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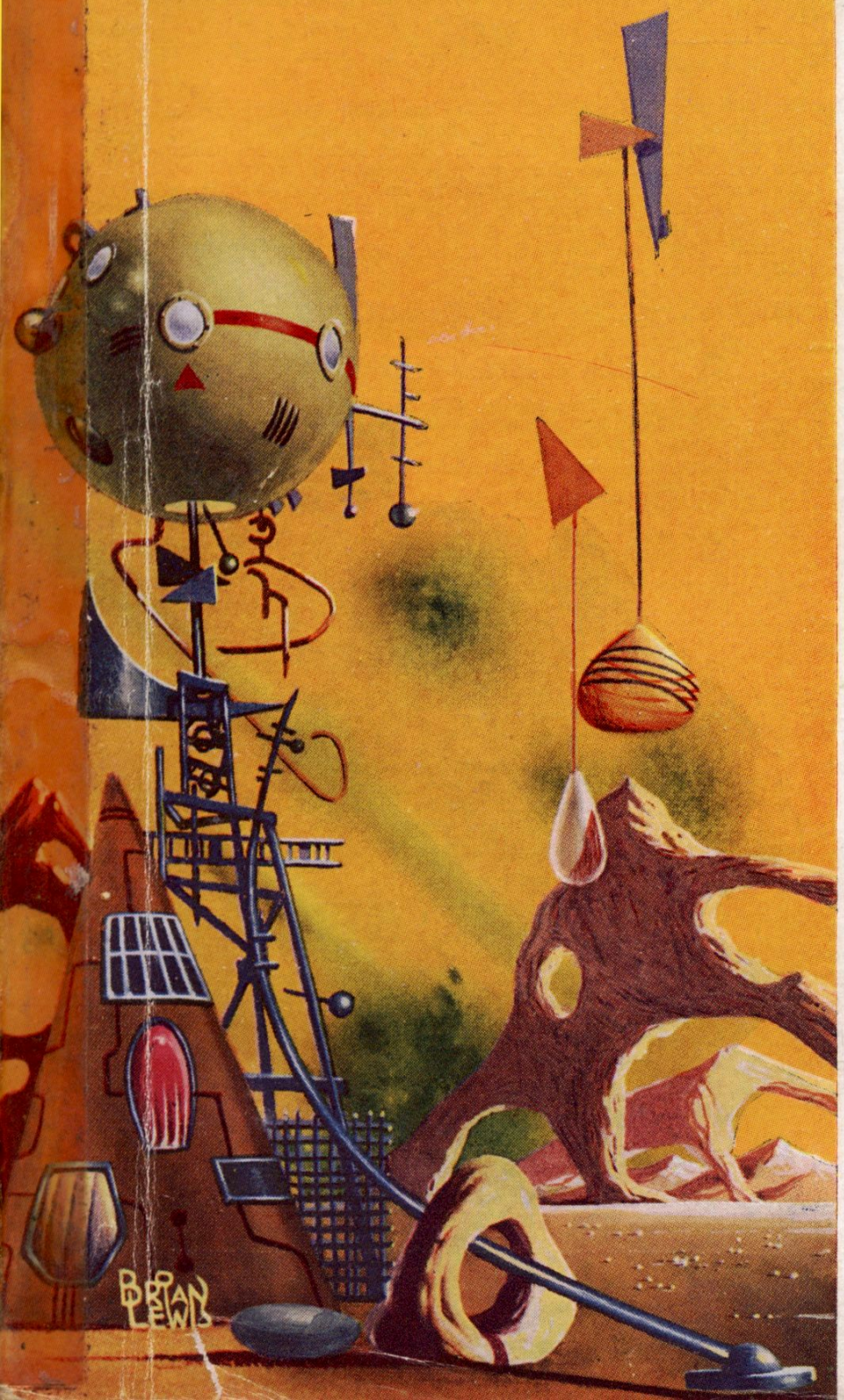

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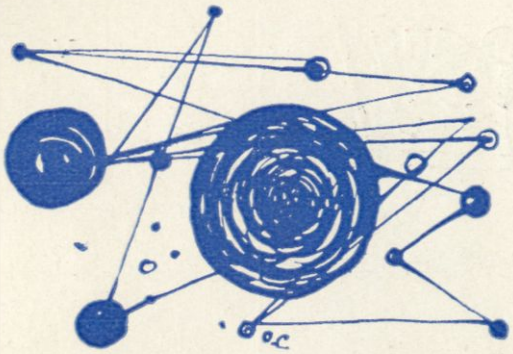

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ECHO IN THE SKULL

BY JOHN BRUNNER

I

By-products of the solar phoenix reaction, deprived of the majority of their ultraviolet components by the ozone layer in the upper atmosphere, punched yellow through the gaps at the edge of the curtain. The highest of them was six inches below the patch of damp on the peeling wall. Overhead, there was clattering as Mrs. Ramsbottom limped and tottered to get her rubbish bucket out of her kitchen.

Hunched in the flimsy cover of her one remaining overcoat, Salley Ercott woke up.

Her first—automatic—reaction was to look at her watch. It wasn't on her wrist, of course ; it was in the Praed Street pawnbrokers, and had been for six weeks.

She looked at the irregular pattern of sunlight on the wall, and the knowledge of the solar phoenix reaction flashed

through her mind. It was chased away by the recognition that from the angle at which the rays slanted it must be noon. Oh, God . . .

It was always like this on waking ; the drop from the warm —or at least tolerable—comfort of sleep into the harsh reality of day was as terrifying and unnerving as an actual physical fall from a precipice.

For a minute or two she struggled to escape back into the darkness of not knowing ; then Mrs. Ramsbottom started to drag her bucket down the stairs, crash, crash, crash, on every step, and it was impossible to flee from it. Angrily, hating herself, Sally got up.

She staggered a little in a fit of dizziness, and put one hand on the mantel to steady herself. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was tousled and got in her eyes ; she made an ineffectual attempt to brush it back with her hand. The hand was filthy.

She took hold of the mantel with both hands now, willing herself, forcing herself, to look into the mirror propped there. For a long moment her blue eyes remained shut, refusing to face the facts. Queen Elizabeth getting old. A line from Kipling's poem drifted into her mind from somewhere in the far past of three months ago. She opened her eyes.

First she looked at herself, deliberately, with loathing. Her hair, rat-tailed, knotted, tangled ; her eyes, red at the edges and bleared with sleep ; her wide mouth, chapped with cold and bearing a moustache of the soup she had had last night. She didn't need to look further than that ; she had worn the same dress for three weeks, her stockings were in shreds, and her shoes had lost both their high heels. Not that she had her shoes on at the moment. She rubbed at the trace of soup on her lips and saw the brownish mark replaced by a greyish one. During the night she must have beaten on the floor with her hands to make them so dirty.

Then she looked, still in the mirror, past her own shoulder. There was the bed. Four cushions oozing their sour flock stuffing, and her coat. The magazine. Her shoes. That was all, except for the dust.

Oh yes—and the testimony to last night.

