nobody. Like you don't grudge me my share here. So—what do you say, Mr. Anvil ?"

" There isn't anything to say," Elijah assured him fervently. " There isn't anything in what I'm doing now. No money in it at all. In the nature of a scientific curiosity only." He nodded also. " A scientific toy, you might say."

Max Duggan stared at him. Then, jerked his head. " If that's how you feel," he said. " Only, there's money in toys too, Mr. Anvil."

" I assure you there's no money in what I'm doing," Elijah declared.

He hoped he would not have to say any more, and, to his relief, Max Duggan did not argue. To Myra's relief also.

After their offensive genius had gone she apologised. " I don't know how I could have said anything," she confessed. " But I must have said enough to make him interested."

" It's all right," Elijah answered. " There's no harm done. I think I've satisfied him there's nothing in it he could use."

" I hope so," she returned. She did not seem altogether convinced.

A third month passed, and a fourth. There was now no question of a question. The business was prosperous. Elijah was happy. So, for reasons which she did not analyse, was Myra. Only Max Duggan was not content.

Perhaps there was something in his make-up which would always forbid him to stop and say, " This is enough. This, when it is complete, will satisfy me." It was so now. His twenty per cent was growing, and would increase further. That would have contented most men. But Max Duggan's mind told him that there was something else ; something which he had reached out for, and which had been refused

him. He could not endure this. This was a condition which must be changed.

He was, though, a reasonable man. So he debated with himself. He must be smooth in this matter. These impractical types could be downright mulish if they were flustered. Therefore he would approach Anvil quietly, gradually convince him that it was in his own interests to have him, Max Duggan, cast an eye over the work he was doing. It might be that what Anvil had said was true, that there *was* no practical use in it. But he wouldn't take Anvil's word on that. He wouldn't take Anvil's judgment on anything. The fool might be as brainy as miss seemed to think he was, but that didn't mean anything. Most of these clever types weren't fit to be trusted with a wheelbarrow. You had to be someone like Max Duggan to know what was good, and what wasn't worth bothering about.

He strolled into the general office, and started talking. About this. About that. Gradually working nearer.

" Going ?" Elijah repeated. The question had been slid, inconsequentially, into the conversation. " How's what going ?"

" It's several weeks," Max Duggan explained. " Since you said there wasn't any money in it. Maybe you've got a bit farther, eh, Mr. Anvil ? Miss here seemed to think you're happy about it."

" I never said anything of the sort," Myra protested.

Max Duggan shrugged. " You didn't go so far as to sign an affidavit," he conceded.

She glared. " If *you* were anyway mixed up in it, Mr. Duggan, I wouldn't sign anything. I don't like your way of doing things."

" I get results," Mas Duggan reminded her. " That's what counts." He nodded. " It's those results that pay you every Friday, miss, and don't you forget it."

He dismissed her carelessly, turning back to Elijah. " I'd be interested in hearing it first hand," he suggested slyly.

" No one," Elijah told him, " is hearing anything. First hand or otherwise." He pulled himself up. " You're both of you very well-meaning, I know, but this happens to be my own personal affair."

He went away stiffly to his own office.

A resolute Myra followed him. " I'd like you to know that what he said wasn't true," she said.

Elijah's face remained bleak. " Shall we just forget the whole thing ?" he suggested.

She breathed deeply. Then, very deliberately, she slammed the door. " No," she flamed. " Because you *won't* forget it. You won't *say* anything, but things will be different. Spoiled. Unless we have it out, here and now." She advanced on him. " It's for you to say," she challenged. " What is it you want?"

She realised afterwards that she had brought it on herself. But by then it was too late. Elijah's long arms reached out, and Elijah's mouth came down, and she was gripped and silenced.

Later, after her first instinctive resistance, and subsequent co-operation, she pushed him away. Not far. Just enough for her to lean back, and consider him with interest. " A year of sheep's eyes," she murmured, " then, all of a sudden, a cave-man attack. How am I supposed to take this ?"

" I love you," Elijah exclaimed.

She nodded. " I do, too," she answered. " But that's not what I asked. Which newspaper do people see our names in —the Times, or one of the Sunday scandal sheets ?"

Elijah stared, then flung back his head. When he could speak, " If you won't feel disappointed," he managed, " I'd prefer respectability."

" So long as I know," Myra said.

She let him come back, went half way to meet him.

They were not thinking of Max Duggan. Which, while it was natural, was not wise. For Max Duggan was very busy thinking about them. When Myra failed to come out of the inner office ; when his very efficient ears heard laughter, alternating snatches of sound and periods of silence, he interpreted these things correctly, and without pleasure.

Things would be different from now on. He was the one who had put this business on a flourishing basis. He was the one who should reap the benefit. Instead, it was miss who thought to carve herself the largest slice. Because, quite obviously, she had known more about what Anvil was doing than she had let on. Which was why she had acted so quickly when he had started working on the dope. She didn't intend anyone else to collect, not if she could help it. And, since Anvil had reacted in just the way she had wanted him to do, she would be thinking she had won all along the line.

Well, maybe she was going to get a surprise.

He went back to his desk, and studied the layout of the forthcoming advertisement which Anvil had just approved.

Presently he drew a sheet of paper towards him, and began to write. There were more ways than one of skinning a cat. As miss was going to find out before she was much older.

When he finished he considered his handiwork. He nodded. It would do very well. In his mind he ran over the names of several friends. They would play, he knew. For a thousand pounds there wasn't one who wouldn't swear to anything. He slid the revised copy into his pocket, and went off to arrange for its insertion in the papers.

When this operation was finished maybe Anvil would see sense. Maybe he'd even be eager to talk then.

In Elijah's office there was a pause.

"What about *him*?" Myra asked.

"What *about* him?" he countered.

"Well, how's he going to take this? Us?"

Elijah grunted. "He can take it how he dam' well pleases," he told her. "It's none of his business." He looked at her shrewdly. "You think he might act up, eh?" He grinned. "Why should he? He's doing well out of it. He's not likely to throw that away."

"I don't trust him," Myra said. She shook her head irritably. "I know that sounds silly, but there it is."

Elijah shrugged. "When he comes in, and says he's pulling out, that's when you start worrying," he advised. He kissed her. "My own opinion of him, I don't think you need start worrying yet."

Myra stared ahead of her. "He wants to know what you're doing," she reminded him.

"He can keep on wanting," Elijah retorted. "It wouldn't help him if he did know. So far as I can see at present, it wouldn't help anyone. Not commercially. It's interesting. But that's all. Maybe, when I've done some more work on it—?" He snorted. "How about forgetting our friend, and discussing more important things?" he suggested.

"Put that way—!" Myra agreed.

But when she opened her paper next morning, and saw the advertisement that carried Anvil's name her worries returned. Elijah, she thought, had never sanctioned *this*. It was—it was asking for trouble. She skimped her breakfast to get to the office early. At that, Elijah was before her.

" The ad," she said.

Elijah was frowning. " You've seen it too, have you ?" He strode into the room where Max Duggan composed his masterpieces. But the publicity expert was not there. " Get him on the 'phone, will you ?" he commanded. " Say I want to see him. Here. Now ! Then get on to the papers, and cancel any repeats."

" Not at his place," Myra reported. " He didn't sleep there last night."

" That means it's deliberate." Elijah was surprisingly calm. " So now we know where we stand." He stared at Myra. " He's out to break us. Anyone following out what that ad. suggests would have a good case for damages." He smiled tautly. " I'll bet my bottom dollar that's what he's doing right now—collecting claimants."

She stared. " Oh !" She swallowed. She turned back to the telephone, and dialled feverishly. " He's certainly not mad," she spared time to comment.

" No," Elijah agreed. " But, I'd like to know just *why* he's done this."

" To make trouble." Her voice was miserable. " It's my fault."

" No," Elijah shook his head. " It's not that. If I know him, there's money in this. For him." He rubbed his chin. " But how much does he expect to get. He's probably got a shrewd idea of what Anvil's is worth."

Within a week he had the answer. When the mail was opened. When he and Myra read the two dozen letters, all from the same firm of solicitors, all stating that as a result of following the advice given in that last advertisement the writer's client had suffered certain ill effects.

" Altogether," Elijah announced, " forty-eight thousand pounds. Settled out of court, say half that. That's still too much. He must know that. There isn't any profit for him in breaking the firm. He wouldn't do it just out of malice." He frowned.

" Nice man," Myra muttered.

" Very," Elijah said absently, still worrying at what Max Duggan intended.

" There's your invention—" Myra suggested after a long silence.

" Wouldn't bring in anything—" Elijah stopped. His face changed. " Hey !" he said.

" What is it ?" Myra caught some of his excitement.

" Wait !" He stood up. He began to stalk up and down. " I wonder—? " He came back to her. " Listen," he said. " Tell me if this is crazy, will you ?"

She listened with mounting animation. She hunched up in her chair. " And then—?" she demanded, eyes wide, lips parted. " Go *on*, darling," she urged. She leaned across the desk.

She stayed in that position until he had finished.

" Do you think they'd buy it ?" Elijah wondered nervously. " For enough to pay off those claims ? Maybe, even, a bit more ?"

Myra collapsed. She gave a wail of laughter. She fell back helplessly in her chair. Elijah leaped towards her. She grabbed him. The tears streamed down her face. " If there's anyone," she gasped, " who's too impractical to be allowed out loose, I'd hate to see them."

" But, would they do it ?" Elijah asked.

She pulled herself together. " Of course they will," she said. " They wouldn't dare let you publish that." She fingered her lip. " How big is your machine ?" she asked.

" About, oh, about a shoe box," he answered.

She nodded. She grinned. " To-morrow, Croesus," she told him, " we're paying a visit to the bank. Before that, you've got to get it ready to demonstrate. It's got to be portable."

" Right."

" Good." She paused thoughtfully. " We'd better call it a day here," she advised. " You do your side of it. Meanwhile, I'll get in touch with the lawyer." She winked. " I'll try to fix it that we go there straight from the bank. With the money to pay him." Elijah gulped, then nodded. " I'll come round to you at about five," she finished.

" Why so late ?" Elijah wanted to know.

Myra shrugged. " If we're going to do big business, we've got to look the part. Means I've got to get a new outfit."

Elijah was amused. " That's as good an excuse as a woman would need," he commented.

" It will also do for the trousseau," Myra pointed out.

He beamed. " Now that's a *good* excuse," he approved.

She pushed him out when he showed signs of lingering. " Not now," she told him firmly. " Five o'clock."

In the entrance to the Bank next morning—

" We want to see the Governor," Myra announced. She handed over an envelope. " When he's read this," she said, " he'll see us. In spite of not having an appointment."

An hour later several officials watched suspiciously as Myra pushed ten bank notes under the teller's grille. Beside her Elijah held an open bag, level with the counter. Inside the bag was a box.

" Watch," Myra instructed her audience.

Nervously the teller counted the money, added the ten one-pound notes to a wad he took from the drawer.

" Now," Elijah rumbled. His fingers twisted the knob on the box.

" See !" Myra smiled sweetly.

The officials gasped. In the bag, pressed close against the box, was a cluster of bank notes. Elijah twisted the knob back. The officials examined the notes.

" They're the same ones," they admitted.

They checked. The wad the teller held was inspected, was found ten pounds short.

" Well ?" Myra demanded. She looked round. " Add it up for yourselves," she invited. " Call that a real deposit. I've got a signed slip that proves I've paid ten pounds into my account. I've also got my ten pounds back. In the bag." She lifted her shoulders. " How long will the banks last when everyone's got a machine like this, and is playing ' Double Your Money ' ? "

The officials shuddered.

There were other demonstrations. For other directors. For the Treasury.

Until agreement was reached, and Myra and Elijah exchanged the bag with its box for two suitcases containing fifty thousand pounds.

" I rang up," Myra told Elijah as they drove away. " I said we didn't want to fight. That, if we could compromise on a figure, we'd pay in cash. To-day. Provided we got a proper clearance. We settled on thirty thousand. He sounded oily. I think he knows very well it's a put-up job."

" I expect he does," Elijah answered vaguely.

Myra sighed. " Something is still on your mind," she said.

" The bank," Elijah admitted. " I reckon we're lucky they didn't ask if I'd made more than one machine."

" Why should they ?" the girl retorted. " They've got their one. You've agreed not to make another. They're happy. And, as far as this one is concerned, it won't exist much longer either." She straightened up from her task of packing thirty thousand pounds into only one suit-case. Together with Elijah's second machine. " We ought to be flying a flag," she said cheerfully. " A skull and crossbones. If that'd make your conscience feel easier."

Elijah grunted. " I expect I'm being silly," he said.

Myra laughed. After a while he chuckled also.

Mr. Sylvester, bachelor-at-law, greeted them blandly. Until his pale eyes noted the suitcase the man carried ; noted also the purposeful air about both the man and the woman. Some of his easy manner faded. There was a lot that was queer about this business. People didn't agree to hand over thirty thousand pounds on so blatant a fraud without some sort of fight. There was a trick somewhere. He set his small mouth. The woman had said they'd pay cash. That might be bluff. He was going to see this money before he lifted a finger.

" If you've got the settlements," the man opened, " we've got the money."

Mr. Sylvester frowned. " You've brought it with you ?" he asked with obvious disbelief.

" Yes," Elijah answered. He put the case on the edge of the desk, unlocked it, and opened the lid. Mr. Sylvester jumped. " You can count it," Elijah told him. " You can take it over to the bank to check if it's genuine." He pushed his hands in his pockets. " Whatever you like," he said.

" I'll—just look at some, perhaps." Mr. Sylvester was overawed. So much money on his desk. He lifted a bundle of five hundred, plucked out a note here, a note there. Took up another bundle. A third. To his eye all were perfect.

Yet, there must be a catch.

But his eyes came back to the money, and the money was real.

He took the papers they wanted from a drawer. " You'll find them in order," he said.

Elijah nodded, reading the top one. The others were the same.

" If you'll sign a clearance," he said.

Mr. Sylvester had this prepared, a block one, acknowledging the receipt of thirty thousand pounds in full settlement of

alleged damages suffered by certain clients, names appended, due to misrepresentation in an advertisement put out by Anvil Ltd.

He signed this clearance.

" Thank you," Elijah murmured. He looked at Mr. Sylvester. " I'd like the case back if you don't mind," he said.

" Of course," Mr. Sylvester agreed. Out of his fee he would gladly have bought Elijah a new case, a beautiful, brand new case. But he did not offer. He began stacking the money on the top of his desk. Until only one thing remained in the case, an object about the size of a shoe box.

They moved towards the door. About five feet away from the desk.

" Thank you," Elijah said.

" Thank *you*," Mr. Sylvester returned.

" Thank you," Myra said. She was on the other side of Mr. Sylvester. He must turn to face her.

Elijah was holding the box awkwardly, the lid still raised. His hand went in through the gap, and his fingers twisted the knob on the box inside. The case became heavier. Over Mr. Sylvester's head he looked down at Myra, still holding Mr. Sylvester's hand.

" Good-bye," she said. She gave Mr. Sylvester a brilliant smile.

" Good-bye. Good-bye." Mr. Sylvester wrung her hand. " Good-bye, my dear young lady."

He came with them through the outer office, beamed at them fondly as they went out through the front door. Such a nice, generous, open-handed, young couple. He wished them all the happiness in the world. A wonderful, truly wonderful, pair.

They got into their car, and he waved coyly. He turned round. He walked, exuding goodwill, back past his clerk and his typist. He reached the door of his office.

" Well ?" A tense Max Duggan emerged from the shelter of the waiting room, strode forward to join him where he stood on his threshold.

Mr. Sylvester executed a half turn. Proudly he flung out his hand towards his desk. " Look !" he exclaimed. His attitude was proprietary, pontifical, sublime.

" Look where ?" Max Duggan snarled.

—Clifford C. Reed

THE MAN WHO NEVER FORGOT

Robert Silverberg is more noted for his science fiction stories than for fantasy but his versatility as a writer is so good that he is equally at home in either medium. The following story has a very simple theme—a retentive memory—but the repercussions are far from simple.

BY ROBERT SILVERBERG

He saw the girl waiting in line outside a big Los Angeles movie house, on a mildly foggy Tuesday morning. She was slim and pale, barely five-three, with stringy flaxen hair, and she was alone. He remembered her, of course.

He knew it would be a mistake, but he crossed the street anyway and walked up along the theatre-line to where she stood.

" Hello," he said.

She turned, stared at him blankly, flicked the tip of her tongue out for an instant over her lips. " I don't believe I—"

" Tom Niles," he said. " Pasadena, New Year's Day, 1955. You sat next to me. Ohio State 20, Southern Cal 7. You don't remember ?"

" A football game ? But I hardly ever—I mean—I'm sorry, but—"

Someone else in the line moved forward toward him with a tight hard scowl on his face. Niles knew when he was beaten. He smiled apologetically and said, " I'm sorry, miss. I guess I made a mistake. I took you for someone I knew—a Miss Bette Torrance. Excuse me."

And he strode rapidly away. He had not gone more than ten feet when he heard the little surprised gasp and the " But I *am* Bette Torrance !"—but he kept going.

I should know better after twenty-eight years, he thought bitterly. *But I forget the most basic fact—that even though I remember people, they don't necessarily remember me . . .*

He walked wearily to the corner, turned right, and started down a new street, one whose shops were totally unfamiliar to him and which, therefore, he had never seen before. His mind, stimulated to its normal pitch of activity by the incident outside the theatre, spewed up a host of tangential memories like the good machine it was :

Jan 1 1955 *Rose Bowl Pasadena California Seat G*216 ; *warm day, high humidity, arrived in stadium* 12.03 p.m., pst. *Came alone. Girl in next seat wearing blue cotton dress, white oxfords, carrying Southern Cal pennant. Talked to her. Name Bette Torrance, senior at Southern Cal, government major. Had a date for the game but he came down with flu symptoms night before, insisted she see game anyway. Seat on other side of her empty. Bought her a hot dog,* 20 *cents* (*no mustard*)—

There was more, much more. Niles forced it back down. There was the virtually stenographic report of their conversation all that day :

(. . . *I hope we win. I saw the last Bowl game we won, two years ago . . .*"

" . . . *Yes, that was nineteen fifty-three. Southern Cal seven, Wisconsin zero . . . and two straight wins in nineteen forty-four, forty-five over Washington and Tennessee . . .*"

" . . . *Gosh, you know a lot about football* ! *What did you do, memorize the record-book* ? ")

And the old memories. The jeering yell of freckled Joe Merritt that warm April day in 1937 : *Who are you, Einstein* ? And Buddy Call saying acidly on November 8, 1939 : *Here comes Tommy Niles, the human adding machine. Get him* ! And then the bright stinging pain of a snowball landing just below his left clavicle, the pain that he could summon up as easily as any of the other pain-memories he carried with him. He winced and closed his eyes suddenly, as if struck by the

icy pellet here on a Los Angeles street on a foggy Tuesday morning.

They didn't call him the human adding machine any more. Now it was the human tape recorder ; the derisive terms had to keep pace with the passing decades. Only Niles himself remained unchanging, The Boy With The Brain Like a Sponge grown up into The Man With The Brain Like a Sponge, still cursed with the same terrible gift.

His data-cluttered mind ached. He saw a diminutive yellow sportscar parked on the far side of the street, recognized it by its make and model and colour and license number as the car belonging to Leslie F. Marshall, 26, blonde hair, blue eyes, television actor with the following credits—

Wincing, Niles applied the cutoff circuit and blotted out the upwelling data. He had met Marshall once, six months ago, at a party given by a mutual friend—an *erstwhile* mutual friend ; Niles found it difficult to keep friends for long. He had spoken with the actor for perhaps ten minutes, and had added that much more baggage to his mind.

It was time to move on, Niles decided. He had been in Los Angeles ten months. The burden of accumulated memories was getting too heavy ; he was greeting too many people who had long since forgotten him (*curse my John Q. Average build, 5ft. 9ins., 163 pounds, brownish hair, brownish eyes, no unduly prominent physical features, no distinguishing scars except those inside*). He contemplated returning to San Francisco, and decided against it. He had been there only a year ago ; Pasadena, two years ago. The time had come, he realized, for another eastward jaunt.

Back and forth across the face of America goes Thomas Richard Niles, der fliegende Hollander, the Wandering Jew, the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Human Tape Recorder. He smiled at a newsboy who had sold him a copy of the *Examiner* on May 13 past, got the usual blank stare in return, and headed for the nearest bus terminal.

For Niles the long journey had begun on October 11, 1929, in the small Ohio town of Lowry Bridge. He was third of three children, born of seemingly normal parents : Henry Niles (b. 1896), Mary Niles (b. 1899). His older brother and sister had shown no extraordinary manifestations. Tom had.

It began as soon as he was old enough to form words ; a neighbour-woman on the front porch peered into the house where he was playing, and remarked to his mother, " Look how *big* he's getting, Mary !"

He was less than a year old. He had replied, in virtually the same tone of voice, " *Look how* big *he's getting, Mary* !" It caused a sensation, even though it was only mimicry, not even speech.

He spent his first twelve years in Lowry Bridge, Ohio. In later years, he often wondered how he had been able to last there so long.

He began school at the age of four, because there was no keeping him back ; his classmates were five and six, vastly superior to him in physical co-ordination, vastly inferior in everything else. He could read. He could even write, after a fashion, though his babyish muscles tired easily from holding the pen. And he could remember.

He remembered everything. He remembered his parents' quarrels and repeated the exact words of them to anyone who cared to listen, until his father whipped him and threatened to kill him if he ever did *that* again. He remembered that, too. He remembered the lies his brother and sister told, and took great pains to set the record straight. He learned eventually not to do that, either. He remembered things people had said, and corrected them when they later deviated from their earlier statements.

He remembered everything.

He read a textbook once and it stayed with him. When the teacher asked a question based on the day's assignment, Tommy Niles' skinny arm was in the air long before the others had even really assimilated the question. After a while, his teacher made it clear to him that he could *not* answer every question, whether he had the answer first or not ; there were twenty other pupils in the class. The other pupils in the class made that abundantly clear to him, after school.

He won the verse-learning contest in Sunday School. Barry Harman had studied for weeks in hopes of winning the catcher's mitt his father had promised him if he finished first —but when it was Tommy Niles' turn to recite, he began with *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,* continued through *Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them,* headed on into *Now the serpent was*

more subtil than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made, and presumably would have continued clear through Genesis, Exodus, and on to Joshua if the dazed proctor hadn't shut him up and declared him the winner.

Barry Harman didn't get his glove ; Tommy Niles got a black eye instead.

He began to realize he was different. It took time to make the discovery that other people were always forgetting things, and that instead of admiring him for what he could do they hated him for it. It was difficult for a boy of eight, even Tommy Niles, to understand *why* they hated him, but eventually he did find it out, and then he started learning how to hide his gift.

Through his ninth and tenth years he practiced being normal and almost succeeded ; the after-school beatings stopped, and he managed to get a few B's on his report cards at last, instead of straight rows of A. He was growing up ; he was learning to pretend. Neighbours heaved sighs of relief, now that that terrible Niles boy was no longer doing all those crazy things.

But inwardly he was the same as ever. And he realized he'd have to leave Lowry Bridge soon.

He knew everyone too well. He would catch them in lies ten times a week, even Mr. Lawrence, the minister, who once turned down an invitation to pay a social call to the Nileses one night, saying, " I really have to get down to work and write my sermon for Sunday," when only three days before Tommy had heard him say to Miss Emery, the church secretary that he had had a sudden burst of inspiration and had written three sermons all at one sitting, and now he'd have some free time for the rest of the month.

Even Mr. Lawrence lied, then. And he was the best of them. As for the others . . .

Tommy waited until he was twelve ; he was big for his age by then, and figured he could take care of himself. He borrowed twenty dollars from the supposedly secret cashbox in the back of the kitchen cupboard (his mother had mentioned its existence five years before, in Tommy's hearing) and tiptoed out of the house at three in the morning. He caught the night freight for Chillicothe, and was on his way.

There were thirty people on the bus out of Los Angeles. Niles sat alone in the back, by the seat just over the rear wheel. He knew four of the people in the bus by name—

but he was confident they had forgotten who he was by now, and so he kept to himself.

It was an awkward business. If you said hello to someone who had forgotten you, they thought you were a troublemaker or a panhandler. And if you passed someone by, thinking he had forgotten you, and he hadn't—well, then you were a snob. Niles swung between both those poles five times a day. He'd see someone such as that girl Bette Torrance, and get a cold unrecognizing stare ; or he'd go by someone else, believing the other person did not remember him but walking rapidly just in case he did, and there would be the angry, " Well ! Who the blazes do you think *you* are !" floating after him as he retreated.

Now he sat alone bouncing up and down with each revolution of the wheel, with the one suitcase containing his property thumping constantly against the baggage-rack over his head. That was one advantage of his talent : he could travel light. He didn't need to keep books, once he had read them, and there wasn't much point in amassing belongings of any other sort either ; they became over-familiar too soon.

He eyed the road signs. They were well into Nevada by now. The old, wearisome retreat was on.

He could never stay in the same city too long. He had to move on to new territory, to some new place where he had no old memories, where no one knew him, where he knew no one. In the sixteen years since he had left home, he'd covered a lot of ground.

He remembered the jobs he had held.

He had once been a proofreader for a Chicago publishing firm. He did the jobs of two men. The way proofreading usually worked, one man read the copy from the manuscript, the other checked it against the galleys. Niles had a simpler method : he would scan the manuscript once, thereby memorizing it, and then merely check the galley for discrepancies. It brought him $50 a week for a while, before the time came to move along.

He once held a job as a sideshow freak in a travelling carnie that made a regular Alabama-Mississippi-Georgia circuit. Niles had *really* been low on cash, then. He remembered how he had got the job : by buttonholing the carnie boss and demanding a tryout. " Read me anything—anything at all! I can remember it !" The boss had been sceptical, and didn't

see any use for such an act anyway, but finally gave in when Niles practically fainted of malnutrition in his office. The boss read him an editorial from a Mississippi county weekly, and when he was through Niles recited it back word-perfect. He got the job, at $15 a week plus meals, and sat in a little booth under a sign that said : " The Human Tape Recorder." People read or said things to him, and he repeated them. It was dull work ; sometimes the things they said were filthy, and most of the time they couldn't even remember a minute later what they had said to him. He stayed with the show four weeks, and when he left no one missed him much.

The bus rolled on into the fog-bound night.

There had been other jobs : good jobs, bad jobs. None of them had lasted very long. There had been some girls, too, but none of *them* had lasted too long. They had all, even those he tried to conceal it from, found out about his special ability, and soon afterwards they had left. No one could stay with a man who never forgot, who could always dredge yesterday's foibles out of the reservoir that was his mind and hurl them unanswerably into the open. And the man with the perfect memory could never live long among imperfect human beings.

To forgive is to forget, he thought. The memory of old insults and quarrels fades, and a relationship starts anew. But for him there could be no forgetting, and hence little forgiving.

He closed his eyes after a while, and leaned back against the hard leather cushion of his seat. The steady rhythm of the bus lulled him to sleep. In sleep, his mind could rest ; he found cease from memory. He never dreamed.

In Salt Lake City he paid his fare, left the bus, suitcase in hand, and set out in the first direction he faced. He had not wanted to go any further east on that bus. His cash reserve was only $63, now, and he had to make it last.

He found a job as a dishwasher in a downtown restaurant, held it long enough to accumulate a hundred dollars, and moved on again, this time hitchhiking to Cheyenne. He stayed there a month and took a night bus to Denver, and when he left Denver it was to go to Wichita.

Wichita to Des Moines, Des Moines to Minneapolis, Minneapolis to Milwaukee, then down through Illinois, carefully avoiding Chicago, and on to Indianapolis. It was an old story for him, this travelling. Gloomily he celebrated his

twenty-ninth birthday alone in an Indianapolis rooming house on a drizzly October day, and for the purpose of brightening the occasion summoned up his old memories of his fourth birthday party, in 1933 . . . one of the few unalloyedly happy days of his life.

They were all there, all his playmates, and his parents, and his brother Hank looking gravely important at the age of eight, and his sister Marian, and there were candles and favours and punch and cake. Mrs. Heinsohn from next door stopped in and said, " He looks like a regular little man," and his parents beamed at him, and everyone sang and had a good time. And afterwards, when the last game had been played, the last present opened, when the boys and girls had waved goodbye and disappeared up the street, the grownups sat around and talked of the new President and the many strange things that were happening in the country, and little Tommy sat in the middle of the floor, listening and recording everything and glowing warmly, because somehow during the whole afternoon no one had said or done anything cruel to him. He was happy that day, and he went to bed still happy.

Niles ran through the party twice, like an old movie he loved well ; the print never grew frayed, the registration always remained as clear and sharp as ever. He could taste the sweet tang of the punch, he could relive the warmth of that day when through some accident the others had allowed him a little happiness.

Finally he let the brightness of the party fade, and once again he was in Indianapolis on a grey bleak afternoon, alone in an $ 8-a-week furnished room.

Happy birthday to me, he thought bitterly. *Happy birthday.*

He stared at the blotchy green wall with the cheap Corot print hung slightly askew. I could have been something special, he brooded, one of the wonders of the world. Instead I'm a skulking freak who lives in dingy third-floor back rooms, and I don't dare let the world know what I can do.

He scooped into his memory and came up with the Toscanini performance of Beethoven's Ninth he had heard in Carnegie Hall once while he was in New York. It was infinitely better than the later performance Toscanini had approved for recording, yet no microphones had taken it down ; the blazing performance was as far beyond recapture as a flame five minutes snuffed, except in one man's mind. Niles had it all : the majestic downcrash of the timpani, the resonant perspiring

basso bringing forth the great melody of the finale, even the french-horn bobble that must have enraged the maestro so, the infuriating cough from the dress circle at the gentlest moment of the adagio, the sharp pinching of Niles's shoes as he leaned forward in his seat . . .

He had it all, in highest fidelity. *There* are *compensations*, he thought. *But oh, the price I pay for my Beethoven* !

He arrived in the small town on a moonless night three months later, a cold, crisp January evening, when the wintry wind swept in from the north, cutting through his thin clothing and making the suitcase an almost impossible burden for his numb, gloveless hand. He had not meant to come to this place, but he had run short of cash in Kentucky, and there had been no helping it. He was on his way to New York, where he could live in anonymity for months unbothered, and where he knew his rudeness would go unnoticed if he happened to snub someone on the street, or if he greeted someone who had forgotten him.

But New York was still hundreds of miles away, and it might have been millions on this January night. He saw a sign : " Bar." He forced himself forward toward the sputtering neon ; he wasn't ordinarily a drinker, but he needed the warmth of alcohol inside him now, and perhaps the barkeep would need a man to help out, or could at least rent him a room for what little he had in his pockets.

There were five men in the bar when he reached it. They looked like truckdrivers. Niles dropped his valise to the left of the door, rubbed his stiff hands together, exhaled a white cloud. The bartender grinned jovially at him.

" Cold enough for you out there ?"

Niles managed a grin. " I wasn't sweating much. Let me have something warming. Double shot of bourbon, maybe."

That would be 90 cents. He had $7.34.

He nursed the drink when it came, sipped it slowly, let it roll down his gullet. He thought of the summer he had been stranded for a week in Washington, a solid week of 97° temperature and 97 humidity, and the vivid memory helped to ease away some of the psychological effects of the coldness.

He relaxed ; he warmed. Behind him came the penetrating sound of argument.

" . . . I tell you Joe Louis beat Schmeling to a pulp the second time ! KO'd him in the first round !"

" You're nuts ! Louis just barely got him down in a fifteen-round decision, the second bout."

" Seems to me—"

" I'll put money on it. Ten bucks says it was a decision in fifteen, Mac."

Sound of confident chuckles. " I wouldn't want to take your money so easy, pal. Everyone knows it was a knockout in one."

" Ten bucks, I said."

Niles turned to see what was happening. Two of the truck-drivers, burly men in dark pea jackets, stood nose-to-nose. Automatically the thought came : *Louis knocked Max Schmeling out in the first round at Yankee Stadium, New York, June* 22, 1938. Niles had never been much of a sports fan, and particularly disliked boxing—but he had once glanced at an almanac page cataloguing Joe Louis' title fights.

He watched detachedly as the bigger of the two truckdrivers angrily slapped a ten-dollar bill down on the bar ; the other matched it. Then the first glanced up at the barkeep and said, " OK, Bud. You're a shrewd guy. Who's right about the second Louis-Schmeling fight ?"

The barkeep was a blank-faced cipher of a man, middle-aged, balding, with mild empty eyes. He chewed at his lip a moment, shrugged, fidgeted, finally said, " Kinda hard for me to remember. That musta been twenty-five years ago."

Twenty, Niles thought.

" Lessee now," the bartender went on. " Seems to me I remember . . . yeah, sure. It went the full fifteen and the judges gave it to Louis. I seem to remember a big stink being made over it ; the papers said Joe should've killed him a lot faster'n that."

A triumphant grin appeared on the bigger driver's face. He deftly pocketed both bills.

The other man grimaced and howled, " Hey ! You two fixed this thing up beforehand ! I know damn well that Louis KO'd the German in one."

" You heard what the man said. The money's mine."