She turned round and picked up the coat ; half a peg survived on the back of the door, and she put the coat on it. There between the cushions, where she had hugged it to her like a beloved doll, was the empty bottle of gin.

She could have paid off part of the back rent with the cost of it ; she could have eaten regular meals for a week ; she could have bought a blanket or two to keep her warm at night. Instead . . .

" Dear God !" whispered Sally. " But I needed it so badly!"

She had stubbed out a half-smoked cigarette directly on the floor beside the pile of cushions ; now she picked it up and straightened it out carefully before fumbling the box of matches from the pocket of her coat. She had lain on the box during the night ; it was crushed and broken open.

She forced herself to make sure there were no loose matches going to waste in the pocket before striking one and lighting the cigarette butt. Her hands shook frighteningly as she tried to bring flame and tobacco together.

So long as the cigarette lasted, she managed not to think of anything at all.

When it finally burned down to her fingers, so that she was forced to drop it and put on her shoes to trample it out, she pulled her coat on—it showed the ravages of long wear less than her dress did—and cautiously looked out through the door to see if anyone was on the stairs. From street level came the sound of Mrs. Ramsbottom clanging her bucket down the last few steps.

The bathroom was up half a flight of stairs ; when she had climbed them she felt as exhausted as if she had climbed Everest. Shuddering with delayed nausea from the gin, she slammed the door and went to the grease-coated wash-basin. She had nothing to put in the gas meter for hot water ; in her present state, she told herself, it would probably do her good to use cold.

Someone had left a thin sliver of soap on the edge of the bath ; gratefully she took it and rubbed it over her hands and face. She left the tap running instead of putting the plug in the wastepipe.

For a moment she considered stripping completely and making some effort to get rid of the sweaty smell from her whole body, but the dirt permeated her underclothes and by now probably even her dress—what was the good ? Sighing, she compromised by pulling her dress over her head and rinsing her neck and arms. Then she managed to wash one foot before the tiny bit of soap slipped from her grasp and fell down the overflow pipe.

Outside, Mrs. Ramsbottom was heaving herself upstairs again ; every few steps the now empty rubbish bucket rang resoundingly as she set it down gasping to rest.

Sally waited till she heard the bucket slammed back into its home beneath its owner's sink, which was always the loudest noise of all ; then she peeped out, having put her coat and dress back on, to see that the stairs were clear. Out on the street she couldn't help people noticing her degradation, but they were strangers and their looks of amazement and pity could be borne. Here in the house she knew she would meet the same looks from the same people, so she hid, scurrying like a rat from cover to cover.

No one in sight ; no sound of footsteps. She took a chance and hurried down the stairs.

But as she was turning the handle of her own room, something impelled her to look back, and there was the West Indian from the floor below staring up at her, his wide-lipped brown face wondering rather than pitying. Sally flung her door wide and rushed through it, slamming it and setting her back to it as if the West Indian's gaze could somehow be held back from penetrating the very wood.

If it had been almost anyone but him . . .! Of all the occupants of the house, from Rowall the landlord himself on the ground floor to Mrs. Ramsbottom in her single garret room, Sally hated most to be seen by the coloured residents. It seemed to her that in their eyes she could read what they were thinking—that they were saying to themselves, " One of these stuck-up superior *white* women, and look at her !"

Sally said it to herself, aloud but in a whisper, and the intensity of her self-condemnation twisted her face so that catching sight of it in the mirror she momentarily failed to recognise the features as her own.

She threw herself full length on the cushions on the floor and began to cry, dry, racking sobs that rasped her throat and brought no tears.

How had it come to this ?

Now, remembering the bathroom and the bath, she tried to calculate how long it had been since she washed all over in luxurious warm water. Weeks ? Months, maybe. There was the gap between *then* and *now* ; *then* was made up of adequate money, pretty clothes, boy friends, theatres, books, music ; *now* consisted in a squalid unfurnished room in a dirty Paddington backstreet, and she owed rent even on that.

But—*how*?

Sally sat up abruptly and crossed her legs in a squatting posture. Yes, *how*? Now she came to think of it, she could not even recall the nightmare of yesterday; she could not bring back to mind the horror which had driven her to seek escape in that empty bottle of gin. How? Why?

For a moment it seemed to her that this was the nightmare; that she could pinch herself to wakefulness and find a soft bed beneath her, a wardrobe of clothes awaiting her choice, a good-looking young man with a car coming to take her to a concert.

The illusion passed, and she stood up with her mouth set in a line of grim determination. Now, this very moment, she was going to start on the way back to the past.

And then she remembered she said that yesterday, and the day before, and probably the day before that, and each time she had run up against the horrible facts: she did not even have enough money to put in the gas meter and kill herself, and she had no way of raising any. Except . . .

She thought of obliging Mr. Rowall, the landlord; she recalled how friendly he had been when she had to confess to him yet again that she could not pay the rent this week. She recalled what she had seen in his eyes, heard glossing his placid north-country voice. No, not that. No!

But despite her revulsion she could hear a cynical little voice saying inside her head: *not that. Not yet, anyway . . .*

She had not quite believed in the way Rowall supplemented the income he wrung from his shabby tenants; when she first arrived here (she could not even remember clearly how long ago that had been, nor what had dragged her down to this slum), she had still been presentable, and blonde, loud-mouthed Mrs. Rowall had been cheery and friendly enough—too much so, Sally had thought, to be what she was. It was not until she had curiously watched by the window one evening, and seen the succession of men accompany Mrs. Rowall to the door, that she stopped blinding herself to the obvious.

Rowall would greatly appreciate the chance of adding her to his list; he thought he had only to wait and be obliging about the rent, and sooner or later . . .

Yes, sooner or later. Sally felt a stir of sickness turn her guts over; if there had been a square meal inside her, she would have thrown up.

No, please God, today, somehow, somewhere, she would find the key to unlock her from this prison of circumstances.

The shafts of sunlight crawling over the wall had gone ; a cloud had blown up across the sky. Sally ordered herself to hurry, in case the cloud brought rain. She looked hopelessly around the room.

She had still had a few belongings when she came here, but hunger and the need to drown the nightmares had deprived her of them one by one. Last night someone had given her a pound for the pawn-ticket on her watch ; search as she might, she could find nothing to show for it except the half-bottle of gin. There had probably been ten cigarettes, and there had also been the soup that had still smeared her mouth when she woke. That was all.

There was nothing back on the gin-bottle ; she hid it after a fashion among the cushions. She had her coat, but she must keep that, surely ! It was good quality material ; she toyed with the idea of trying to exchange it for a cheaper one at a second-hand clothes-dealer's, and get a few shillings allowed on the trade, but that was for desperation, and she was trying to convince herself she wasn't desperate yet.

And there was the magazine. Puzzled, she picked it up, and looked at the garish cover with a frown. Science fiction. That was why she had those phrases about the solar phoenix reaction running through her head when she awoke—there was an article here about it.