" No," Niles said suddenly, in a quiet voice that seemed to carry halfway across the bar. *Keep your mouth shut*, he told himself frantically. *This is none of your business. Stay out of it* !

But it was too late.

" What you say ?" asked the one who'd dropped the ten-spot.

" I say you're being rooked. Louis won the fight in one round, like you say. June twenty-two, nineteen thirty-eight, Yankee Stadium. The barkeep's thinking of the Arturo Godoy fight. *That* went the full fifteen in nineteen forty."

" There—told you ! Gimme back my money !"

But the other driver ignored the cry and turned to face Niles. He was a cold-faced, heavy-set man, and his fists were starting to clench. " Smart man, eh ? Boxing expert ?"

" I just didn't want to see anybody get cheated," Niles said stubbornly. He knew what was coming now. The truck-driver was weaving drunkenly toward him ; the barkeep was yelling, the other patrons backing away.

The first punch caught Niles in the ribs ; he grunted and staggered back, only to be grabbed by the throat and slapped three times. Dimly he heard a voice saying, " Hey, leggo the guy ! He didn't mean anything ! You want to kill him ?"

A volley of blows doubled him up ; a knuckle swelled his right eyelid, a fist crashed stunningly into his left shoulder. He spun, wobbled uncertainly, knowing that his mind would permanently record every moment of this agony.

Through half-closed eyes he saw them pulling the enraged driver off him ; the man writhed in the grip of three others, aimed a last desperate kick at Niles's stomach and grazed a rib, and finally was subdued.

Niles stood alone in the middle of the floor, forcing himself to stay upright, trying to shake off the sudden pain that drilled through him in a dozen places.

" You all right ?" a solicitous voice asked. " Hell, those guys play rough. You oughtn't mix up with them."

" I'm all right," Niles said hollowly. " Just . . . let me . . . catch my breath."

" Here. Sit down. Have a drink. It'll fix you up."

" No," Niles said. *I can't stay here. I have to get moving.* " I'll be all right," he muttered unconvincingly. He picked up his suitcase, wrapped his coat tight about him, and left the bar, step by step by step.

He got fifteen feet before the pain became unbearable. He crumpled suddenly and fell forward on his face in the dark, feeling the iron-hard frozen turf against his cheek, and struggled unsuccessfully to get up. He lay there, remembering

all the various pains of his life, the beatings, the cruelty, and when the weight of memory became too much to bear he blanked out.

The bed was warm, the sheets clean and fresh and soft. Niles woke slowly, feeling a temporary sensation of disorientation, and then his infallible memory supplied the data on his blackout in the snow and he realized he was in a hospital.

He tried to open his eyes ; one was swollen shut, but he managed to get the other's lids apart. He was in a small hospital room—no shining metropolitan hospital pavilion, but a small county clinic with gingerbread moulding on the walls and homey lace curtains through which afternoon sunlight was entering.

So he had been found and brought to a hospital. That was good. He could easily have died out there in the snow ; but someone had stumbled over him and brought him in. That was a novelty, that someone had bothered to help him ; the treatment he had received in the bar last night—was it last night ?—was more typical of the world's attitude toward him. In twenty-nine years he had somehow failed to learn adequate concealment, camouflage, and every day he suffered the consequences. It was so hard for him to remember, he who remembered everything else, that the other people were not like him, and hated him for what he was.

Gingerly he felt his side. There didn't seem to be any broken ribs—just bruises. A day or so of rest and they would probably discharge him and let him move on.

A cheerful voice said, " Oh, you're awake, Mr. Niles. Feeling better now ? I'll brew some tea."

He looked up, and felt a sudden sharp pang. She was a nurse—twenty-two, twenty-three, new at the job perhaps, with a flowing tumble of curling blonde hair and wide, clear blue eyes. She was smiling, and it seemed to Niles it was not merely a professional smile. " I'm Miss Carroll, your day nurse. Everything OK ?"

" Fine," Niles said hesitantly. " Where am I ?"

" Central County General Hospital. You were brought in late last night—apparently you'd been beaten up and left by the road out on Route Thirty-Two. It's a lucky thing Mark McKenzie was walking his dog, Mr. Niles." She looked at him gravely. " You remember last night, don't you ? I mean . . . the shock . . . amnesia . . . "

Niles chuckled. " That's the last ailment in the world I'd be afraid of," he said. " I'm Thomas Richard Niles and I remember pretty well what happened. How badly am I damaged ?"

" Superficial bruises, mild shock and exposure, slight case of frostbite," she summed up. " You'll live. Doctor Hammond'll give you a full checkup a little later, after you've eaten. Let me bring you some tea."

Niles watched the trim figure vanish into the hallway.

She was certainly an attractive girl, he thought, fresh-eyed, alert . . . *alive.*

Old cliche : patient falling for his nurse. But she's not for me, I'm afraid.

Abruptly the door opened and the nurse re-entered, bearing a little enamelled tea tray. " You'll never guess ! I have a surprise for you, Mr. Niles. A visitor. Your mother."

" My moth—"

" She saw the little notice about you in the county paper. She's waiting outside, and she told me she hasn't seen you in sixteen years. Would you like me to send her in now ?"

" I guess so," Niles said, in a dry, feathery voice.

A second time the nurse departed. *My God* ! Niles thought. *If I had known I was this close to home—*

I should have stayed out of Ohio altogether.

The last person he wanted to see was his mother, she who had given him life. He began to tremble under the covers. The oldest and most terrible of his memories came bursting up from the dark compartment of his mind where he thought he had imprisoned it forever. The sudden emergence from warmth into coolness, from darkness to light, the jarring slap of a heavy hand on his buttocks, the searing pain of knowing that his security was ended, that from now on he would be . . . *alive—*

The memory of the agonized birth-shriek sounded in his mind. He could never forget being born. And his mother was, he thought, the one person of all he could never forgive, since she had given him forth into the life he hated. He dreaded the moment when—

" Hello, Tom. It's been a long time."

Sixteen years had faded her, had carved lines in her face and made the cheeks more baggy, the blue eyes less bright, the brown hair a mousy grey. She was smiling. And to his own astonishment Niles was able to smile back.

" Mother."

" I read about it in the paper. It said a man of about thirty was found just outside town with papers bearing the name Thomas R. Niles, and he was taken to Central County General Hospital. So I came over, just to make sure—and it *was* you."

A lie drifted to the surface of his mind, but it was a kind lie, and he said it : " I was on my way back home to see you. Hitchhiking. But I ran into a little trouble en route."

" I'm glad you decided to come back, Tom. It's been so lonely, ever since your father died, and of course Hank was married, and Marian too—it's good to see you again. I thought I never would."

He lay back, perplexed, wondering why the upwelling flood of hatred did not come. He felt only warmth toward her. He was glad to see her.

" How has it been—all these years, Tom ? You haven't had it easy. I can see. I see it all over your face."

" It hasn't been easy," he said. " You know why I ran away ?"

She nodded. " Because of the way you are. That thing about your mind—never forgetting. I knew. Your grandfather had it too, you know."

" My grandfather—but—"

" You got it from him. I never did tell you, I guess. He didn't get along too well with any of us. He left my mother when I was a little girl and I never knew where he went. So I always knew you'd go away the way he did. Only you came back. Are you married ?"

He shook his head.

" Time you got started then, Tom. You're near thirty."

The room door opened and an efficient-looking doctor appeared. " Afraid your time's up, Mrs. Niles. You'll be able to see him again later. I have to check him over, now that he's up."

" Of course, doctor." She smiled at him, then at Niles. " I'll see you later, Tom."

" Sure, mother."

Niles lay back frowning as the doctor poked at him here and there. *I didn't hate her.* A growing wonderment rose in him, and he realized he should have come home long ago. He had changed, inside, without even knowing it.

Running away was the first stage in growing up, and a necessary one. But coming back came later, and that was the mark of maturity. He was back. And suddenly he saw he had been terribly foolish all his bitter adult life.

He had a gift, a great gift, an awesome gift. It had been too big for him until now. Self-pitying, self-tormented, he had refused to allow for the shortcomings of the forgetful people about him, and had paid the price of their hatred. But he couldn't keep running away forever. The time would have to come for him to grow big enough to contain his gift, to learn to live with it instead of moaning in dramatic self-inflicted anguish.

And now was the time. It was long overdue.

His grandfather had had the gift ; they had never told him that. So it was genetically transmissible. He could marry, have children, and they too would never forget.

Or did it skip a generation every time ? Or was it sex-linked, like haemophilia, with women as carriers ? It didn't matter : The mechanics were something to be learned, like the use of it.

What did count was that his gift would not die with him. Others of his kind, less sensitive, less thin-skinned, would come after, and they too would know how to recall a Beethoven symphony or a decade-old wisp of conversation. For the first time since that fourth birthday party he felt a hesitant flicker of happiness. The days of running were ended ; he was home again. *If I learn to live with others, maybe they'll be able to live with me.*

He saw the things he yet needed : a wife, a home, children—

" —a couple of days' rest, plenty of hot liquids, and you'll be as good as new, Mr. Niles," the doctor was saying. " Is there anything you'd like me to bring you now ?"

" Yes," Niles said. " Just send in the nurse will you ? Miss Carroll, I mean."

The doctor grinned and left. Niles waited expectantly, exulting in his new self. He switched on Act Three of *Die Meistersinger* as a kind of jubilant backdrop music in his mind, and let the warmth sweep up over him. When she entered the room he was smiling, and wondering how to begin.

—Robert Silverberg

THE UNDERSIDE

This month Bertram Chandler delves into the theme of racial memory, a subject at once both fascinating and filled with tremendous possibilities. In a way it is a pity this story is so short—it has all the ingredients for a much longer story.

BY BERTRAM CHANDLER

That's the way it happens.

You know somebody quite well, and then you drift apart and lose all touch and then, quite by chance, you meet again and it's as though the intervening years had never been.

That's the way it happened with myself and Carruthers. I hadn't seen him for years, and hadn't thought about him for almost as many years and then, one late afternoon, I found myself rubbing shoulders with him, quite literally, at a crowded bar in Pitt Street.

I stared at him in surprise—and was a little hurt to see that my amazement wasn't reflected in his face. He looked the same as he had always looked ; the untidy, dark hair over the thin face was as abundant as ever, the pale eyes still the same startling contrast to his olive skin, his necktie still the bedraggled, twisted rag that it always was.

He said, before I could speak, " I was expecting this."

" I wasn't," I replied. " What are you doing in Sydney ?"

" I could ask you the same," he countered, " but I won't. After all, one is liable to run into seafarers anywhere that there's salt water. I take it that you are still at sea ?"

" I am. But what are *you* doing in Australia ?"

" Couldn't stand the English climate," he replied. " And when old Uncle Phil—you'll remember *him*—died and left me a sizeable hunk of folding money, I decided that I might as well live where I pleased instead of being tied to a job in one of the drearier London suburbs. I haven't made up my mind yet—but I think this place will suit me."

" Got a job yet ?" I asked.

" There's no need for me to look for one. Even in these days of iniquitous taxation I have enough to live on comfortably. In any case, a job would interfere with my real work."

" Your real work ?" I asked. " Oh, I remember now. You were always playing around with psychic research and all the rest of it. There was that magazine you started . . . It folded, didn't it ?"

" Yes. It folded. It shouldn't have done. The public is willing enough to support periodicals that deal with these things from the viewpoint of superstition, but not one that approaches them from the angle of scientific research."

" Come off it, Carruthers," I told him. " What else is it but superstition, in spite of all that Rhine has to say about it ?"

" That," he said, " is a matter of opinion. I seem to remember one night—it was just after the war—when *you* were a very badly frightened young man. It was just after I'd started the magazine, *New Horizons*, and we had a seance in my flat. We raised *something*—remember ?—and it started throwing the furniture around."

" *You* may remember," I said, " that the house next door, and quite a few others, had been demolished by a V-2 rocket some few months previously. What we thought was a poltergeist or something was just the house sagging on its foundations."

" None of the Government surveyors found any evidence of war damage," he told me.

" Surveyors aren't infallible," I said, ordering more beer.

" As far as I know," he said, " the house is standing yet. It was six weeks ago."

" So," I asked, " what ?"

He sipped his beer.

" Quite the sceptic these days, aren't you ? I suppose that if you saw the Flying Dutchman—do sailors still sight it, by the way ?—you'd laugh it off as a mirage."

" Yes—unless I had at least three reliable witnesses and a good camera."

" You didn't use to be so disbelieving," he said. "Remember when you let yourself take part in those experiments involving long range telepathy under hypnosis ?"

" That," I told him, " was different."

He laughed. " Yes, it was, wasn't it ? As far as I can remember you had some idea that you and your current heart-throb could use long range telepathy as a means of communication and save the expense of Air Mail and radio messages . . . What happened, by the way ?"

" She married," I said. " But not me."

" Too bad."

" Oh I don't know. I met her a year ago, quite by chance—as I've met you—and she's put on considerable weight."

" Often these chance meetings are fortunate," he said. " I have a feeling that this one will be for me. And, of course, for you."

" What do you mean ?"

" I'll tell you. But, first of all, I'd like to remind you that you were a very good subject for those telepathic experiments. You weren't much use as a transmitter, but you were an excellent receiver."

" Thanks."

" So I'd like your help."

" Sorry," I said. " I can't afford the time. We sail tomorrow for Brisbane. Surely you must know somebody who could be your . . . your subject."

" I don't. I've been in this city for only four days. I was able to do quite a lot of experimental work on the way out—I travelled in the *Cape Banks*. Do you know her ?"

" I do. A filthy old tub. She's due for the breakers after her next voyage."

" So I gathered. But she suited my purpose—far more than a cleaner ship would have done. I was able to investigate a *very* promising line of research. But now I need help."

" Sorry Carruthers, but you'll have to count me out. I managed to get a ticket for *Around The World In Eighty Days*."

" Turn it in. You'll have no trouble getting your money back. Look at it this way, Whittingham. You're a seaman. Why did you come to sea ?"

" It's a job."

" I know that. But you didn't think of it in those terms when you were a kid of sixteen, wearing your first brassbound uniform and still to be seasick for the first time. Why did you come to sea ?"

" Adventure, I suppose. It was more glamorous than schoolmastering or bank clerking or keeping the inkwells filled in some dingy office . . ."

Carruthers ordered another round.

" You had a bit of adventure during the War," he said, " as we all did. Apart from that, you've found very little. Am I right ?"

" You are," I agreed gloomily.

" You've found," he continued, " that pubs and women are very much the same the wide world over."

" They are," I concurred.

" And you just stay at sea because it's the only way you know of earning a living."

" I might as well get my brass hat now," I admitted.

" Laurel leaves on the peak of your cap, and four gold bands on your sleeve. Where's the adventure in that ?"

" They'll be nice to have."

" Unless you stop looking at things in such a . . . a suburban way you'll never have an adventure in the Here and Now," he said earnestly.

" What am I supposed to do? Offer myself to the Americans as something better to put inside a satellite than the Russians' moon pups ? No thanks. I've no desire to be cremated before my time."

" *I*," he said, " can offer you adventure."

I began to wonder how much he had had to drink. I began to wonder how much I had had to drink. I remembered the experiments in which I had taken part during a long spell ashore just after the War—and remembered that with them had been a certain excitement that is altogether lacking from everyday life.

" A film," he said, is only make-believe. Cancel your booking. I can offer you the real thing."

" I've a good mind to take you up on that," I said. " I've had rather too much beer, and it's made me sleepy . . . The way I feel right now I'd probably sleep through the show."

" Good," he said.

" What's good about it ?"

" You'll see."

" Anyhow," I demanded, " just what *is* this adventure you're blathering about ? Are you trying to raise the ghost of a bunyip, or what ?"

" No. How would you like to visit the Jurassic Era and see the dinosaurs striding royally through the jungle ? How would you like to visit the future and see the sky streaked with flame as the big ships take off for the Moon, for the planets ?"

" Forgive my being personal," I said, " but aren't you just a little nuts ?"

He glared at me, then laughed.

" Oh, physical Time Travel *is* impossible. I grant you that. Mental Time Travel is different altogether. What about Bridey Murphy ?"

" Oh, no," I said.

Our glasses—unemptied—were whipped away as the pub started to shut down for that absurd one hour break that is compulsory in New South Wales. With the other drinkers we found ourselves standing on the footpath, feeling rather disgruntled. Carruthers waved frantically at a passing taxi. It swerved on to the kerb. We boarded the vehicle. My friend gave the driver a Kings Cross address.

" I've plenty of beer in the flat," he said. " We can carry on talking there."

" It might be better," I suggested, " if we had some espresso coffee and a snack."

" Afterwards," he said.

We passed the rest of the drive in silence. I was feeling abominably drowsy. I was almost asleep when the cab pulled up outside one of those big, red brick blocks of flats. Carruthers' Uncle Phil must have been very well-to-do, I reflected. We got out of the taxi, went into the building. We rode an elevator to the fifth floor. We had a long wait while Carruthers fumbled for his key. He found it at last, and we went inside.

It was, of course, a furnished flat—but even during his very short occupancy my friend had contrived to impress something

of his personality upon it. There was a bookcase well stocked with all the standard works on the occult, and a few that were new to me. There were pictures that I recognised as having come from the brush of that woman artist who claims to be a witch. There was, standing on a little table of its own, a large crystal ball.

Carruthers told me to sit down. I did so, in one of the two armchairs. He went through to the kitchen and returned with two pint pewter tankards of beer. " To adventure," he said, raising his mug.

" What *is* all this about ?" I asked.

He went to the bookcase, pulled out one of the volumes. He handed it to me. It was Dunne's *An Experiment With Time*.

" You've read this," he said.

" Yes. But it was a long time ago."

" All right. I'll refresh your memory. We'll ignore the dreams that Dunne used as proof for his theory ; we'll just consider the theory itself. I'm afraid I'll have to put it rather crudely ; I'm no mathematician. It all boils down to this—we live in a multi-dimensional universe. We'll ignore the fifth, sixth and so on dimensions—we'll concentrate on the first four."

" Height," I said. " Length. Breadth. And Time."

" Agreed."

" Well, what about them ?"

" Look at it this way, Whittingham. You cut a pencil in two. What do you get ?"

" Two pieces of pencil. Or two pencils, if you sharpen them both."

" No. *No*. Where you cut—I'm assuming that it's a nice *clean* cut . . ."

" That's almost impossible with a pencil. They usually split endwise."

" Have you ever tried to cut a pencil in two ?"

" Yes," I told him.

" Imagine a sausage . . ."

" Salami ?"

" If you like."

" I could do with some right now," I said.

" Oh, all right."

He went out again to the kitchen, returned with rolls, cheese, butter and a length of salami. He set them down on the table between our two chairs. He picked up the carving knife.

" Now," he said, after he had finished cutting, " we have a series of two dimensional samplings of a three dimensional object."

" You can hardly call those hunks two dimensional."

" Perhaps not—but their surfaces are."

" Not bad sausage," I said. " But we should be having Chianti with it, not beer."

" You'll have to drink beer and like it. To get back to Dunne—just as these slices of sausage are two dimensional samplings of a three dimensional object, so are you a *three* dimensional sampling of a *four* dimensional object . . ."

" I remember now," I said, my mouth full of bread and salami. " World Lines, and all that. We are relatively small in three dimensions and greatly elongated—we hope—along the fourth, which is Time. Our World Lines extend from the womb to the tomb and along them, at a uniform rate, travel our sparks of consciousness. But they must take time to do this. Which brings us to a new sort of Time—the Fifth Dimension . . ."

" Never mind that."

" Oh, but it's important. Without it—and without all the other dimensions, ad infinitum, we'd never have Free Will."

" Never mind that, I said. All we're concerned with right now is the Fourth Dimension. Your World Line, you said, stretched from the cradle to the grave ?"

" Yes."

" Then you're wrong. You must have had ancestors, otherwise you wouldn't be here. Your World Line stretches back and back, through them . . ."

" Hence Bridey Murphy. Perhaps."

" Then, suppose you have children, your World Line will stretch, through them, indefinitely into the future."

" Indefinitely we hope," I said.

" Indefinitely we hope. Well, you've read Dunne. You've read about his precognitory dreams."

" I've had a few myself."

" Most of us have. You know the theory of it. You know that a dream, any dream, is based upon memories—and that these memories may be of the Future as well as of the Past."

" Yes."

" Then why shouldn't you dream of the racial Past, the racial Future ?"

" Why not ?"

" Of course," he went on, " the whole damned trouble with dreams is that they're so unpredictable. If you could go to bed tonight with the intention of dreaming the winner of . . . of . . . What's the big race out here ?"

" The Melbourne Cup."

" All right. If you could go to bed tonight with the intention of dreaming who was going to win the Melbourne Cup . . ."

" It was run three weeks ago," I told him.

" Oh, skip it. I have enough money to do me, anyhow."

" I haven't," I reminded him.

He ignored this.

" On the way out here I studied Dunne. I tried to work out some way in which we might get some sort of information about the really distant past—and the future. I think I succeeded—but there was nobody aboard the *Cape Banks*, either crew or passenger, who was a suitable subject. I must have a good telepathic receiver. And you're one."

I finished my bread and sausage, washed them down with beer.

" There's no risk, I suppose ?" I asked.

" Didn't you say that you ran away to sea because you wanted adventure ?"

" I didn't run away to sea—I entered the profession through the normal channels. In any case, it was a long time ago. Furthermore, my ship is sailing tomorrow, and like any good Chief Officer I have my employers' interests at heart . . ."

" There's no risk," he said, a little scornfully.

" I still can't see where telepathy comes into it," I said. " I can see the point of using hypnosis to tap the racial memories —but telepathy . . ."

" It's a new technique."

" Well, I'll give it a go. There're quite a few things I want to see. Would it be possible to find out just who *did* write Bill Shakespeare's plays ? And what was the truth about the first Elizabeth ? And . . ."

" It's a new technique," he said. " To begin with, I'm going to try to send you as far back as I can. It'll be quite a few million years before Shakespeare and Elizabeth I."

" You hope."

" I'm pretty certain. I'll have to hypnotise you first, of course."

" A deep trance ? That's when you get clairvoyance, isn't it ?"

" No. Not a deep trance. And clairvoyance has nothing to do with it." He got up, shifted the tray with the remains of our meal on to the floor. He put the beer mugs beside it. He brought the crystal ball from its own table, set it before me. Beside it he placed a small cardboard box. " Now," he said, " I'll turn off all the lights but one."

" What's in the box ?"

" It's part of the apparatus. Now, Whittingham, relax. You're tired, very tired. You've had a hard day. You're tired . . ."

So it went on. We got to the stage when I had my hands up behind my head, with the fingers interlocked, and he told me to break the grip and bring my arms down to my sides. I knew that I could do so quite easily if I wanted to—but I didn't want to. After all—I was supposed to be co-operating.

Then, after he had suggested that I do so, I was looking into the crystal ball. The thing seemed to be glowing with a light of its own—but that, I knew, was impossible. It was no more than a freak of reflection or refraction. The thing was glowing with a light of its own, and there were movement and colour in its depths. Then the ball was gone, and the room was gone, and I was standing on what seemed to be rough gravel. All around me towered the stems of what might have been bamboos—but they were like no bamboos that I had ever seen. They were too sparsely jointed, and they were too tall. I looked up, saw a grey, overcast sky, saw something flap slowly overhead. I felt a moment of panic, remembering Carruthers' talk of the Jurassic Era. There were the great flying lizards in those days. But this thing was no pterodactyl or pteranodon. It was a butterfly—but it was huge, bulking as big as a B29.

The earth was shaking beneath me.

I looked around. I had thought that the butterfly was enormous—but what I saw approaching, but dimly (it was too big for me to see it properly) was like a mountain walking. It towered against the grey sky like a grey skyscraper. There was —but incredibly distant—the suggestion of a reptilian head, with eyes and teeth. Then, directly over me, was a great foot the size of . . . of . . . Have you ever been down in a drydock and looked up at a ship when she's on the blocks ? That's what the foot was like.

And that was the last thing that I saw, although presumably my host must have escaped. There can be no such thing as racial memory unless it is transmitted. It was the sheer, nightmare terror of it all that snapped me back abruptly to the Here and Now. I wanted to make an end to the experiment—but the hypnosis was still effective. I wanted to get up from the chair, but I could not.

" What did you see ?" asked Carruthers urgently. " What did you see ?"

Speaking slowly and distinctly, missing no detail, I told him. I watched him open the lid of the box that stood by the crystal, watched him sprinkle some grains of a white substance into it. He replaced the lid.

" Sugar," he murmured to himself, " and a derivative of marihuana . . . It should work . . ." Then, to me, " Watch the crystal."

I watched the crystal. I didn't want to, but I did. I saw the swirling colours, the shifting shapes. Then, as before, I was inside the thing. I was standing on what seemed to be a very rough concrete. It was a building that I was inside, a castle that must have been erected by giants. But it was a ruined castle. Through great fissures in the wall streamed sunlight.

There was something moving, something coming towards me over that rough floor. It was big, about the size of an elephant —yet it was small in comparison to the vast area over which it was running. But such matters as comparative sizes—excepting insofar as the thing and myself were concerned—had ceased to worry me. The beast was a rat—and, obviously, a hungry one. I felt the terror that was felt by my host. I hoped that I would wake up as I had done before. I did not.

Then I was climbing the wall. The wall ? The cliff, rather. I paused, slewed sidewise and looked down. The rat was still there. It was jumping, its great yellow fangs bared. Then, suddenly, it screamed, and its side suddenly sprouted a profusion of little shafts from around which oozed the blood, matting the coarse, grey fur. *Arrows*, I thought. *Arrows* . . .

The rat fell writhing to the ground, kicked convulsively and was still. I watched the hunters walking in single file towards the huge carcass. Some carried bows, some spears. I thought of the centaurs of legend—the horse body, the man torso, the four feet for running, the two hands—and was amazed to see that there was, in actuality, a solid foundation of fact for the myth.

One of the hunters saw me clinging to the wall, fitted arrow to string, drew and let fly. In the fraction of a second before the shaft struck I saw that the strange beings were not centaurs. They were ants.

A badly frightened Carruthers brought me round.

Badly frightened he was, but not too badly frightened to ask me, while I was sipping my second brandy, what I had seen. I told him.

"I know it was all just a dream," I said, "but there are two points that puzzle me. The first—why, each time, was everything excepting myself, so huge? I've seen reconstructions of dinosaurs in museums, and none of them was like the Empire State building on legs. And a butterfly the size of a heavy bomber would be just impossible. And the second time—that was worse, if anything. A rat the size of an elephant, ants the size of men, and carrying weapons in their forelimbs!"

"And the second point?"

"This. I'll assume that you did actually send me back into the past somehow, and that I did have dreams based on racial memories. In the second dream my host was, presumably, killed. How the hell did he transmit the memory of his death to his descendants?"

"I need some of this," muttered Carruthers, helping himself to a generous slug of brandy.

"I can't see why *you* should be so shaken up."

"Can't you? I'll answer your second question first. You got the memory of your host's death *through his ancestors.* That was the Future, not the Past—but his racial World Line runs from Now to Then. Of course, taking Serial Time into account, that was only one of the many possible Futures . . ."

I felt sick.

"What about this business of sizes?" I asked at last, to change the subject.

He managed a rather pallid grin. He got up, went to the bookcase, took out a book and handed it to me. I read the title—*the lives and times of archy and mehitabel.* I opened the volume at random—and found myself scanning a piece of the immortal archy's verse, *the ballade of the underside.*

"I see from the underside," I read aloud.

"And archy," said Carruthers, "was the soul of a *vers libre* poet reincarnated in the body of a cockroach."

" And he wrote his stuff," I went on, " by hammering the keys of the typwriter with his head. He could never manage the shift lock—that's why there's no upper case. All very amusing, and I'm a great admirer of archy and mehitabel myself—but why change the subject ?"

" The *Cape Banks*," said Carruthers, " is a verminous old tub."

" I know."

" She has rats. She has ants. She has bedbugs. She has cockroaches."

" I know."

" Funny things, cockroaches," he went on. " They seem to be proof against mutation. The cockroach of today is practically identical with his ancestor of, say, Jurassic times. That means that we have continuity. That means that we have no breaks in the race memories. There were no men, you know, coexistent with the dinosaurs. Anyhow, the cockroaches with whom I shared my cabin on the way out set me to thinking, and thinking about more things than insecticide. The trouble was that I couldn't find a telepathic receiver. It was quite infuriating—that vast reservoir of racial memory untapped and no means of tapping it.

" Anyhow, I worked out the theory of it, and came up with the conclusion that it should work both ways—Past and Future. Having survived so long the practically indestructible arthropod is likely to go on surviving—and, furthermore, to survive unchanged, no matter what radiations may be released in future wars . . ."

He opened the lid of the box. I looked down at the filthy little thing inside with loathing.

" This one," he said, " may well be unique . . ."

" May it ?"

I snatched the box from his hands, threw it down to the carpet. I ground it and its occupant under my heel.

" And you can tell your ancestors all about it !" I snarled.

Since then Chance has not seen fit to throw Carruthers and myself together again.

I hope she never does.

—Bertram Chandler

Doubtless there are times when you dream—be they pleasant adventures or otherwise—so beware of the Dealer in Dreams should you come across his curious old shop. It isn't what he will sell you—it's where he gets them from that matters.

BEWARE!

BY E. C. TUBB

Beware of the Dealer in Dreams. Beware of the tubby Judas with his round face and twinkling eyes and the eternal good humour of him. Walk gently and tread soft and do not linger to inspect his wares or to satisfy idle curiosity for his words are as honey and his smile is as honest as that of a child, and sure, what harm could there be in such a man at all?

None, if you cannot find him and if you cannot then it's safe enough that you are though perhaps the poorer because of it. Not everyone can have the eyes to see the tiny shop, all squeezed and with the look of falling apart and yet seeming as strong as the rocks of Killorne all at one and the same time. But though it may not be easy to see yet it is as real as the imagination-world of children and as real as the stuff in which the owner deals. As real as the little people and they are real enough as any old wife will tell you and the more fool you for not believing. And if it takes a special kind of person to see the tiny folk then it takes no less to recognise the shop of the Dealer in Dreams.

Such a man was Sean O'Donnell, a tall, gangling man with the smell of peat in this threadbare suit and the kiss of sun and wind marked in freckles on his long-nosed, long-lipped face. A happy man was Sean with never a care as to where he next would sleep or where he would eat if at all. A simple man with the simple faith that things would come if they were to be sent his way and for sure, what was the use of worrying when the sun was shining and there was so much to see in this place ? And if he was put out over the lack of gold which was supposed to line the streets and if his throat was raw at the stink of the motors which was a bad thing and an offence to God to so spoil the sweet air, there were compensations for all of that.

One of them passed him so close he could smell the flower-scent of her, a bright-eyed colleen with a figure which caught the breath in his throat and a saucy way of walking which would have earned her hard words from the women and hard looks from Father Rosen had she been back in Ballinasloe. But Sean was no woman and no priest either, God be thanked, so he smiled at her as she passed and let what he felt show in his eye so that her step faltered and a baby dawn rose in her cheeks.

" It's a fine day," said Sean for he was never at a loss for a word when a word was needed. " And sure, it's a finer day because of yourself passing this way, that it is."

" Cheek," said the girl and would have passed on but the Devil had her by the feet so that she hesitated long enough to see the red hair like a field of wind-tossed grain in the sunset and the laughing eyes as blue as the skies over Galway.

" It is not," said Sean. " It is the simple truth that I'm telling. Sure and I've travelled far and never knew until this minute why I was travelling at all." And he smiled again so that she couldn't see the two inches of wrist hanging from the frayed cuffs of his jacket or the broken shoes on his feet so blinded was she by what he had within him.

" Cheek," she said but smiled as she said it, her lips curving as if the Devil himself had taught her the arts of temptation.

" I'll not be asking if I shall be seeing you," said Sean boldly. " But yourself could be telling me if its passing this way again you'll be today."

" I shall," she said, and glanced at her wrist where a scrap of golden chain held a watch small enough to be put in a man's ear and him never to be knowing of it. " In about an hour."

And then the Devil, his work done, released her feet and let her be about her business and Sean, with an hour to wait, wandered through tiny streets and crooked lanes and wondered how it was that the sun shone brighter and that the very air seemed to glitter with suspended gems.

And so it was that he met the Dealer in Dreams.

A smiling man is the Dealer in Dreams and he has reason to smile. He smiled even wider as Sean pushed open the door of his shop and stood blinking in the soft light, so that it seemed the two men were trying each to outdo the other with their good humour. He smiled and rubbed his hands and leaned on his counter and his voice was as soft as eider and as sweet as the scent of roses.

" May I help you, sir ?"

Sean had met men before who smiled and spoke like that and never had good for him come from the meeting but his head was filled with beauty and the soul of him was tickled at what he had read. And not even the good God Himself could have stopped a man like Sean O'Donnell from being curious about the lettering he had read on the window of the tiny shop.

" A fine day to you," greeted Sean and nodded towards the window. " And is it a fine joke you would be playing at all ?"

" No joke," said the Dealer and if his eyes twinkled a little the brighter and his smile grew a little the wider then surely he could not be blamed for that ?