What on earth had driven her to spend money on it ? Two whole shillings ! Almost enough for a meal ; plenty for a snack. Her stomach cried out in protest against her own mad extravagance. Now it came back to her, that she had sat here last night, reading by the light of a street-lamp through the window and sipping at the gin till she could not see the print any longer. Why ?

The magazine was scarcely marked, and it was probably a current issue. April, it said—it must be April by now, or maybe it was still March, from the cold and the sharp, warmth-lacking sun. There was the magazine dealer's next door—maybe she could get ninepence back on it, enough for a cup of tea and some bread and butter.

She thrust it in the pocket of her coat and looked for the half-comb she had managed to keep by her until lately. It was not to be found ; last night had probably accounted for that, too.

Timidly, hoping no one would see her, Sally Ercott slipped from the room and tiptoed quietly downstairs.

II

The tolling began in her head when she was only halfway down the first flight. A moment before it started, Sally could not have said how it was she knew one of the attacks was coming ; the instant it came, however, she knew with a terrifying certainty that this was the herald of a fresh visit from the horrors she tried to run from.

" Tolling," she called it to herself. She could time it by her heartbeats ; every four beats and a bit the sound rang out again. It was not like a bell, but rather like a bass-voiced scream issuing hollow and monstrous out of an infinitely deep well. There were echoes following each sound, not quite dying away before the next one came, so that in a moment there were clanging reverberations shaking the very bones of her skull in an insane resonance.

She clung to the banister-rail, breathing hard, keeping her eyes wide open and staring so that closing them should not help to break her hold on reality. *Fight it* ! she ordered herself. *You've got to fight it* !

Another step down the stairs, carefully, deliberately ; she emphasised to herself the message from her muscles which told her she was placing one foot after the other on the step below. Mist came up before her eyes, so that the dingy stairwell swam and distorted itself.

She reached the hallway with the tolling thunderous in her head ; almost she expected to see the walls shiver and crumble under the impact of the tremendous noise. The darkpainted, stained walls seemed to arch together over her head, like the roof of a cavern. There was the handle of the door, tarnished yellow brass, waiting for her to reach out and turn it, waiting for her to go out to the street beyond.

Because she was in the cavern, the tolling redoubled in fierceness ; the hard rocky walls threw it back at her from all sides, so that now the echoes ran together and united in a wild cacophony. Why, this was like the time when . . .

And her resistance broke. She knew what it was she remembered, a scene so like the one she was living through that the two episodes had become merged in her mind. This reminded her of the time when she had gone down into the heart of the mountain, down the irregular twisting pathways of the caves, looking for the man Iwys.

She stopped, irresolute, within a few paces of her goal. The vague light was so poor, this far from the surface, that she could barely distinguish the walls of the tunnel.

Now that the moment was here, she could feel the desire stir in her breast to turn back, give up, follow the advice her well-meaning friends had given her when they said :

" It is no use to yearn for Iwys now. We have seen others taken from among us—we have seen thousands acquire that blind purpose in their eyes. All of them have gone into the mountain, and none of them have returned. True, it is a shame that Iwys was taken when he means so much to you. But it is known that the creature in the mountain cares nothing for our human emotions."

" Then," she had said with wild grief, " if it cares nothing for human emotions, it can care little which human being it takes. Let it take me instead of Iwys !"

They had tried to hold her back at that, but she had broken free and fled up the mountain, hunting one of the caverns by which the creature dwelling at its heart reached the air outside. Now she had found one, now she had penetrated its depths ; now she was surrounded by the noise of the beast's life-processes, that terrible echoing sound which made her flesh crawl on her bones. Now there was nothing between her and the creature itself but a few yards of rocky tunnel and one of its chitinous closures.

No, she could not go back. Whether it was her love for Iwys that had driven her so far, or her own pride, she could no longer tell, but in this ghastly place the choice between being taken by the creature for its own purposes and going back to face the pity of her friends was no choice.

In reality, Sally Ercott fumbled for the handle of the door, turned it, and stepped through blindly.

As she reached the chitinous flap closing off the end of the tunnel, she reached out her hand to touch it. Before she actually touched it, however, it fluttered around the edges where it was rubbery to ensure a tight seal to the rock, and then folded and drew back.

Beyond was a place glowing very slightly green : like a pouch or bag, laid on its side. In the greenness things like ferns, tendrils of the creature's substances, waved and gestured. The air was warm and foetid.

Horror-struck, she threw out her hands and braced them against the walls of the tunnel.

Now a voice spoke whisperingly, susurrantly, seeming to come from everywhere at once. Oddly, though it was so quiet, it was distinct enough to penetrate the roaring noise which still echoed up the tunnel. The voice said, " Come forward."

Somewhere she found the resolution to comply. When she stepped past the entrance, her feet sank very slightly into softness, exactly as though she were walking on the skinned flesh of a dead animal. Where her sandals were worn into holes by the rocks she had passed, she could feel the surface underfoot warm and alive.

She said, " I—I come—" And choked on the words.

The creature's voice came again. " You come," it said affirmatively. " You were not sent for."

" I come to ask you to take me in place of the man you took yesterday. Iwys." She threw back her shoulders and stared defiantly at the waving fronds around her. What a place of nightmare ! As though one were standing in the guts of a gigantic man, able to see the villae on the walls of his intestines live, and move, as they went about their business of digestion . . .

" It is all one which of you I take," said the creature. " So long as you are strong and in good health. But you are too late. I do not know which of the ones I took yesterday was called Iwys. It may be this one I show you now."

She put her hands to her mouth ; she wished she could put them over her eyes, but something forced her to watch what happened. A sphincter at the far side of the pouch opened, and the greenish light grew brighter. Beyond the sphincter she could see . . .

A human form. And yet not altogether human. It could have been man or woman. It had two arms, two legs. But all over its upper torso, and shrouding its head, was alien flesh, clinging, growing. *Only in the place where the human eyes should have been were there still two recognisable features ; they were eyes, yes, but not human eyes. Flat, wide, lidless, with enormous pupils like pools of the night sky.*

They were dull and unaware.

" Almost ready," said the creature. " When the sun comes tomorrow I shall send them out."

" What—what do you take our people for ?" she gasped through a throat dry and constricted with terror.

" To spread my kind," said the creature flatly. " Each year I send out a few like these. Your people give me strong limbs to carry my children far and fast, and to dig them a burrow before they are old enough to grow by themselves."

The sphincter oozed shut with a sucking noise. " I have no use for you," said the creature. " I will kill you if you wish, or let you go. Next year perhaps you would be useful to carry one of my children. But tell me something—why has one of your kind never come willingly to me before ?"

Sally screamed ; two worlds whirled about her, and she fell. The tolling vanished from her ears, and instead there was screeching of cars' brakes, and high alarmed shouting in human voices.

Bella Rowall let the gauze curtain drop back into place over the window and turned to her husband with a self-satisfied air.

" Well ?" she said challengingly. " Looks as if I was right, doesn't it ? The little fool nearly got herself run down by a car that time. Next time it may be a bus, and buses don't stop so easily."