" It's a long way that I've travelled," said Sean. " And many a strange thing I have seen since I left Ballinasloe. But never the Devil of a thing have I seen the like of this." And he smiled with the wonder of it.

" There are many strange things to be seen by a man who has the eye to see them," said the Dealer. " There are many odd corners in the world, and other worlds, which hide stranger businesses than mine. Or perhaps you doubt my word ?"

" I do not," said Sean and meant every word of it. The Dealer was a strange one to be sure but what of that ? There were many strange folk walking the ways of the world and if a man wanted to buy, sell and exchange dreams then that was his business even if it was one with Devil the bit of sense in it. But, still and all, it was a strange thing and good for a tale

on a winters night when the wind was screaming like a banshee and the peat hissed in the grate and the talk had run dry. And he had an hour to spare and where was the harm in talking to the queer creature with the queer trade ?

" Then it's meaning it that you are ?" asked Sean just to be sure.

" I mean it," said the Dealer and smiled as if he had met men who doubted their eyes before, as indeed he had. " I will buy a dream if you have one to sell. I will sell a dream if you are willing to buy. And I will exchange a dream if that should be your wish." He coughed as if reluctant to touch on the matter. " With any necessary adjustments, naturally."

" Naturally," agreed Sean, though why the smiling man should be talking of dreams as if he were talking of pigs and hens was something he couldn't get to the bottom of. He was about to say so when a bell chimed from somewhere behind the curtains which divided the rear of the shop and the Dealer stepped towards them.

" A business call," he apologised. " If you will be so kind as to wait ?"

" I will do that," said Sean, and stood where he was as the Dealer vanished then, alone, he stared about him with eyes as big and as wondering as those of a child taken into the biggest toy shop in the world and surely he couldn't be blamed for that ?

Jars stood on shelves against the walls. Hundreds of jars on dozens of shelves. Big jars and small jars, some of clouded glass, and some of ancient stone, some with long thin necks and others as squat and as fat as tubs of butter. Metal jars there were shining as if made of beaten brass or of polished gold. Amber jars and jars of glinting ice. Jars of every shape and size and colour that a man could imagine and some that no man could imagine at all. And, with only Sean himself in the shop which was almost too small to hold another, split as it was by the counter, and with himself not moving and hardly breathing at all, and with the shop away from all traffic and outside noises, it should have been as quiet as a grave. But quiet it was not.

From all sides came the most peculiar collection of sounds ever heard by mortal man. Sighs as if from broken hearts, laughter as if from happy children, deep groans and tittering

giggles, baby chuckles and muffled screams, gurgling and whimpering, moaning and keening, singing and whispering, all merging and mixing as if he were listening to the life-noises of a world. And all the sounds seemed to come from the jars.

It was an odd thing and a strange thing and Sean crossed himself and muttered a charm the Old Woman of Ballinasloe had taught him and which was to be used when he heard the scampering of the little people for fear that they should do him a harm. That done, and as safe as a man could ever be in the world, curiosity pricked him so that he reached out a long arm and rested his hand on one of the jars and was lifting it from its place when he heard the sound of a cough just behind him. Quick as a flash he let loose the jar and spun on his heel and smiled at the Dealer for it was not a good thing to be prying into another man's belongings and him queer in the head.

" You were going to open that jar," said the Dealer.

" I was not," said Sean.

" You were going to steal it then."

" I was not," protested Sean. " It was after looking at it that I was and that was all." He glanced towards the door wondering if he could reach it and escape without doing the Dealer harm for the smiling man no longer smiled and his eyes held more than just a twinkle. Then the tubby man smiled again and his eyes sparkled and he was all friendliness and good humour and things were almost as they were before. But not quite though it would have taken a sharp ear to have noticed the difference. For now the air was no longer filled with the sounds of the world, only the soft footsteps of the Dealer as he moved behind his counter.

" You will pardon me," he said. " There is a most urgent matter, a question of a dream for a—a client."

Sean watched as the Dealer busied himself at his work. From beneath the counter he took a phial of polished jet and then ran his eye over his jars.

" Let me see now," mused the Dealer. " Some baby's laughter I think and, yes, a touch of lovers sighs." He reached and selected and placed two of the jars against his phial and, as he did so, the sounds of chuckles and sighs filled the air to die as he replaced the jars in their places.

" Always a good background," he said cheerfully to Sean. " And cheap too." He pursed his lips again like a cook

selecting a rare dish to set before a king. " Now what ? A touch of horror should go well." He sighed as he selected a tiny black jar. " The sobs of condemned men, rare and terribly difficult to obtain but there, we can't do without it." And Sean felt sweat bead his forehead as he heard what came out of the jar.

" Some tears and some groans, some love and some hate, a dash of hope and a soupcon of despair, a touch of bitterness and a helping of futility. Shake, add a generous measure of you know what," and here the Dealer winked like all the Satyrs which ever were, " and the dream is ready." He stared fondly at the tiny phial in his hand.

It is a grievous thing to be a disappointed man and Sean was that very thing. Sure and the Old Woman of Ballinasloe could have done as well with her brews and not made half the fuss about it and not called what she sold by so grand a name as this smiling man did. And almost Sean walked out of the shop but there were the jars and the queer sounds he had heard and— Sure and all, the Devil found a useful tool when he found curiosity in a man's heart.

" And would there be no more to it than that ?" asked Sean. " Just a tiny bottle with something in it ? Faith, and I'd sell you a dream made of poteen which would take you to the ends of the world and back again and you feeling every step of the way."

" This ?" The Dealer tossed the phial from hand to hand and shrugged. " This is just a minor sample of my art. The mainstay of my trade, as it were. Dreams for a night or a week or even a year. Dreams for those with soft lives and hard thoughts who are jaded of their own sensations. Temporary dreams for those who know not how to dream without my aid. Brief respite for the imaginationless ones and for others it is best not to name. But do not judge me on this."

" On what then ? For sure it's a big claim you are making for a thing so small."

" Small ?" The dealer did not lose his smile but his eyes lost a scrap of their twinkle. " Is it a small thing to make a beggar dream that he is a king ? Or a king dream that he is a beggar ? Is it a little thing to give love to the loveless, horror to the unterrified, hope to those who are strangers to mercy ? Would you call that small ?"

" I would not," said Sean.

" But that is nothing." Casually the Dealer tossed the phial into a drawer, closing it softly and smiling as he raised his head. " I deal in dreams, not mere sensations. I can give an old man a dream which will make him young again and I can give a young man a dream which will fill his pockets with gold." And here the Dealer's eyes glowed like fiery stars. " Would you be needing such a dream ?"

" I would not," said Sean.

" No ?" The Dealer laughed, a man-of-the-world laugh and his eyes were bold as they stared at the O'Donnell. "You are young and handsome but that is not enough. Youth dies and looks fade and then what is left ? Dreams are poor things with which to win the heart of an attractive girl and few dreams can fill a man's stomach or put clothes on his back. You are young, my friend, and you have a dream, but of what use is that dream to you ?" And he left the question in the air while the Devil whispered in Sean's ear.

For sure and what the Dealer said was true enough. Fine dreams had Sean but Devil the gold in his pocket and he'd starved more times than he had eaten his fill. Not that it had worried him even if he'd thought about it which was less than often. The world was as it was and the sun shone on a rich man as it did on a poor and it was a grand thing to be walking with the whole day to be spent in the walking and to be seeing with a poet's eye and to be talking to the trees and the rustling grass and to be taking things as they came with never a care at all.

And for sure the smiling man was queer in the head for him to be talking of the buying of something of no value at all and for him to be talking of gold for the buying of it. And more than talking by the look of him, standing there with a great ring in his hand and his eyes twinkling and himself bubbling with good humour. And it would be a rare thing to sell him nothing for that gold and to be walking away laughing after it with money to spend and a grand tale to be telling when the bitter wind keened and the peat hissed and the talk ran dry.

" Take this ring," said the Dealer. " Sell me your dream for this ring."

" I will not," said Sean, and laughed at the look of him. " My dream is a good dream and worth more than your gold."

" You think that I am joking," said the Dealer. He added a second ring to the first. " I am not joking. Take these rings and sell me your dream."

" I will that," said Sean, and laughed again as he thought of pigs and hens. " But my dream is a good dream and what would I be doing without a dream at all ?"

" I'll exchange your dream," urged the Dealer. " I'll give you a dream and these two rings for the dream which you will sell to me."

" And would it be a good dream ?" said Sean, and he felt his sides ache as he thought about it. " It's not any old dream that I'll be taking for what you want to buy."

" It is a well-tried and well-used dream," said the Dealer. " It is a dream which most men have or most men grow into. The chances are that you will grow into it yourself before long. Will you accept it ?"

" I will that," said Sean.

" Then it is done," said the Dealer. And without more ado he thrust the rings into Sean's hand and pushed him towards the door and out of the shop and into the street.

And the odd part about it was that when Sean looked back at where he had been he couldn't see the tiny shop at all.

Not that he worried about it for time was passing and he had to be where a wonderful colleen would be passing with her bold eye and figure which caught the breath in his throat and the saucy way of walking which would have earned her hard words and sharp looks had she been back in Ballinasloe.

But despite his hurry the rings had to be examined and it was with relief that he felt the metal give beneath his teeth and knew that they were of gold and not of brass. And he frowned as he bit them, wondering how it was that he had not tested them before for the fine fool he would have been had they turned out to be a pig in a poke. Then he hesitated to decide what they would be fetching and his eye fell on a motor car and he felt a sudden stab of wanting for the shiny thing ; himself who had never wanted other than his own legs before.

A window gave on a fine show of soft furniture and he hesitated again, wanting a soft bed and a fine rug for the floor and one of those things which gave a man music and pictures in his room. Then he saw what was wanted for the fine things and worried lest the rings should not fetch enough

then cheered at the thought that he could lend the money and make more money by the lending of it. And it seemed a fine thing to him to be making the money and then more money so that he could be having all the things offered in the shops and then a house to put them in and servants to wait on him so that he could live like a rich man.

The thought gripped him so that he no longer saw the beauty of the sun or smelt the scent of the air nor did he see the bright colours around him or the smiling faces of the flowers growing, few to be sure, but growing bravely despite that in the few pots and boxes on the windows. And he frowned as he thought so that he was at the place before he knew it and there was the colleen and her coming towards him with a smile and a warmth in her eye and a blush on her cheek and him not answering her smile at all.

" I waited," she said, and then lost her smile as she looked at him. And now she saw what she had not seen before, what the brave dream inside of him had made of no importance at his frayed jacket and the two inches of wrist, at the broken shoes and the poorness of him, and seeing this she turned away.

For now he had only a common dream and was only a common man.

—E. C. Tubb

Here is a delightful short fantasy story by Arthur Sellings which will leave you guessing as to whether the modus operandi was mass hypnotism or the normal attributes of someone not quite of this Earth.

LIMITS

BY ARTHUR SELLINGS

The Regency was never a success, though it was given a chance in every department, including some that would have set its founders turning sadly in their Victorian graves.

There was some pious dream in the beginning of bringing the labouring classes the best of the drama of the ages—carefully edited, that is, for their untutored minds. To the puzzled disappointment of its founders the labouring classes continued to prefer melodramas and music-hall. By the time a new management changed to melodramas and then to music-hall, the Regency had already achieved the status of a white elephant.

Perhaps it was just too small ever to be a paying proposition. Perhaps it was too awkward to reach, squatting down there by the river, jostled by warehouses and dark factories.

Oh, it had its little flashes of success. Irving appeared there once—for one night, I mean. A bright company put on a series of Restoration comedies in the days when that was a daring thing to do, and for a brief session it was the fashion to brave the wilderness of chimneys and mean streets (in a hansom, of course) and pay a visit to the Regency.

But it never found its feet. But somehow it *did* survive. While bigger and more famous theatres flickered away before the approach of building schemes or the new cinemas, the Regency endured.

It became a cinema itself for a short time, and then there was some difficulty—with fire regulations, I believe—and it switched back. It changed hands many times. Concerts, boxing shows, pantomime, avant-garde hybrids, all turned up there. It was used at various times as a club theatre, a ballet school, a try-out house. Once somebody tore the seats up and made a dance hall of it. But there must have been too many ghosts in the air ; after six months the seats went back.

More than once it was closed for longer than seemed hopeful. But always somebody new would turn up to try his hand. Some local jobbing printer must have done well down the years with *Under Entirely New Management* posters.

Through storms and floods and wars and rockets it survived, while factories went up and warehouses came down, while the horse-bus gave way to the tram and the petrol bus, and the Underground nosed its way through many new burrows—but never, unfortunately, came up near the Regency.

And I, having stumbled upon the place when I was very young and working for a local paper, came to love it as a man loves an ageing and unfaithful mistress.

When I told Fred, the taxi-driver, " The Regency," he sniffed loudly under his walrus moustache.

" Slumming again, guv ? I thought you'd be at the Coward do at the Palace. Biggest first night for years. Tallulah, Bea, Duggie—the lot."

" That," I said, " is why I'm going to the Regency. If you don't mind, of course. I've posted the faithful young disciple, Digby, to the Palace."

Fred sniffed again as he engaged gears—the two sounds were strikingly similar—and started off.

I got to the theatre five minutes before curtain-up. Just time to savour the pitifully wonderful atmosphere of the place. They still had gaslight in the foyer. The drapings were of the heaviest red plush, and so were the seats. Nobody could have called the painted plaster cherubs on the ceiling beautiful—except me.

I didn't know what to expect this evening. I have a weakness for mime, as for anything simple—the eccentric dancer,

the single impersonator holding stage and audience with the barest props. Probably, after thirty years of sitting through every possible and impossible demonstration of theatrical ingenuity, of revolving stages and multi-level sets and *The Tempest* to jazz, I had developed, out of satiety, a taste for essences.

I'd seen mime in Paris and once talked a night through with Barrault on the subject, but I hadn't seen—or even heard of—Jean Victoire. The programme gave no history. It simply announced *Jean Victoire et Son Ecole.* The *ecole* seemed to consist of three pupils only.

The lights went down.

Jean Victoire was a little, supple man—of about sixty, I thought. His pupils were young and, it soon became apparent, inexperienced. Once by sheer youthful exertion they managed to evoke something of the atmosphere of a machine shop. But the rest was rather sorry stuff.

Victoire introduced each scene and set it off, or took a minor part. He did not appear solo until just before the interval. By that time I felt that the handful of audience was becoming politely restive, and I had regretfully decided to have a drink at the bar at the interval, then leave.

Then Victoire came on. A pupil announced simply, "*Dans le Parc.*"

Victoire began by walking through the park in several successive manners. He was the lover, the girl, the old philanderer, the park-keeper. He suggested them brilliantly.

It must have been, I thought, that he was a bad teacher ; for his own technique was superb. Without being an authority, I could *feel* the generations of tradition that informed each step, each angle of the wrist, each gesture of the shoulder.

The audience was stirring, but with interest now, laughing at the attempts of the old philanderer to entice the girl, the snooping of the park-keeper, the triumph of boy and girl, their walk home.

The final bit of play was masterly, the shy young man leaning on the post at the foot of the stairs, crossing and uncrossing his feet bashfully, the girl trying to encourage him and yet trying not to appear brazen.

And then it happened—

He was the young man leaning on a post that wasn't there. Only suddenly it *was* there. And the stairs too.

And Victoire as the girl acted goodnight and went off up the short flight of stairs—and in that moment he *was* the girl. Not just a clever suggestion of a girl's coquetry and gestures and steps. He *was* a girl—a brunette in a flowered summer dress. There was a flash of red lips as the figure disappeared off-stage.

The curtain came down and Victoire re-appeared immediately, a little man in faded tights. He bowed and retired. The lights went up.

The audience applauded as if nothing extraordinary had happened. I went out to the bar in a daze.

" A double scotch, Ada, please."

" A double ? That's something new, isn't it ?"

We'd known each other for years. She'd been at the Regency as long as I'd known it—somehow, like the building itself, surviving all its chances and changes.

I drained the whisky and ordered another impatiently across the knot of people waiting to be served. An eyebrow or two was turned and raised at me. Ada shook a draining bottle of Guinness, admonishing and refusing me.

The usual interval chatter filled the air. Nobody seemed to be bewildered as I was bewildered. Were modern audiences, I asked myself, so blase ? I felt a sudden need to talk to somebody, anybody, about what I had seen—or thought I had.

A girl stood next to me, a girl with big eyes and a mop of black hair and a dress like a totem-pole. She was looking my way. I was about to utter some introductory politeness, but she looked past me suddenly to greet a friend.

The knot had dispersed from the counter. " Ada," I said.

" No," Ada said firmly. " You know it's against doctor's orders."

" I didn't mean that," I said. " This man Victoire, what do you know about him ?"

She shrugged. " Nothing."

I knew that Ada turned up at rehearsals to dispense drinks and cut sandwiches. She didn't have to, but she loved the theatre, this theatre, as much as I did. She was steeped in it, the ephemeral successes, the heartbreaks, the sweat, the dimming of lights.

" You must have seen the rehearsals," I persisted.

" Oh, bless me, they ain't what they used to be. No discipline now, you know. Anyway, this kind of thing's not my cup of tea. Give me Euripeyeds any day."

" You're getting precious, Ada," I told her. " But Victoire —what's he like ?"

" Oh, a very polite little gent, like most of these Frenchmen. Though I think he'd be a bit more than polite if you was to give him half a chance." She sighed. Ada was something of an actress herself. " But he doesn't say much. He seems rather sad. And his kids—they don't say much either. As if they was a bit scared of him. Then he's their teacher. I suppose that's it."

" Scared ?" I said.

" Second bell's gone." She turned to washing up glasses. " The lights are going down."

Well, the second half of the programme went much as the first. The pupils were indifferent, and Victoire himself only came on as the last act.

This time it was something of a *tour de force*. There were no human characters at all in this—an attempt to convey the mood of the country in summer. An attempt that succeeded, for somehow he managed to suggest flowers, grass, the sky, the coming and passing of rain, birds, trees.

Trees—

Until then he had indicated them, conjured them up with every device of suggestion. But now suddenly—he became one. Or seemed to. He had faded green tights on, but no amount of contortion or artistry could have produced this illusion. This was a tree—in living leaf.

I got a distinct impression that it was an act of torture, that it took every ounce of strength to maintain. Or perhaps my startled mind was equating the twisted trunk of the tree with straining sinews.

Then the vision strangely flickered, half-man half-tree. A hand waved like a wind-blown leaf and the curtain came down quickly—but not before the vision had become wholly tree again.

There was a pause. I had a crazy notion that the little mime had become permanently a tree and taken root there behind the curtain.

But the curtains parted and out he stepped. He seemed to be breathing heavily and sweat was standing out on his forehead.

I didn't wait for the applause, but went straight round to the stage door and sent my card in. The doorkeeper came back after a while and showed me to the dressing room.

Victoire was sitting at his dressing table, gazing into the cracked mirror, his head moodily propped on his hands.

" Monsieur," I began, " vous avez donne—" My French was rusty, but I was determined.

" I speak English," he said, turning to me. " What can I do for you ?"

" I came to congratulate you," I said. " For—for the miracle."

" Miracle ?" His English was good, but his shrug was untranslatably French.

I couldn't understand his being dejected—unless it stemmed from reaction. A sudden thought struck me.

" You—you know that you do it ?"

" I know it," he said simply—and hopelessly.

" And yet—"

" M'sieu '." He looked at me with eyes infinitely sorrowful. " There was a man called Pygmalion who made a statue very life-like. The statue came to life."

" Indeed," I said. " But that brought him happiness. Forgive me, but why are you so sad ?"

" Pygmalion wanted a wife," he said. " He must have been a poor artist."

" I'm afraid I don't see."

The little man brought his fist down on his dressing table with a thump that set the grease pots jumping. One fell to the floor and rolled into a corner.

" Because, m'sieu', when he had a wife he no longer had a work of art. All of art is a struggle towards the—the suggestion of life. A painter works with paint on a flat board. He does not take flesh and blood.

" I try—all my life I have tried—to suggest other things. I have learned much. Many years, m'sieu'. Many countries. Many masters. An artist sets limits to his work—because his art is the struggle against them. Without them there would be no art."

I saw now what he meant. " But you can stop yourself ?" I said. " You need not pass the limits, surely."

His shoulders drooped. " Can it be so ? When all your life you have worked and strained towards that ?"

I knew now that the struggle I thought I had witnessed had been real enough—but to prevent, not achieve.

" But now you have risen to the heights," I said. " You can claim your just fame. They say that success is a hollow thing, but you know that you have won it. You have striven for the perfect illusion. Now you have achieved it."

" Illusion ?" He laughed bitterly. " You think so ?"

His tone alarmed me. " How else ?" I faltered.

" Look," he said, and rose to his feet.

And then and there, in that tiny dusty dressing room, he put on a performance for my especial benefit—or so I thought.

" *Le Tueur*," he announced.

He called up a dark night, conjured a rich man hurrying fearfully down crooked street after crooked street. A wave of the hands and the moon passed from behind clouds.

Walking stooped in terror as the rich man came to a cul-de-sac. Behind him he could hear steps. A dark figure came into view. They struggled.

All within the limits of mime, by brilliant suggestion.

The rich man cowered against the wall, his heart beating wildly. The dark figure loomed over him. A knife appeared in his hand.

But now it was a real knife—

Before I could reach him the assassin had plunged it deep into the rich man's breast—but it was a little man in green tights who was both wielder and victim. He swayed for a moment, then slumped to the floor.

Yet when I reached him his right hand was empty and the only stain on the faded tights was of sweat. But the rest was no illusion. My trembling hand upon his breast told me that.

—Arthur Sellings

Mr. Presslie's story this month deals with an android—but an android the like of which you have never known ! This one not only eats (and who ever heard of a synthetic man eating ?) but has a magnetic charm for the ladies. One might say, however, that there are wheels within wheels . . .

LADIES' MAN

BY ROBERT PRESSLIE

Naturally, he was in the kitchen when the call came through. I say naturally because in all the five years I have been with him he has shown only two interests in life. And if the word kitchen has conjured up visions of conventional infra-red and high-frequency cookers, the time has come for further enlightenment. My boss was seated at a large console, one hand supporting his head, the other flitting over serried ranks of knobs.

He was getting his breakfast together. In response to the summons of his fingers, aminoacids were combining to form the proteins of his choice, flavours and aromas were being synthesised in new permutations. Just as I was about to open my mouth, he finished his latest creation, pressed the delivery button and watched a platter slide out of the chute in the centre of the console.

I knew it could cost me a lot of grief to interrupt him at this vital moment, but business was business.

" You're wanted on the paravee," I told him.

He prodded the mess on his platter with a fork, sniffed at a sample, put it in his mouth, rolled his cheeks as he savoured it. With a hum that combined pleasure and self-congratulations, he proceeded to attack the remainder of his breakfast.

" It's the Trade Commissioner for Non-Ferrous Metals from Ruchbah," I said, patiently.

At first I thought he was going to ignore me altogether ; which would not have been a new experience. But, instead, he made a great play of poising the fork halfway to his mouth before letting it clatter on the plate with a fine show of disgust and resignation.

" Miss Gold," he said without looking my way. " I cannot remember offhand whether or not I have ever told you—but my interest in non-ferrous metals is entirely negative. Now, if you don't mind, I will continue with the spoiled remains of my breakfast."

" Childs was here yesterday," I said. "He told me to remind you of one of the Laws—the one that says any independent android becomes government property if it can be shown that he is no longer capable of supporting himself."

He turned and gave me a big sorrowful look. I knew he was hamming it for all he was worth but he still made me feel like a worm.

" Sharon—" the voice was heavy with reproach. " As my secretary, as my *friend*, surely it was your duty to point out to Childs that there is another Law which states that it is illegal to insult, wound or debase an android by reminding him of his status. And regarding my present financial embarrassment, I have already assured him that I have several projects in mind."

Out of all that, the only thing that really registered was his use of my first name. So it was in gentle honeyed voice that I prompted, "—the paravee ?"

" Later," he waved. " First things first, Miss Gold."

Miss Gold, indeed ! I snapped out of my daydream. He had not worked for three months, not since the Martian affair and he had lied to Childs about his future prospects : there were none. If he did not work soon it would be back to the vats . . . I stifled the thought quickly.

I said primly, " The Trade Commissioner for Non-Ferrous Metals from Ruchbah is a woman. She is waiting—"

He was out of his seat and through the kitchen door in one move, leaving me to blink my tears in private.

As I said, he has only two interests in life.

I dabbed my face and followed him determinedly. For one thing, it was not safe to leave him too long with any woman, be she in the flesh or only an image on the paravee screen. Furthermore, the call from Ruchbah looked like business and business was something we badly needed. Like a good little secretary, I got behind him and activated my portable recorder.

He bowed in front of the paravee. " Homer Adonis at your service. Enchanted to make your aquaintance, Miss—?"

The charm worked like always. If that Ruchbah cat was annoyed at being kept waiting, she was mollified by what she saw and heard : six and a half feet of everything a girl could wish for and speaking as if he had hitherto shunned matrimony because he had been waiting for her and her alone.

" Homer Adonis," she purred. " That's a nice name."

" It ought to be. I picked it myself. The Adonis is obvious. The Homer, like myself, is a corrupted form of Homo."

" You're not very modest !"

" Modesty is for the mediocre. That, I have never been. But you have not answered my unspoken question. You knew who and what I was before you called. I am at a disadvantage, Miss—?"

"—Goohan. Nanthy Goohan."

" Nancy !" He said it with a deep sigh, as if he was engraving it on his heart.

" Nanthy," she corrected. " Not Nancy. We have no sibilants in our basic alphabet."

" Beautiful," he said. There were signs of this mutual admiration dialogue going on forever if somebody did not make a move towards business.

" Miss Goohan," I interposed. " This call must be costing you a fortune. And there may be other clients wishing to contact us. If you would tell Mr. Adonis the reason for—"

The eyes on the screen shifted from him to me. I will bet he saw no change of expression. It takes a woman to see how the same smile can mean two different things. I was getting the acid isotope. Then the eyes went back to Homer and the acid changed to saccharin.

" I have heard that you are an expert at solving problems," she said speaking as if I was not there.

" A moderate number of successes," he allowed.

" He has never failed," I put in.

" Could you stop a war ?" she asked.

" At a price," he said blithely and I gasped. He was stepping in with both feet. Even granting that he was something unique among androids—or men, for that matter—he was laying himself wide open to prosecution by Childs. Interference in planetary affairs by non-politicals was strictly frowned upon. For an android to try it was suicide.

" What is your price ?"

" That depends. Sometimes my services are granted free. Usually I charge a minimum of ten thousand credits."

I tried to get him out of it. " Per day !" I snapped.

Her smile did not falter. " That could be arranged," she said and I was afraid. I reached past him, killed the sound and said, " Don't touch it, not with a ship's gantry !" He arched his black eyebrows and waited.

" I smell a rat, and I don't mean only her. Where could anyone find that kind of money ? Clean money, I mean. I don't know what she wants you to do but whatever it is, don't do it. One : nobody gets paid that much for less than murder. Two : if the job is as big as it must be and you failed, your only payment could be with your life. Three : Ruchbah is in Cassiopeia and you know you're not even allowed to go as far as Luna. If Childs—"

He turned up the sound. " You were saying, Nanthy ?"

She did not try to hide her lack of love for me. " I can lip read," she said tightly.

" You must forgive my secretary. At times she is over-zealous of my good health."

" I think I would prefer to see you alone before saying any more. Since you can't come to me, I'll come to you."

He offered, " I'll send my secretary out of the room."

" Never mind, Homer. I'm sure it will be much more satisfactory to meet you in the flesh . . . alone !"

It was no surprise to me that our first visitor should be Childs. He came in the late afternoon and, as usual, without preliminary notification. For once I ushered him in with a welcome.

He immediately appropriated my desk and chair. " Tell that synthetic master-mind I want to see him, Miss Gold." He sounded so pleased in a grumpy sort of way, I wondered if he had Adonis's disintegration warrant in his pocket.

I conveyed the news to the study where the boss was browsing through his art collection. Art, for him, means photo-

graphic records of the pick of the world's pulchritude. I think he was trying to classify Nanthy Goohan in advance. He was certainly still floating in the glow of her paravee appearance because he showed no displeasure at my news. He closed the folder of glossies, returned it to its shelf, checked his hair in the mirror, gave a fluffy set to his cravat and went through to Childs.

" My good fellow," he said affably. " Delighted to see you. What brings you to the suburbs ?"

Childs fished in a pocket, took out a thick four-times folded document.

" Android B-254, sometimes known as Homer Adonis," he intoned. " The Office of Android Control is worried about you. As you are no doubt aware, the history of artificial man is not unlike that of the early American negro, who once existed in slavery but is now emancipated. Androids of the B-class, such as yourself, made the grade remarkably fast. Today you are allowed complete freedom ; freedom of choice of labour, freedom of country . . . I don't need to list everything you're as free as any human."

Homer wagged a hand under my nose. " My nails are a bit rough, Sharon. Would you be so kind—"

" Ah-ah !" Childs warned. " I've known you long enough to recognise the signals. We'll keep this little chat entirely off the record, if you don't mind."

Homer blinked innocence. "I merely requested a manicure."

" Which Miss Gold was meant to interpret as an order to record this conversation."

" Record ? My good fellow, the only tape-deck is on the desk before you."

" Tut-tut. We've known each other too long for prevarication. I know for a fact that Miss Gold has a very accomodating bustle. Take off the brooch, Miss Gold . . . Good, now where was I ?"

Adonis was not put out. " About halfway through page three of the Declaration of Android Independence."

Childs went on, " In spite of all the freedom I mentioned, a century is too short a time for anyone to say it is safe to let androids completely off the leash. Hence we have the Office of Control, which I represent."

" Most diligently," Adonis murmured.

"—for your own good. It is my job to see that no android becomes a nuisance and an embarrassment to himself and

other people. Now, let me see. You live in the grand style. In the suburbs, as you put it, in an expensive house, lavishly furnished. All of which I must admit you have paid for, thanks to a diversity of undeniable talents. But—!"

He slapped the document on my desk. " Unless you clear this overdraft at the bank within thirty days I'm going to claim you ! I'm going to prove that you are a grade-one nuisance and embarrassment to me, to the country, to Earth, to the entire universe as we know it !"

The boss looked hurt. " My dear Childs, everything is under control. Why, I could clear that overdraft with two days work—"

Childs leaned across the desk, the triumph of the moment illuminating his face. " Oh, no, you won't ! Not on your life you won't ! And certainly not on Ruchbah you won't !"

" You've been listening," Homer complained, as if such things as paravee tapping were not done.

" What do you think ?"

" Most unethical. A most unethical invasion of personal privacy."

" Save the speeches for the pretty ladies. I know all about this Ruchbah thing with Miss Nanthy Goohan and I'm telling you here and now : forget it. If you make any signs of trying to hop a spacer for Ruchbah, if you so much as jump six feet off terra firma, I'll conduct you to the vats personally and with the greatest of pleasure."

Homer was a picture of bewilderment. " Who said anything about leaving Earth ?"

" Let's say I have foresight born of previous experience of you and your ways."

The boss grew solemn. He went across to the desk and faced Childs. He tapped the top of my desk. " Come on, out with it. You know I wouldn't risk losing my freedom by doing anything so silly. Here's the table—put your cards on it."

Childs looked first to see that my brooch was still disconnected. " I will," he said.

" We don't want you involved in any way with Ruchbah. For as long as anyone can remember, Ruchbah and Caph have been at each other's throats. It would be fair to say they don't like each other. If they confined their quarrels to their own sector of the universe, it wouldn't be so bad. But they have an unfortunate habit of dragging other people into their

squabbles. Two of the planets of Hamal took sides in their last bicker—and it will take them centuries to recover. We don't want Earth to be implicated by some amateur trouble-shooter such as you."

Adonis was peeved at being called an amateur. But he passed it. I could see his brain working. Already Childs had given him more information than he had possessed. His policy, for the moment, was to keep Childs' tongue wagging.

He pursed his mouth. "I didn't realise the situation was so tricky. Now that you've told me, I'll endeavour to keep my nose clean. You said Caph were the trouble-makers ?"

"I said nothing." Childs was no fool. "I'm simply telling you that if and when Miss Nanthy Goohan appears, show her the door."

He looked in my direction. "This hunk of animated protoplasm is your shining light, isn't he ? You see that he follows my advice. Otherwise—"

For the rest of that week I did not sleep too well. I had more complexes than a prune has wrinkles.

Unless Homer Adonis earned enough to clear his overdraft within a month he would be led to the slaughterhouse by Childs. But, on the other hand, the only immediate source of revenue appeared to be the Ruchbah case ; if he took the case, he would almost certainly have to leave Earth to solve it and androids were forbidden to leave Earth ; also, if he took the case, he would have to see a lot more of a certain cat-eyed female, thereby giving me further sleepless nights.

The Goohan girl rolled up to the house just six and a half days after her paravee call. Perhaps rolled up are the wrong words ; she must have singed a hole in hyperspace before slinking up our avenue.

We were very polite to each other, a tight sort of politeness that left the air in the room charged with static. I made her wait fifteen minutes while I finished the paper work on my desk before I buzzed for the boss and told him he had a caller.