Arthur Rowall scowled at his bleach-haired, sleazy wife. " You're only making excuses for your own softness," he said harshly. " You know as well as I do that so long as this Ercott girl is walking the streets in a body like that, she's liable to meet someone intelligent enough to listen to what she has to say and figure out the truth."

Bella gave a scornful snort of laughter. " Who ?" she demanded. " More likely they'd stick her in a mental hospital and ' cure ' her of her delusions by force. No, I stick by what I said—it's better, and safer for you and me, to let her drink and worry herself into a genuine breakdown. That'll fix things tidily."

" Meantime *we* worry ourselves the same way every time she leaves the house," snapped her husband. " If you'd let me rig the gas meter the way I wanted to the first night she came here—"

" There'd have been hell to pay. Not every body hides a mind as dumb as yours, Arthur. Suppose she had gone out the way you wanted, in full possession of her faculties and quite aware of the fact that she didn't gas herself—"

" It would have looked like an accident !"

" I don't know about looking like an accident," said Bella ; she twitched the curtain aside again to see what was going on in the street now. " It would certainly have been a mistake. There—what did I tell you ? Someone picked her up, and she's

walked off on her own again. I don't think you appreciate how ashamed that girl is of what she thinks must have happened to her. She's so ashamed, she'll keep it to herself until it breaks her to bits."

" You'd better be right," said Rowall. " You'd *better* be. Maybe I should follow her and make sure."

" Come off it !" Bella roared. " There's no risk of anybody putting two and two together. Have *you* ever met anyone who'd accept such a fantastic idea without trying to explain it away ? Of course you haven't. People like that don't grow here."

" It's not the authorities I'm worried about," Rowall said. " They think with their conditioning. It's the open-minded idiot who'll swallow anything—the eccentrics."

" Imagine Sally Ercott putting her trust in a screwball, can you ? Nuts. She'll be back, more lonely and more frightened and confused than ever."

She gave her husband a mirthless grin, and finished, " I do have to congratulate you on the beautifully sinister way you imply what you hope to make her do eventually. That by itself would probably be enough to drive her crazy sooner or later."

III

Someone was helping her to her feet, inquiring in anxious tones whether she was all right. Her vision was blurred ; she staggered a little, and when she reached out for support her hand rested on the nose of a shabby, elderly sports car which had come to a halt literally inches from where she had fallen on the hard street. Half a dozen curious people had stopped to see what was going on ; now that they could see she was recovering, they were moving away again. Another car honked as it wormed past the stationary sports car, and the driver gave them a casual glance as he went by.

She managed to quiet the raging tumult in her mind, and remembered that she had been asked a question. " Yes—yes, I'm all right, thank you," she said, and forced a smile. " What happened ?"

" You seemed to come over dizzy on the kerb," said the man who had helped her up. He was young : brown-haired, long-faced, with horn-rimmed glasses, wearing a raincoat. " You put your hands to your face and then measured your length in the road—I damned near smashed into you."

By now he was beginning to see more clearly. At first the startlement of the near-disaster would have blinded him to her appearance, Sally thought. Now, though, she could almost read what was in his mind as he tried to reconcile her husky, pleasant voice and educated accent with her shabby, slept-in, much stained clothing, her chapped lips, her bare legs and broken-heeled shoes.

" You—you ought to see a doctor," The young man ventured.

" Yes, I know. I—I *am* going to see one." Sally improvised. God, this man's questioning eyes ! She felt as if he was looking straight through her—seeing her visibly crusted with the scabs of some loathsome disease. " I'll be all right now. I'm sorry I gave you such a fright."

She stepped away from him determinedly, taking the greatest possible care about negotiating the kerb, and began to walk quickly. She didn't look back, but she could feel the young man's puzzled gaze on the back of her neck.

What can be happening to me ?

That vision which had begun in the hallway of Rowall's house had been like a memory of her own. As a chance similarity of environment, a remark, an event, reminds one of like occurrences in the past, so she had been reminded by the dark hallway of that wild, unearthly episode. The action of being reminded was so natural, so automatic, she felt sure it was normal and commonplace. If it had merely been the case that walking down the hallway reminded her of walking down another dark place towards another, not very different door, she would not have given the matter a second thought.

But to be reminded of walking into the heart of a mountain to save her lover from an alien monster—! And to *feel*, deep inside, that she *was* remembering, as other people might recall things that happened to them as children—!

" Please," said Sally under her breath, making it almost a prayer, " Don't let me be going mad."

Quite unaware of what she was doing, she had come to a halt on the pavement. Now a voice penetrated the fog of misery shrouding her : the voice of the young man who had nearly run her down,

" I say !"

She turned and saw that his beat-up car had drawn alongside her. He had reached over to open the passenger's door.

" Look, if you won't let me do anything else for you," he was saying, " at least allow me the ordinary privilege of taking a pretty girl to lunch."

She thought he was being sarcastic. The picture of herself seen in the mirror that morning rose up before her. And all of a sudden *now* (tenement room/cold/dirt) and *then* (boy friends' warmth/pretty clothes) telescoped in her mind. Men had done this for her often ; true, the car was more likely to be a new Jaguar or Daimler than a twenty-year-old MG in need of a wash-down like this one . . .

The hopelessness of her situation overwhelmed her. She saw the street swim around her as her eyes filled with tears. Loathing herself, feeling that this was the crown of her degradation, she got into the car.

She sat staring through the windscreen as he reached past her and slammed the door before moving back into the stream of traffic.

" My name's Nick Jenkins," said the driver conversationally. " I don't care whether you tell me yours or not. All that worries me is the fact that you're obviously in a mess, and if I can't help fish you out of it, maybe somebody I know can. You *are* pretty, damn it, and you've got a lovely voice. What —the hell—has happened to you ?"

" I don't know," whispered Sally.

Jenkins shrugged. " All right, so it's none of my business."

With an impressive growl belying its elderly looks, the car dived through an exiguous gap in the traffic and swung into a broad, tree-lined avenue. Sally gasped. They were even now only five or ten minutes' walk from the place where she had been living ; how, in the months since she had found herself stranded in this quarter of London, had she avoided wandering out of those squalid alleys and into this handsome road ? Had she perhaps been glorying in her downfall, deliberately magnifying it to herself ? The idea horrified her. She felt a sudden urge to convince Jenkins of the truth of what she had just said.

" I *don't* know !" she insisted, surprising herself with her own vehemence. " I can never remember ! I can't remember anything about myself before a few weeks ago—"

That wasn't the whole of the truth, of course. But how to explain that she *did* remember, perfectly clearly—only what she recalled was all wrong ?

"You do need a doctor, then," Jenkins said flatly. He signalled other traffic to overtake and pulled in at the side of the road. "You mean you have amnesia?"

"It's worse than just that," Sally said, and shivered.

"Well, no one can help you till you give them a chance. You strike me as being the clam type—bottling your troubles up inside you till they burst you wide open." He got out and opened her door for her. "You might get into practice by telling me, but you'd better get some food inside you first. When did you last have a square meal?"

"God knows," she said bitterly. "Last week, maybe."

"Better make this a small one, then."

He took her into the restaurant and ordered soup and dry bread; the smell of good cooking was so pleasant to Sally that she barely noticed the disapproval in the eyes of the waitress who brought her food, and a warning scowl from Jenkins stopped the woman from giving vent to that disapproval. While she was eating, Jenkins sipped slowly at a cup of coffee and let a cigarette burn to ash in front of him.

"Good," he said when she had finished the soup. "Like a smoke?"

She took the cigarette and had to steady it with her hand to keep it in the flame of his lighter. Then she sat back and tried to relax. She failed. Jenkins had removed his glasses, and without them he looked so ridiculously youthful that Sally almost laughed at herself for thinking—even momentarily—that he might be able to help her. He had called her pretty—rat-tailed hair, filthy coat, shoes without heels and all! Lord, what nonsense!

"You're broke and you've lost your memory," he was saying thoughtfully. "But that can't be the whole story, because you must have taken quite a long time to get to your present state. Do you remember your name?"

"Yes," said Sally wearily. "Sally Ercott. I know I'm aged twenty-five. But that's about all. I can't remember my family, or where I used to live, or any of my friends if I had any, or where my job was."

"Still, if you know your name—how about National Assistance? It's kept me from starving more than once."

"I didn't have my insurance card, and I don't know my number, and I never claimed benefit before so I didn't know what to do, and—"

" And you didn't like to ask anybody," Jenkins finished for her. " I might have guessed. That accounts for the fact that you haven't seen a doctor, nor rung the Missing Persons department at Scotland Yard to find out if they were looking for you. Have you done that ?"

Sally shook her head dumbly. " I—I was afraid to. I didn't know how I could face anybody, especially people who knew me before this happened . . ." Her voice trailed away.

" Look," said Jenkins, stubbing his cigarette, " there's one thing you'd better get straight right away. You aren't unique. You've probably been pretending to yourself that you've suffered such an unparalleled catastrophe you have to hide the fact. Bunk. There are thousands of people who are sick and down-and-out, damn it !"

Sally felt the need to drive home to this assured and irritating young man that her downfall *was* unique, her degradation *was* unparalleled. She said bitterly, " All right. I live around the corner in a filthy room in a house owned by a man who sends his wife out on the streets and who's hoping that when I get desperate enough I'll go the same way. I owe him rent, but he's been co-operative about it because he thinks I'll give in eventually. I have to sleep in my clothes on a pile of cushions because I have nothing else to keep me warm. I can't afford gas for the fire. The light-bulb has blown and I can't buy another. Last night someone gave me a quid for the pawn ticket on my watch, and I bought half a bottle of gin and drank myself stupid because I couldn't stand it any longer."

Her voice grew shrill as she finished, " How do you think I could explain *that* to people who used to know me ?"

Jenkins slammed his palm on the table. " God, what a selfish, *vain* remark ! What about the worry you've caused your family ? Doesn't it matter to you that somewhere people are driving themselves insane wondering what's happened to you ? No, it seems it doesn't. All you're bothered about is saving yourself a well-deserved punch in the ego ! Is it your fault you've had a breakdown ? Why are you carrying such a load of *guilt*—do you think you've committed a murder or something ? You're sick, and you've got to face the fact that you need curing like any other invalid."

Her face went scarlet, and she pushed back her chair as if to get to her feet. That was more than she could bear—to be told she ought to be ashamed of her shame, not of her degradation. Jenkins gave her a glare. " Wait a minute !"

For no reason that she could think of, she waited.

" I'm going to give you a choice that is no choice. Either you let me take away this excuse you've given for skulking in a Paddington back-street—get you a bath and a shampoo and some clean clothes—"

Sally fancied she could see in Jenkin's eyes something like the expression she had so often detected in Rowall's. A small voice in her head said : *you only have to wait till they get desperate . . .*

" Or ?" she said coldly.

" Or I'll give your name and description to the first policeman I meet, tell him you're missing from home and have lost your memory, and get the authorities to rescue you by force. It's up to you. I think you'd rather go back to your friends in a presentable condition and on your own feet than in the company of a policeman."

You only have to wait till they get desperate . . .

Suddenly Sally found she didn't care any longer ; her pride, her insistence on standing by herself, melted away, and she gave a slow nod. *What the hell ? I am desperate, and it's no good lying to myself any longer. If I try to make out on my own after this, there's only one way I can go. Down.*

Jenkins called for the bill and paid it. Sally felt that the coins tinkling in the saucer on the table were like the bell of a cash register ringing up the sale of her soul.

IV

He took her only a short distance, into a small square off the long tree-lined avenue down which they had driven earlier. He parked the car outside a row of handsome old houses which had been converted into apartments and took her indoors. She barely noticed what was going on until she found herself in a large, high-ceilinged room, aggressively contemporary in its decor and furnishings, and blessedly, wonderfully warm.

Once more *now* and *then* telescoped in her mind. This was the sort of environment she had known—before . . . She didn't let the thought go further than that. But how wonderful to own so many *things* ! There were shelves and shelves of books, heaps of records, a record player, a tape recorder, pictures, a bowl of flowers — so many individual items she grew dizzy in a ridiculous attempt to count them one be one.

Jenkins had shut the door behind her. Now he had gone into an adjacent room and was doing something that sounded busy. Sally listened, wondering if she ought to turn round and run out of the house ; before she could make up her mind to do so, he was back.

" All right," he said. He seemed to have screwed himself up to determined action ; he had put his glasses back on when they left the restaurant, and still was wearing them, so he no longer looked too ridiculously youthful. " I think you'd probably want to start with a bath and wash your hair. If you go into the bedroom you'll find a dressing-gown and a couple of towels set out. I'll go and run your bath while you're undressing. There's a bottle of shampoo in the bathroom—I'll show you where. And I want you to give me your clothes."

" What ?" said Sally wonderingly. Jenkins looked uncomfortable—even embarrassed—but he went on firmly.

" I don't want to run the risk of you deciding to walk out while I'm gone. I can't see you running off wearing nothing but a dressing-gown. I'm sorry, but—" He spread his hands. Then he turned to a table close at hand, on which stood his telephone ; he took up the scratchpad and the pencil which lay there for note-taking, and scribbled something down. " Now," he said, and drew a deep breath, " what sizes do you take in clothes ?"

" I—I—do you mean you want to go out and *buy* me new things ? You must be crazy ! I couldn't let you do that !"

" Look at yourself," said Jenkins pitilessly. " Oh, don't worry—I'll send the bill in for what I buy. I'm not all that well off."

" But—"

" Wrap them up in your coat and give me the bundle, if you prefer it that way," said Jenkins, uncannily divining the excuse she was making to herself. She was slightly shocked at the worldly wisdom implicit in the remark. Then she forgot it, and went silently into the bedroom with her head downcast.

She was desperate, she told herself. And desperate does as desperate is.