Even while hating it, I had to admire his technique. The study door opened, he took a few steps forward and stopped. You would have thought he had suddenly seen a vision. He stood there with the slobbery expression of a spacer having his first look at a woman after a six-year trip to the Hub. Then he almost ran to her, took both her hands in his, raised them to his lips.

" Nanthy," he breathed. " The man who said the paravee screen is flattering is a liar. You are every bit as lovely as I expected."

To look at her, anyone would have been justified in saying she was very much a woman of the world. She had the kind of figure that can only be described in whistles or snorts, depending on the sex of the viewer. Her face was alabaster white, it had the same perfection of surface, and its pallor highlighted the green of her eyes and the ripe red of her lips. The whole picture was topped by a tightly styled pelt of metallic silver hair.

With the introductions over, that was the last I saw of them for the rest of the day. They went into the study for a private discussion. I waited and waited for them to come out, picking two fingernails to pieces in the process. When it got to the hour when a man and a woman were stretching the bounds of decency by being together, I put my ear to the study door.

I do not know what I expected to hear but I do know that hearing nothing at all made me completely miserable and I flounced upstairs to my apartment with much slamming and banging. In the morning I had more rings under my eyes than Saturn.

There was still silence behind the study door. I knocked a few times, got no answer. I tried the door. It opened. The room was empty—which was something. It looked as if the Goohan female had departed. I went to the kitchen with my best smile on, prepared to forgive and forget.

The kitchen was as empty as the study. I went to my desk to buzz his bedroom. And that was when I saw the pilot light on my recorder.

" Sharon," his dreamy voice said at the touch of the playback switch. " Sharon, you were right. The Ruchbah case is not for me to handle. Regrettable—for the fee was tempting and very much needed. I have told Miss Goohan that I cannot accept the case. To compensate for her natural disappointment, I am escorting her to her ship at spacefield, I shall spend the night at the Android Club. I will be back in the morning by ten at the latest—I have an appointment with Childs at ten about my overdraft."

Something, and I couldn't tell what, was phoney. It was seldom my privilege to hear the honey he had put into his recorded words. Any time such sweetness had come my way in the past, I had later regretted falling for it.

I wondered where the catch was. For one awful moment I wondered if he had been so mesmerised by the Ruchbah wench that he had joined her on the return trip to her planet. Then he said that bit about Childs and I relaxed a little.

His voice went on, " There is something I would like you to do for me, Sharon. On checking the accounts last night—" I sighed relief; Nanthy Goohan must have got the door some time soon after I had gone to bed, " —I found a possible discrepancy. It seems that Mr. Childs is being too hasty. Would you go to the bank and get me a statement of account? And please be back by ten so that we can confront Childs with his error."

It was nine then. I had an hour to get to the bank and back to the house, just enough time but no more. I touched the copter down on the roof of the bank twenty-five minutes later.

The manager's attitude, never very warm, was distinctly frigid. People like him were the reason for the Office of Android Control and people like Childs. The only time he tolerated Homer was when he was paying into his account. The overdraft he hated; it confirmed what he thought about allowing androids complete freedom.

At my request, he buttoned Homer's number on the computer. Without delay the machine coughed up a statement. Even from my side of the counter I could see the red ink and again I wondered what Homer was up to.

The bank manager fingered the statement disdainfully, dropped it on the counter as if it was garbage. I could see him building up to a speech about the horrors of insolvency when a flunkey sneaked up to him and whispered in his ear.

" Excuse me," he said and went into his office.

Some of the ice in his expression had melted when he returned. He fed a few figures to the computer, buzzed for a summation and gave me a new statement. The ink was all black.

" Mr. Adonis called," he said. " He told me to inform you that he is at the house and hopes you will be there soon."

I picked up the statement and looked at him pointedly.

" Oh, yes," he said. " He gave me the serial number of a cheque for a hundred thousand credits. He mentioned something about a retaining fee—"

" What bank?" I snapped. " What bank is the cheque drawn against?"

Snootily he said, " Ruchbah — the Central Bank of Ruchbah."

Sheer pique at being taken in by the glib Adonis had me cursing at the slowness of the copter—and I was driving full out. At first when I saw the red glow up ahead I thought it was the angry blood swimming in my head. When I got closer and saw the smoke I took back everything I had wished would happen to the boss.

The house was an inferno. Half a million credits worth of an architectural dream was belching its smoky way into ruin.

I dug the copter into the grass and ran. I would probably have ran right into the blazing shell if Childs had not stopped me.

" You're too late," he said. " There's nothing you can do to save him, nothing anyone can do."

" Is he—? You're quite sure—?"

" He called me on the car radio as I was on my way here. Said he was celebrating and that he was cooking something special . . . I never did trust that fancy electronic kitchen of his. Why couldn't he eat ordinary food like anybody else ?"

" Because it was dead, he used to say. Meat or vegetable, it was dead. He insisted it was healthier to synthesize the proteins and so on at the time they were required."

I got the explanation out and then dissolved in tears as I realised how cold-bloodedly we were discussing Homer in the past tense.

" Come on," Childs said, with unexpected kindness. " I'll run you back to town. There's nothing left here. If you like, I'll ask my wife to put you up until you find another place."

But I stayed. Until the last ember had cooled, I stayed.

My little world had come to an end. Many's the time I had hated the boss and his Cassanova complex. He had been egotistic, vain, immodest, selfish—and the only man I ever cared for, human or android. And now he was dead.

Childs was an angel. He took me under his wing and helped me through those first days after the fire. He even offered me a job in his office, said I would have to get back to work some time and it might as well be on the right side of the law. Not caring what happened to me, I took the job just to make him feel better.

The job lasted one day.

First day in an office—you know how it is—you take the existing filing arrangements and sort them according to your own pet method. About lunchtime I came across a whole sheaf of files on Homer Adonis.

I forgot all about lunch, spent the whole hour going through the folders, with my handkerchief getting moister every minute.

Childs had been thorough. He had Homer Adonis taped right from his birth-vat. Every detail of his life and career were there, including a lot of information that I thought nobody knew except Homer and myself. There was a final slim folder about the end of Android B-254. I held it in my hands a long time before I could bring myself to open it.

It covered the last few weeks of Homer's life. Much of it concerned his recent spell of idleness, his diminishing bank balance and the consequent overdraft. Turning a sheet of foolscap, I came to a verbatim report of a tapped paravee conversation. A footnote carried a cross reference to a file on Ruchbah and added that a picture of Nanthy Goohan was on the next sheet.

My first inclination was to turn two sheets rather than see that woman's face again. But my thumb must have slipped. I took one look at the picture and screamed.

Childs nearly burst the glass door between his part of the office and mine. He relaxed when he saw the files, guessing wrongly at the reason for my scream.

" You shouldn't have looked if it was going to upset you like that."

" Who—who ?" I spluttered. " Who is this woman ?"

" Put it away. Take the rest of the day off."

" Who is this ?" I insisted. " Don't look at me as if I have gone fruity. I'm dead serious. Whose picture is this ?"

" You can read—"

" But it isn't. This isn't Nanthy Goohan."

He gave me a sour look, picked up the desk intervee and called his private secretary. He asked for a picture of the Trade Commissioner for Non-Ferrous Metals of Ruchbah. A prim, spinsterish female version of himself complied smartly and brought the picture.

The pose was different but the sitter was the same.

" It was murder," I said. " She killed him."

" Her ?" Childs pointed to the ten-by-twelve.

" Not her. Nanthy Goohan."

" That is Nanthy Goohan."

" Not the one who came to the house to see Homer."

" I can assure you this is definitely Nanthy Goohan." He closed the glass door to provide us with privacy. " You say you saw someone else, a different woman ? Someone who pretended to be Nanthy Goohan ?"

" I'd know her anywhere. She had blonde hair like this one but she had bleached it and tinted it to an ash colour. And the eyes were distinctly green, not brown like here."

" Ash blonde hair and green eyes ?" Childs seemed to be catching a train of thought.

" You know her ?"

" I told Adonis it would be dangerous to meddle. But I didn't think they would go so far as—"

" Who is she—the one we saw ?"

" Wait." He went into his office and came back with a folder. He opened it, took out a picture. "Anything like this?"

" That's her !" I reached over and turned down the cover of the folder to read the reference data. " Caphian Trade Commissioner for Ferrous Metals !" I quoted.

Childs made me sit down, took the top of the desk for his pew and said, " It is evident that a deception was attempted. For what reason . . . who knows ? The only certainty is that Caph and Ruchbah cannot tolerate each other ; sooner or later the constellation of Cassiopeia will be minus one solar system. Between ourselves, it seems as if Adonis's death was not accidental. As you surmised, it appears to have been contrived. Well, you can't say I didn't warn him—"

I took the verbal slap. " All right," I said. " So he was wrong to get himself implicated even to the extent of meeting the woman. But what are you going to do about it ?"

" What can I do ?"

" You mean you won't—?"

" I told you. It's best to keep out of their politics. I can't involve Earth in any way. Besides, our legal position would be untenable. He was an android, remember ?"

" He was a better man than most of—"

" That's not the point. His charter forbade him to deal in politics. If we pressed charges, if we even opened an investigation, that is the first thing they would throw in our faces. I'm sorry, Miss Gold, but there it is."

" I quit."

" Furthermore, we have no proof whatso . . . I beg your pardon ?"

" I quit. He was right. You're a cold-hearted, chapter and verse abiding, red tape bound automation. Mr. Childs, I quit. I thank you and your wife for your recent hospitality. But I quit."

Before he drew sufficient breath to answer I had scooped up my bag and left. I suppose it must have been some time later when he discovered I had appropriated two colour photographs belonging to the office of Android Control.

They laughed me out of the Caph and Ruchbah consulates. All I learned was that both planetary systems seemed to entrust their administrative posts entirely to women. Both the consuls I met were female. Each took one look at my pictures, laughed and more or less told me it was time I had a session on a psycho couch.

I tried our own Local Board of Trade. Very complicated situation in Cassiopeia, I was informed ; they were afraid there was nothing they could tell me about Nanthy Goohan or her impersonator.

Translating the unspoken words of everyone concerned, I got the impression that, myself apart, everyone knew what went on between Caph and Ruchbah—but they weren't telling. The Terran officials were scared, and the aliens—well, they were women.

The more doors that closed behind me, the more I became convinced that Homer had been murdered. And the more I became determined to find the responsible party. I already had the fake Miss Goohan lined up as the most likely candidate, but I had to be sure, Also, I had to find her before I could do anything about levelling the score.

I spent three futile days at the spaceport, trying to persuade the spaceline to ferry me out to Ruchbah on deferred terms.

A bright idea temporarily doused my rising despair and I spent my last credit on a nugget of fuel to whisk my copter from the spacefield to the bank. But it turned out to be a lousy idea. The barriers were up there too.

The manager said yes, it was true that Android B-245 finished up with a credit bank balance, but didn't I know that on the death or destruction of an android, all surplus monies

reverted to the Office of Android Control? I said I didn't know and I thought it was a one-sided scheme.

He suggested calling on Childs. That gave me my first laugh in days. I could just see Childs parting with the Office's money. Not to mention the fact that we had not exactly said goodbye in the friendliest way.

It was a very dispirited Sharon Gold who stayed at home next day, moping around her tiny flat, conscious that she would soon be evicted for non-payment of rent and wondering just how she was going to get any closer to a pair of alien Trade Commissioners, one of whom was responsible for the premature demise of Homer Adonis.

There were moments of clarity when I wondered why I was bothering. It wasn't as if the boss had ever shown any reciprocation of my tender feelings towards him. I called myself a fool during these spells; but the fool in me accepted the accusation like a martyr and once again I would pummel my brains in search of a way to get to Ruchbah.

All I got was a headache.

Then the limb of my family tree which has its roots in the Emerald Isle did its stuff. Mixing metaphors and nationalities, the mountain came to Mahomet. The off-key door chimes announced the presence of a caller. Looking back, I remember that I went to answer the summons with all the emotions of a dead fish; but as soon as I saw who stood outside the door, I became as animated as a flea in a doss house.

I might have been frustrated Mahomet, but this was no mountain. This was the most beautiful female I had ever seen. And it takes a lot of pride-swallowing for a woman to admit a thing like that.

My visitor was Nanthy Goohan, the genuine article, the one and only Ruchbah Trade Commissioner for Non-Ferrous Metals, the living image of the girl whose likeness I had filched from Childs.

She turned out to be as charming as she was lovely. For the first time since her impersonator had killed Homer, I got a straight answer to my questions.

The bogus caller had been Nanthy's half-sister, by name of Leeba Goohan. The nearest they got was in blood relationship. They lived in different systems, one in Ruchbah, the other in Caph, and they had as much love for each other as their worlds had—none.

" Both systems have males," Nanthy said. " Neither have men." Her tones gave colour to the distinction.

" Although we disagree in everything," she went on, " we are dependant on each other for certain things. One of which is the males of the enemy system. We are self-sterile. Unless Ruchbah wishes to become eventually devoid of people, it must have truck with the men—" She spat the word. " —of Caph. And vice-versa, of course."

Now, I will at all times declare myself to be pure and innocent, but I had heard of the birds and the bees. I saw a fallacy in what Nanthy said.

" But going back in time," I queried. " Back to the beginning, before your separate systems ever had traffic with each other—where did the people come from ?"

" Before space travel you mean ? Where did we find fathers for our children ?"

" Well, unless you were parthenogenetic in the past—"

" Nothing like that. Going back that far, we were one people and our home was in another system. However, even then we disagreed, one half of the system with the other. More or less simultaneously we got out. We sought a new home in a new system. Cassiopeia was the nearest. The enemy settled in the Caph system, we in the Ruchbah."

" You must be running the longest feud ever."

" Not our fault, I can assure you."

" You mean the Caph planets are the trouble makers ?"

" Planet, singular. They call it Caph after their sun. Our history is strangely parallel. We too found only one habitable planet."

" Called Ruchbah ?"

She gave me a suspicious look wondering whether I was extracting the Michael. " Yes," she agreed. " And if it wasn't that we needed their men and their bismuth, we would live in complete peace."

" Before you go any further," I said, meaning before it got any more complicated. " Is there any specific reason why affairs of state appear to be in the hands of women ?"

" Appear to be ? They very much are ! And have been for eons. If you saw our males you would know why. Undersized, overweight, little round blobs of fat and spindle shanks. It's a racial characteristic and as much as we've tried to breed it out it still persists. We, the women, do all the work ; from factories to offices, from battlefields to council chambers."

I nodded understandingly. " You hate men, don't you ? You hate the fact that they are necessary for the propagation of the race ?"

Until then, Nanthy's manner had been most demure. But she exploded in a very unladylike way. " Hate them ! We may hate the ones we have to put up with, but there isn't a woman in the two systems who wouldn't give her eyeteeth just to get hold of a real man !"

My eyes popped open. " So that was it ! She didn't want his professional services, it was *him* she wanted !"

The amazing Nanthy Goohan dimpled and said, " What woman wouldn't ?"

She had a point there. However, instead of clarifying matters, it made them thicker.

" So she didn't kill him ?" I asked.

Nanthy smiled encouragement, like a teacher watching a pet pupil work out a problem.

" It was a staged fire," I expounded. " He wasn't there at all. He's alive ! She abducted him and got someone to use recordings of his voice to phone Childs and the bank and that someone burned the house down so that everybody would think Homer was dead. Oh, it's wonderful !"

" Wonderful ?"

" He's alive !"

" And most likely wishing he was dead !" said Nanthy, bringing me down to earth with a bump.

" I knew. I just knew that woman was up to no good."

" That is why I came to see you."

" Me ? What can I do ?"

" Come with me to Ruchbah. If Homer Adonis is on Caph, you can help us get him out."

All my prayers were suddenly answered. My heart asked what we were waiting for. But my head still functioned. Trying not to sound ungrateful, I asked, " Why should you do that for Homer ?"

" We need him. To stop a war."

" That's funny. That's what she said."

" Bait. Simply bait to get him as far as her ship so that she could abduct him."

" This may seem like an impertinence and I hope you'll pardon the question, but how do I know your motives aren't similar to hers ?"

She gave me one of the injured looks that Homer had specialised in. " Let me give you the whole story," she said, in a confiding, woman-to-woman tone.

In spite of their perpetual feud, Caph and Ruchbah were so interdependent that their existence was almost symbiotic. Because of several factors, including variable suns and slow axial planetary spins, both worlds required immense thermostatic devices to keep the varying temperatures within tolerable limits. And both planets used the same type of device, gigantic grids of bismuth telluride.

We had one in the house-that-was, so I was not unfamiliar with these grids. Bismuth telluride is a compound with a useful peculiarity ; if current is passed through it in one direction, it can be used as a cooling unit ; reverse the current and it makes a dandy heater.