Slowly, behind the closed door, she took off her clothes and put on the dressing-gown. It was thick and masculine and comfortable. The mere touch of a different fabric on her skin was itself a reward, and she felt suddenly lighter of heart. Maybe Jenkins wasn't so bad . . .

Then she bundled up her clothes as she had been directed, and when there was a tentative knock at the door she said, " Come in."

Jenkins entered, took up the bundle of clothes with a nod and tossed them into a wardrobe. He locked the wardrobe door and pocketed the key.

" I suppose you might break it open," he said. " But you'd need to want to get away pretty badly. Right—tell me your sizes in clothes and I'll show you the bathroom. It's just along the corridor."

" Everything ?"

" Everything," said Jenkins shortly. " I don't know about clothes making the man so much, but I never yet met a girl whom new clothes didn't make a new person, more or less."

She told him ; he noted the details carefully, including stockings and shoes. " I'll get you a pair of flat-heeled slippers," he said musingly. " I don't think you'd better have proper shoes without trying them on. How about a dress ? What colours do you like ?"

" Oh, anything." She made an impatient gesture. " What do *you* like ?"

" Red," he said promptly. " Only I never met a blonde girl who really enjoyed wearing bright colours. I'll get you a pastel colour—light blue or something like that." He put down the pencil and tore the sheet from the scratchpad. Quite unexpectedly, he gave a short nervous laugh.

" You know, this is really going to embarrass me," he said. " I've never in my life walked into the ladies' underwear department. Oh well, there has to be a first time for everything."

Suddenly, in that moment, Sally found she didn't dislike Jenkins after all. She smiled, and the smile woke lights in her eyes that hadn't been there for weeks.

Jenkins pocketed his notes and picked up the towels from the bed. " Okay, I'll show you the bathroom and then get going. I shouldn't have to spend long on this. By the way, though—how did you remember your sizes so quickly ?"

" I didn't give it a thought," said Sally, staring. " How odd."

Jenkins shrugged. " Well, you remembered your name and other things—I believe it's usually only events which go when you get amnesia."

Later, soaking in the wonderful luxury of a hot bath, Sally thought of that remark. Only events. Only events. It fitted. The trouble was, though, that she did have memories of events. Fantastic, *unearthly* events, that didn't belong to her own life.

She knew that much. Now, trying to recapture exactly what it was that she had remembered in the hallway of Rowalls house, she found she could not. It was always the same. An event, an outside stimulus, reminded her, and she called to mind a casual reference to something which had happened to her. Only when the memory itself was presented to her consciousness, it was invariably so terrifyingly *wrong* that she fled into the depths of her mind, hunting the recollection of the real world in which she must have grown up.

Somewhere in this brain, she thought, there *must* be memories of childhood, of parents, of school. Instead, when she tried to think back, she found only utter and complete strangeness.

She felt very frightened again for a moment, and then the comforting embrace of the water reassured her. Everything might turn out all right after all. Jenkins had said she needed a doctor ; that was perfectly true. Really, she must need a psychiatrist—why had she so shrunk from calling on medical help ? Maybe she had unconsciously inherited a belief that mental illness was somehow more shameful than physical.

And yet she didn't feel mentally ill at all. Most of the time—aside from the emptiness she was aware of when she sought for memories of her earlier life—she thought clearly and logically enough.

Frowning, she tried to dismiss the whole train of ideas, and dunked her head backward in the bath prior to reaching for the bottle of shampoo. This was a lazy way of washing one's hair, but she was enjoying the bath so much she could not summon the energy to get out and dry herself and wash her hair at the handbasin.

The sucking feel of the water behind her head was the trigger this time. At first she was only aware of a vague sensation of disquiet ; she shampooed her hair and rinsed it and shampooed it again. It was only by degrees that she realised she was again fighting to retain her hold on reality.

I must get out of the bath and rinse my hair properly at the handbasin, she told herself firmly, *or it will be all dull with soap-film.*

She splashed lather away from her eyes, and again, almost without conscious intention, bent her head back and submerged . . . her scalp a third time. And . . .

Laughing among the other girls in the shallow pools left between the rocks by the retreating tide, she raised her head and shook her wet hair so that a spray of drops spun out around her. In this sun it would dry soon enough. She climbed out of the pool in which she had been rubbing herself over and stretched happily. The air and the water were both warm ; the sky was a brilliant, wonderful blue, and the red rocks and the reddish-brown sand stretched away to the deep green sea.

Two of the other girls had brought a ball ; now, seeing that she had risen from her bath, one of them called to her, inviting her to join them in a game with it and saying that she would soon dry off. Without bothering to wrap the single length of cloth about her that served as clothing for men and women alike in the pleasant climate of this region, she delightedly agreed, and ran down on to the sand to catch the ball and sent it bouncing back.

Soon the rest of the girls had finished their toilet in the rock-pools ; some of them joined the game with the ball, others chose to stretch out lazily and sleep or talk about their boy-friends in the hot sunlight. Much time had passed when one of their number, who had been staring out to sea, gave a frightened cry and threw up her arm, pointing.

On the edge of the ocean were four ominous black shapes ; they were ships. Large ships. They had cast anchor where the water was as deep as a man's waist, and now men were pouring from them, splashing over the side and clambering on to the beach, Even at a distance it could be seen that they were big and strangely clad, and that each of them brandished a double-bitted axe or a mace.

She had the ball in her hands ; she was standing on a rock in the centre of a ring of her companions to whom she had been throwing it. Now, startled, and as horrified by the intrusion of the strangers as were all the other girls, she dropped the ball in astonishment and took an automatic step backwards.

Losing her footing on the slippery rock, she fell. The sucking sensation of water on the back of her head was the last thing she remembered before her head struck something terribly hard, and there was darkness, and water in her lungs.

Choking, terrified, Sally scrambled back to reality with a spluttering cry. She had let her head fall back so far in the water of the bath that it rose into her mouth and nostrils ; she blew it out with a gasp, and spat the foul soapy taste away.

Again. It had happened again.

There were footsteps outside, which barely penetrated her numbed consciousness ; then someone tried the handle of the bathroom door and found it would not give.

" Are you all right ?" said the familiar voice of Nick Jenkins. " Sally, are you all right ?"

It was the first time she had heard him use her name. An overwhelming relief streamed through her body, making her shake and tremble like a leaf.

Coming back from a very long way away, she found her voice and spoke. "Yes, I'm all right. I'll be out in a moment."

" Right, I'll hang on. I got you your things—I hope they're all right."

She got up noisily and pulled the plug ; then she towelled herself and wrapped one of the two towels she had been given around her head. She took a deep breath and opened the door. Jenkins was standing there ; she made certain the dressing-gown was pulled closely round her body and went out to him.

" Good God !" he said. He had taken off his glasses again. " *Good* God ! You're as white as a sheet, and you're shaking fit to fall apart ! Here, I'd better get you back in the warm."

She leant on his arm gratefully, and as he helped her back down the corridor to his apartment, she whispered to herself, " Thank heavens somebody helped me after all."

She was ashamed of herself for having refused to recognise that she needed help for so long.

V

" Bella !" Rowall shouted at the top of his lungs, and his wife came hurrying through the kitchen without even taking the time to set down the saucepan she held, the look in Rowall's eyes warned her before she spoke that something disastrous had occurred.

" What is it ?" she asked in a small voice.

" What *is* it ? Only that your brilliant idea of giving the Ercott girl enough rope to drink herself crazy has paid off.

And it's likely to ruin everything. It's damned lucky I got to hear about it as soon as I did."

" Calm down a bit, Arthur," Bella suggested. " Maybe it's not as bad as you think it is." She couldn't resist adding, " It usually isn't."

" Shut up and listen. I went round the corner to get a paper, and I heard the old man in the shop talking about the girl who nearly got run over outside here. That's her, isn't it ? You're not going to tell me there've been two of them in one day." His tone was bitterly sarcastic.

" Well, what about her ?"

" The old fool was making a great joke about how the young man driving the car picked her up a few minutes afterwards and drove off with her in his car."

Bella's face went slowly white. She had to turn and set down the pan in her hand before she could trust herself to speak ; Rowall went on at exactly the moment she managed to shape the first word.

" Fortunately it turns out the old man knows who the driver is—he lives just round the corner and buys his papers in the same shop. His name's Jenkins, and he drives a pre-war MG, a dark green one. Sports model. Get a coat on and come out and look for it. The old man thinks he lives in one of the squares behind Sussex Gardens."

" Well, good lord ! What was all the panic about if you know who he is and where he's taken her ?" snapped Bella. " If you ask me, she's decided to take up your suggestion and get herself some money the only way any woman can get it."

" Idiot !" snarled Rowall. " Suppose she tells him the truth about herself ? Suppose he's not as thick-brained as you *hope* he may be ? Where do we find ourselves then ?"

" Oh, he won't." Bella spoke with weary disdain. " I wish you wouldn't be so scared of your own shadow—"

" Shadow be damned !" roared Rowall. He was trembling in an ecstasy of fear and rage, and his voice rose to a shout. " You can't recognise danger when it comes up and pokes you in the belly ! Get your coat on and come with me ! I only hope we can pry this Jenkins off her before it's too late. You and your soft-minded imbecility ! We'll wind up having to *make* her look for another body—and I said we ought to do that in the first place, remember ?"

" Keep your voice down !" his wife said urgently. " All right, all right. If it'll give you any satisfaction, I'll come and

look for her with you. But I'm damned sure you've been panicking over nothing, as usual."

In the room overhead Clyde West straightened up and brushed off the knees of his trousers. His full-lipped face was set in a puzzled frown.

He had only caught part of what Rowall and his wife were saying, but the fabric of the house was thin enough for him to have heard the last explosion of Rowall's with perfect clarity. He didn't understand a bit of it, but the violence behind it worried him.

The Ercott girl had worried him since she first came here ; he remembered how she had been crying in the hall on that rainy night, how he had seen her thrust money into Rowall's hand to let her have the empty room on the floor above. He had heard the sound of her hopeless weeping as he went up to the bathroom later on, and imagined her alone in the totally bare room. He had hesitated with his hand stretched out to knock at the wooden panels of the door ; he had looked at the hand poised before him, considered its dark skin, and drawn it back. Probably she would tell him to go to hell.

That was not the only time he had listened to her choking sobs, either from his room below, or from the landing. He had seen her as she went about the house, cowering, not wishing to be seen, and wondered endlessly who she was, why she was here where she didn't belong.

He had wondered, too, about the attitude of the Rowalls towards their new tenant. He hated the house and its owners both ; however, he had little choice as to where he could live, for he was trying to make out as an actor, and there were few parts available, so most of the time he had to get along on his carefully husbanded savings. This place he had was cheap, and he had made it fairly comfortable. He had seen worse back home in the Caribbean.

But this Ercott girl—she had seen better, that was for sure.

Down below he heard the front door open, stay open long enough for two people to pass through, and shut again. He glanced from the window ; yes, there were the Rowalls striding along, he with a face like thunder, she half a step behind him him with an expression of resigned annoyance.

Resolution hardened in him. He didn't know what it was the Rowalls had in mind for Sally Ercott. But he was sure it was evil. Somehow he might manage to get a step ahead of

them, warn her, get this Jenkins to keep her away. If she came back to this house, he thought, she was done for.

Jenkins sat her in a skeletal armchair and hurried to fetch a blanket to put round her shoulders. He dropped to his knees beside her and took her hand comfortingly.

" Can you tell me what happened ?" he asked.

She could remember, she knew. That was strange ; usually the memories vanished—but then that was hardly surprising, for she usually fled from them, with or without the help of alcohol. If she could remember, she could speak.

" Nick," she said pleadingly, " please listen carefully to what I say, and don't jump to the conclusion I'm crazy."

He noted the use of his first name with a nod. " I promise faithfully that I won't jump to any conclusions at all," he said. " I'll tell you what I think, that's all."

It was a candid remark ; she accepted it. She sat back in the chair and crossed her legs, staring into vacancy. " Well—to start with, what would you expect me to tell you about my past ? My childhood, I mean, and my background."

Jenkins considered. " I guess a pretty good education, because of your voice. You probably went to an exclusive school. Maybe you were trained as a model or for the stage, because you walk very gracefully."

" I feel that way, too. That's the sort of thing I ought to remember. Only—you know how something you see, or something someone says to you, can remind you of other things that you remember from earlier on ? Well, that happens to me.

" Only the things I remember having had happen to me can't *possibly* have happened to *me*."

" Such as ?"

She told him about playing naked on the red beach with the other girls from the willage, and how the warriors came from the black ships ; how she had fallen backwards into the pool and struck her head. Jenkins listened with attention, not betraying the cynical disbelief she had half expected.

" So you would probably have drowned in the pool," he suggested. " The water would have covered your face ?"

She nodded. " Do you remember any other things like that ?" he went on. " For instance, had you had a — a vision like this when I nearly ran you down ?"

She knit her brows. Why, of course : the hallway had become a sort of cave, and . . .

Jenkins read the mounting horror in her eyes before she gave it utterance, and said quickly, " If it's very dreadful, maybe you shouldn't—"

She shook her head. " It isn't so dreadful in its own context," she said. " I'll tell you about it."

When she had done, Jenkins shuddered. He had got up from the floor and taken a chair facing her while she was talking. Now he said, " I'm sorry, but I disagree. I think the idea of some monster using human beings to spread its young is absolutely disgusting."

" To me, as I'm sitting here," she hastened to agree, " it does seem horrible. But to the person I was at the time, it—it was just something I'd grown up with, got used to."

" Do you remember anything else about the creature ? For example, how come it spoke Eng—how come it spoke a human language ?"

Her eyes widened in surprise. " That's something I hadn't thought of, but you're quite right. Oh, I don't mean how could I understand it—after all, it was intelligent and could compel human beings to serve it, so I never gave that question a thought. But now I think it over, I don't think the language it used was English, although I understood it."