It was these same grids, on a much larger scale, that caused most of the ill-feeling between Caph and Ruchbah. Fate had played a dirty trick when the planets had first been created. Caph had been given all the elements except those of the ferrous group ; Ruchbah had plenty of ferrous metals, iron, nickel, cobalt, but no bismuth. It was quite a set-up, loaded with dangerous possibilities, and the feuding planets exploited them to the full.

Caph had bismuth deposits all over the planet. However, these deposits were not of the native metal but of its sulphide. To extract the pure metal it was necessary to fuse the sulphide with iron ore. And Caph had no iron.

Ruchbah had as much iron as Caph had bismuth. But it had no bismuth of its own. The nearest source of the essential metal was Caph. Business between the two worlds was most necessary hence the exalted positions of their trade commissioners. That these commissioners were half-sisters and private enemies only added to the explosiveness of the situation.

" The trouble is," Nanthy said, " they keep screwing up the price of bismuth. Naturally, to maintain an economic balance, we must in turn charge more for our iron."

I took my finger out of the coil of hair I had twisted round it while listening. " Why don't you come to some agreement ? Maybe I'm stupid about such things, but surely if one of you lowered your price the other would follow suit. Wouldn't that stop the rising spiral ?"

" Yes, but who ? If we cut the price of our iron, there would be a time lag before we would be able to buy cheaper bismuth. As it is, our economy is so finely balanced that a lag of only a week would see us ruined. And don't those Caphians know it ! Even now we have to maintain a huge staff of spies so that we can learn immediately of any change in the bismuth market. They, of course, have spies in our midst."

I was beginning to suspect that Caph and Ruchbah enjoyed their feud. Certainly they seemed to make very little effort to end it.

" Is it all necessary ?" I asked. " I mean, if that's how they are, why go on being so dependant on them ? Why not get your bismuth elsewhere ? Or change to some other means of thermostatic control ?"

" You must have been a wonderful disciple to your master ! It is precisely those last two questions which we are hoping he can answer."

" Where does the war come in ?"

" The economic war is already on, always has been. It is real war we fear, destructive war. If we on Ruchbah decided to adopt another thermostatic system, think how long it would take us to erect such a system all over the entire planet. And while we're so engaged, what do you think those creatures on Caph will be doing ? I'll tell you. They'll misinterpret our motives. They will say we're trying to ruin them by not buying any more bismuth, and trying to kill them by not supplying iron. No, Miss Gold, the minute we started such a scheme they would pounce on us. There's your war."

" And Homer— ? "

" We are aware of his reputation as a solver of problems. You have heard the problem. Perhaps he can solve it, perhaps he can find some way of convincing those of Caph that we would mean no harm to them if and when we scrapped the bismuth telluride grids."

" And the other question ? About getting your bismuth elsewhere—"

" An obvious solution and a possible one at first glance."

I was getting wise. I knew there just had to be a snag. I sighed.

" What looks different at a second glance ?"

" There is a planet in Polaris, equidistant to Caph and Ruchbah. We know that this uninhabited planet is rich in

the bismuth on which our existence depends. With the help of Homer Adonis we hope to be able to mine it without starting a war."

I had a creepy witchy feeling, as if I had suddenly been gifted with deja-vu.

" Miss Goohan," I said. " I don't suppose the trouble is that this planet with all the bismuth is also loaded to the core with the iron that would solve Caph's problem ?"

She swept the space between us with a series of long-lashed blinks.

" How did you guess ?" she said.

For all Ruchbah's alleged economic instability, its trade Commissioner for Ferrous Metals had herself a ship whose cost would probably have solved half the planetary debt. I imagined that Leeba Goohan of Caph was similarly equipped, because the time lag between her paravee call to Homer and her actual visit was no longer than the time it took Nanthy and I to get to her home planet. It seemed that trade commissioners were exempt from economy measures.

With my first view of Ruchbah I wondered why the natives were so insistent on staying there, why they didn't pack their bags and look for some place better.

I suppose it is unfair to criticise iron. It has its uses. But it gets a bit monotonous to see everything made of the stuff. Its superabundance was not noticeable in the streets or in the exteriors of buildings. It was when you were inside and getting down to the business of living that you noticed it. I never saw so much tubular steel furniture. And when it came to eating . . . well !

Because of Homer's insistence on synthetic food, it had always been my lot to wine and dine his varied clients and in my time I have coped with everything from chopsticks to plastic squeeze-bottles. But I left more of my first Ruchbah'n meal on the plate, on the table and on the floor than I managed to get inside me. Every time I got the fork and knife near each other, they clanged together with magnetic chumminess. When I pulled them apart, the fodder flew in all directions. I would have given anything for one set of genuine non-ferrous eating tools.

To avoid discussion of my performance, I asked Nanthy how and when we got in touch with the boss.

" Any minute," she said. " Didn't I tell you ? My half-sister has agreed to bring him here."

I am of the wrong sex to be a Thomas, but I could and did have his proverbial doubts. " Do you think she will ?"

" Oh, yes. She'll do that much. We meet quite often, you know, in the course of our work."

" Won't she think you might intend snatching Homer ?"

" Of course. But the emergency will be provided for. She'll have a fleet of warships orbiting the planet, just waiting for a signal that she has been double-crossed."

" What do you hope to achieve ?"

" That's up to Homer Adonis. While he was on Caph he was getting a one-sided view of the picture. I could quite easily have staged a kidnapping and made him see the other side. But I am Nanthy, not Leeba, and I don't do things that way. I believe he should hear both sides of the problem at once."

" How noble of you !"

The sarcastic remark was not mine. Evidently Nanthy had left instructions that her half-sister was to be ushered into her presence the minute she arrived. Leeba stood in the doorway, her expression every bit as sour as her tones.

My first impulse was to dash across to hug Homer—until I saw the way that Leeba was hanging possessively to his arm and his patent pleasure that she should do so. But at least he did not ignore me.

" Hello, Sharon," he said with a nod. Ever the perfect gentleman, my boss.

" I thought you were dead—"

" Do I detect a note of regret ?"

I put my nose in the air. He could think what he liked.

Nanthy tried to make the atmosphere less electric. " Shall we go through to the conference room ?" she suggested.

" The usual arrangements ?" her half-sister asked.

" Of course," said Nanthy and they both turned their backs on Homer while they fished in their foundations to bring out their mini-recorders. At the door of the conference room, Leeba extracted another gadget, evidently designed to detect the presence of any live current which might be powering other hidden recorders. She seemed satisfied with what the doodad told her and took a seat at the round table which, with four chairs, was the only item of furniture in the room

Leeba and Nanthy faced each other across the table. Homer was between them. I sat facing him.

There was a long narrow strip of paper at Nanthy's place. She turned it over, slid it across the steel surface in Homer's direction.

" I mustn't forget this," she said. She watched the boss's expression. " Is it enough ?"

I could see six zeros on the cheque, which once again brought home to me how desperate these two planets were to get what they wanted, and how freely their trade commissioners threw their credits about. I was not prepared for Homer's answer.

He picked up one edge of the cheque. " My usual retaining fee," he fibbed. " If you wish me to act without bias to either side you had better alter this to one million. Leeba has already done so. Of course, you are at liberty to withdraw your option on my—"

Nanthy snatched the paper, changed the figures and initialled the alteration. Adonis took the amended cheque, pushed it across to me with another like it and told me to take care of them. My fingers shook as I picked them up. After five years as his secretary I had thought nothing he could do would surprise me. But to price himself at two million !

" We need a new house," he murmured and I flushed at the way he had read my thought.

" Now," said Nanthy, " we can get down to business. For a start, dear sister, I shouldn't bother projecting your emotions to your guardian ships. It has taken me quite some time to realise that you had a miniature transmitter surgically ensconsed under your scalp. As a safety measure I have had this room heavily gaussed."

Leeba hissed, " Why, you— !" Then her beautiful features relaxed. " My silence will be just as suspicious as any warning I could have sent."

" I thought of that. Your ships are at this moment receiving on the appropriate channel a nice steady hypothalamic rhythm. They will suspect nothing."

Nanthy apologised to Homer and myself. " I'm sorry if all this sounds terribly suspicious of me but if this conference is to achieve any success it is necessary that no side has an advantage over the other. And I know dear Leeba of old."

Homer said he understood.

" I will now consider the facts," he went on. " I will assume that it is impossible for any agreement to be made regarding

the stabilisation of prices for iron and bismuth. I will also assume that you have contemplated and discarded any suggestion of a straightforward barter system, exchanging your commodities ton for ton. Therefore, you wish me to find a new answer to an old problem. Does anyone have a nailfile ?"

I wondered if he had forgotten the gauss field. Nevertheless, I passed him a file and activated my brooch mike at the same time.

" Before attempting to find a solution, I should like a restatement from each of you young ladies. I should like to hear once more your proposals. You first, Leeba."

" Well, if it wasn't for Ruchbah—"

" No preamble or diversions, please. The facts only. And keep it short."

I sat up straight. For him to talk to a woman like that was the acme of rudeness. I could see Leeba didn't like it.

She spoke with a prune in her mouth. " There are two ways out. One : Ruchbah must guarantee not to attack us while we instal a new system of temperature control. Or two : if we undertake to mine our iron on Delta Polaris, Ruchbah must agree to stay out."

" And," said Homer, " you wish me to endeavour to make one or other of these events come to pass without causing war ? You have paid me one million credits to prevent a war?"

" Yes."

" Now you, Nanthy. Do you agree with Leeba's suggestions ?"

" They are much the same as I told Sharon."

" Repeat them, please."

Nanthy hesitated, then complied. Homer asked if she had any alternative suggestions to make. She said she hadn't.

" And you agree that to earn the one million credits now in Sharon's hands I must prevent a war ?"

" I don't see where all this is leading—"

" Do you agree ?"

She mumbled inaudibly.

" I beg your pardon ?"

" I said I agree."

" Return the cheques, please, Sharon. We're going home !"

Of the three women present, I was the least astounded. But I had grown accustomed to his vagaries, his tortuous ways of

doing things. Anyhow, I hadn't liked the idea of two million credits from the start. I pushed across the strips of paper, one to each side. The Goohan girls just stared at them, completely dumbstruck.

They found tongue simultaneously. Both heads jerked up, both voices said, " But—"

" No," said Homer Adonis. " It can't be done. I withdraw the offer of my services."

Once again they said, " But—"

" My decision is final."

" Is it money ?" Nanthy asked. " What's your reason ?"

" He won't do it," I told her. " Not if he says he won't."

" Give me a reason," Nanthy insisted.

" I'll give you four," Adonis said. " Item : Terrans are forbidden to dabble in Cassiopeian politics. Item : The same applies to androids, only doubly so. Item : it is illegal for an android to leave Earth, as I have. Your nailfile, Sharon. I have finished with it, thank you."

The file went back in my purse and the brooch mike got switched off.

" You said four reasons," Nanthy reminded him.

" Both of you have lied to me, that is the fourth reason."

Both of them gasped. I was beginning to enjoy the play. This was the Homer I knew, the old master of the situation. I hadn't a clue as to what he was doing but I enjoyed it just to see him get nasty with women for a change.

" Leeba, you lied from the minute you appeared on my paravee screen. You said your name was Nanthy. "

" I explained about that."

" You underestimate my intelligence. That stupid story about your own name having been so discredited by Ruchbah that you thought it best to use Nanthy's ! You knew perfectly well that Childs monitored all my calls : you knew he would come to warn me off the case ; you knew he would recognise your real identity, tell me, and thereby ensure that I was sufficiently intrigued to go with you to Caph."

This was getting more interesting all the time. It was also news to me that Childs had told Homer about the switch of identity.

Nanthy offered, " I told you she couldn't be trusted."

Homer inspected her as disdainfully as he inspects a non-synthetic steak. " Your duplicity was just as great. You informed Miss Gold that I was being held hostage on Caph

and that only her presence would ensure my coming to Ruchbah."

It was only the thought of future wrinkles that kept my eyebrows down. I began, " How did you—?"

" I received a threatening message while I was residing with Leeba, a message from Nanthy to the effect that *she* was holding *you* as hostage."

" And you came to rescue me !"

" On the contrary. I came to see why Leeba and Nanthy thought I would come."

" My hero !" I snarled.

He was undeflated. " As I expected, it was simply a plot to get Earth in the wrong with the Galactic Council. You were there in case the council said that an android was not responsible for his actions or something similar that would have foiled their plan."

" *Their* plan ? I thought they hated each other's—"

" Please, Sharon. Not that word. It reminds me of putrescent food—and I have had to suffer too much of that since I left home. You thought what everybody thought. In fact, the two worlds of Caph and Ruchbah have been in sinister alliance for quite some time. Ever since they decided they wanted Earth."

He must have been right because the sisterly hatred was now being concentrated on him. Green eyes and brown eyes seared him as he laid out his story.

After Childs' visit to the house, Homer had done some tape reading. He had absorbed the Cassiopeian situation long before Leeba showed up. With cajolery, promises and money he had opened up secret lockers and learned of the Caph-Ruchbah alliance. The burning of the house had been his own suggestion, a ruse to convince Leeba that he had swallowed her tale.

If everything had gone as planned the two worlds could have made legitimate war on Earth. They could have told the Galactic Council that Earth—as represented by Adonis and myself—had horned in on Cassiopeian affairs. And the council would have stood aside, powerless to bring other worlds to Earth's aid, because Earth would have been the aggressor.

One thing was so obvious, I had to voice it. " Childs must have known all along about the fire and you leaving Earth and everything—"

" But of course !"

" You mean Childs let you leave ?"

" He paid me to. Didn't you, Childs ?" he raised his voice there.

The door opened, Childs put his head round and grinned. Me, I just gasped. Now I had seen everything. Childs and Adonis working together !

" How did he get in ?" Nanthy asked.

Childs pushed the door wide open so we could see the army behind him.

" We've been expecting a move from these girls," he said. " When Leeba moved in on Adonis, we guessed this was it and commissioned him to play it our way."

" Ten credits a day !" Homer said disgustedly.

Childs grinned again. " Plus the honour of being the first android to be permitted to leave Earth."

Since everybody seemed to be in the picture except we girls, I felt obliged to put a question or two.

" Doesn't this count as aggression ?" was number one.

Childs answered it. " When I said we had been expecting a move, I meant the council, not only Earth. We came with the council's backing."

" What made you so sure they would make some kind of a move ?"

Homer took that one. He asked me to name a few ferrous metals.

" Iron," I said. " And nickel. And cobalt. And—"

" Stop there at cobalt. Now give me a non-ferrous metal."

I mumbled my way down the periodic table until I came to lithium.

" That's far enough. Now what similar product could Caph make with cobalt and Ruchbah with lithium ?"

They teach that stuff in kindergarten these days. " Bangers," I said. " Equalisers. Erasers. Bombs."

" Precisely. And when two enemies discover they both have powerful weapons—the use of which against each other will do nothing to settle their real problem—what do you think happens next ? "

" They look for somebody else to use them on—"

He gave me a smile that made my day. "—Earth," he finished for me.

" But why ? Earth is a small world. There isn't enough iron or bismuth—"

" They don't want iron or bismuth, Sharon. I told you, they have been allies for some time. Their real problem was, and always has been, men. And Earth was the nearest source of supply."

I mentioned Delta Polaris, the uninhabited planet equidistant to Caph and Ruchbah.

" There is no Delta Polaris. A fiction invented for your benefit."

Childs completed the sordid details. Apparently Nanthy had told me one item of truth, that both C and R's men were men in name only. But Nanthy had not told me all the truth, she had not told me that the birth rate on both worlds was at rock bottom, that unless new stock was found there would soon be no more generations.

" They would have fought Earth for that ?" I asked. " For men ?"

" Women always fight for men."

I snorted. " Not me, Mr. Childs. Not for any man or . . . What are you grinning at, Homer Adonis ? You haven't been so smart. Your house burned to the ground, only a few credits in the bank, and you do child's work for ten credits a day !"

" Ah ! Thank you for reminding me, Sharon. Could I have a playback of the recorded conversation of a moment ago ?"

I moved a hand, then said, " What about the gauss field ? There'll be nothing on the tape."

" You are forgetting these ladies are friends. That was window-dressing."

When the tape got to the part where both Leeba and Nanthy confirmed that they were paying him one million credits each for preventing a war and they didn't say which war, he sneaked the two cheques from under their palsied fingers.

" We can go now," he said.

And I laughed all the way home as I remembered Childs' face at that moment. The truce between him and Homer had ended with Childs' entry into Nanthy's conference room and he squirmed to see Homer get his hands on sufficient money to keep him out of debt and out of the disintegrating vats for many a day.

—Robert Presslie