" Logical. There isn't such a creature anywhere in the world, and hasn't been during the time that English has been spoken. Ergo, English wasn't spoken. How did this thing get its power over human beings, anyway ?"

" Why, every year or so a few people in the city felt an uncontrollable urge to walk into the tunnels in the side of the mountain, down to where the thing lived underground. I don't know how the creature actually called them to come."

" You just mentioned a city. When you told me about playing on the beach with other girls, you said they came from a village. What was this city like, do you remember ?"

She closed her eyes. The effort of recollection ploughed shallow parallel furrows across her forehead. " It was quite big. It had wide roads, but the buildings were only one storey high. There were carts and hand-trucks, but no cars. In the middle there was a big temple which nobody ever visited any more. When people first came to the place, they used to offer sacrifices there to try and stop the creature in the mountain

from taking away any more of the young men and women. Only eventually they realised it wasn't doing any good, so they stopped going there. I'm afraid I'm talking hopeless nonsense, but you asked me for it." She opened her eyes.

Jenkins shook his head. "You seem to me to be talking sense. It all hangs together. How about the village—the one all the girls came from?"

"Very small—only a few hundred people. No roads or anything. People grew vegetables and went fishing. There was a lot of fish. Young girls like me didn't have to work until they were betrothed, when they were taught to cook and weave and keep house. We were supposed to play on one side of the island and the boys on the other—they mostly learned to make nets and harpoons and get fish. Only of course sometimes we managed to creep across the island, especially at night, and meet our boy friends halfway."

It was amazing the richness and fullness of detail that crowded these out-of-place memories now that she was thinking about them without the beclouding terror that had blurred her mind before.

There was a brief pause while Jenkins reflected on what she had said. Then he got up.

"I oughtn't to keep you sitting here with that dressing-gown on," he said. "I put the things I bought you in the bedroom—I hope they'll do. While you're dressing, suppose I go through the phone book and see if anybody has lost a beautiful girl called Sally?"

She flushed. But she couldn't think of a sound reason why he shouldn't. He accepted her silence as consent, and went over to the phone. He was shuffling through the directory S to Z as she passed towards the bedroom.

"Not Urquhart, U-R-Q," she said. "Ercott — E-R-C-O-double T."

"Sorry," he said absently, and reached for E to K.

"Nick."

He looked up with a smile. "Yes?"

"Nick, you seem perfectly ready to accept these—wild illusions of mine as if they really were memories. Why?"

"You said that's what they seem like to you, didn't you?"

"Yes," agreed Sally absently, and went on into the bedroom. Somehow, the possibility that the memories *might* be real troubled her more than the possibility that they were pure imagination.

VI

The trouble melted in the sensuous delight of clean new clothes on her body. Even when she heard the ratching of the telephone dial, she made no attempt to eavesdrop on what Jenkins was saying.

He had remembered everything except a suspender belt ; owing to that, she left the stockings in their cellophane bag. She turned the other items out of their wrappings, hung the dressing-gown over a chair and hurried into the underthings. Standing before the long mirror in her slip, she undid the towel round her head and finished drying her hair. Then she borrowed a brush lying on the bedside table and stroked it into a shining glory it had not known for months. At last she put on the dress—light blue, as he had said it would be—and looked at her reflection.

She wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. It was a miracle. It was purely a miracle.

The vague sound of Jenkins talking on the phone outside had stopped. She tore herself away from contemplation of the vision she had become, wishing only that she had some means of disguising her chapped lips and the tired circles of darkness beneath her eyes, and opened the bedroom door.

Jenkins was sitting chewing his lower lip in the chair he had formerly used. He looked up, and his astonishment was obvious. " Damnation !" he exclaimed. " I was right, wasn't I, when I said I was taking a pretty girl to lunch ?"

Delighted, Sally danced a few steps forward across the floor spinning round so that her skirt swung out around her thighs. She felt as if she had made an entrance on stage, in a fabulous period costume which made a whole auditorium hold its collective breath. It was like being a bride . . .

The splendour of her clothes was dazzling. Around her hips was a skirt of thinly beaten gold leaf appliqued on a cloth heavy, like silk. Over her shoulders and crossing on her bosom were two magnificent panels of brocade, with fertility symbols and good-luck charms embroidered on it in red. Her waist was girdled with a belt of red and yellow hide ; on her head was a crown of feathers and shells that towered almost her own height above her, and was so heavy her neck ached. Green paint outlined her eyes ; red, her lips ; blue, the fine veins on the backs of her hands. There was a ring with a stone set in it weighing

down each finger, and every stone differed from its neighbour. Round each of her toes was a tiny leather strap with a bell attached, jingling as she moved. A necklace of solid metal plates an inch square clung at her throat. It was the most gorgeous bridal array that had been seen in a hundred years.

It passed. A few hours before it would have shaken her mind to its foundations ; now Jenkins's contagious matter-of-factness steadied her and caused her to reflect that she could be, was being, helped. She did not have to bear her burden all alone.

He had noticed her moment of shock. His face had relapsed into a deep-etched frown, and he was letting a cigarette burn towards his fingers with half an inch of ash balanced on it. He said, " Come and sit down. I'm afraid my bright idea wasn't so bright. I can't find anyone called Ercott in the directory at all."

Sally came forward and sat obediently. She didn't know whether to feel disappointed or relieved. " But I thought I heard you phoning," she said. " Were you calling directory inquiry or something ?"

" I did that, too," Jenkins answered. " But—well, I'm afraid I cheated a little. I called a friend of mine, a doctor : Tom Gospell. I hope you don't mind. He's a wonderful person, and I always ask his advice if I have a problem like yours."

Sally felt a quiver of apprehension. " A—a *doctor* ?" she emphasised. " Not—?"

" Not a psychiatrist, no. I'm sure you'll like him, by the way. He has a practice not far from here, and he's just gone to call on some patients, so he said he'd look in as soon as he could. I thought it would be wise, just in case—you know, in case you'd hurt your head or something."

Sally nodded.

" Well, all we can do just now is hang on till he comes. How are the clothes, by the way ?"

" Nick you shouldn't have done it, you know. It must have cost an awful lot, and goodness knows how I'm going to repay you—"

" You already did. It was well worth it to see you come in looking so happy just now. But—uh—did I forget to buy you any stocking after all that ?"

" You forgot a suspender belt, actually," said Sally, and felt her face twitch into a grin at Jenkins's almost comical dismay. " But don't let that worry you, please ! It's—it's so wonderful to have nice things to put on again."

The memory of herself in that fantastic barbarian bridal costume came back as she spoke, and she mentioned it to Jenkins, finishing, " But that was nothing to do with any of the other memories I've had ! I don't know who I was marrying, or whether I liked him or was being sold to him—all I know is that I was loving every moment of being a bride and having such gorgeous clothes. Although I really think they were hideous."

Jenkins said astutely, " How old were you ?"

" Why—why, I—" She stopped trying to pretend, and gaped open-mouthed at him in undignified awe. " Nick, are you a mind-reader or something ?"

" No, of course not. I just make a habit of guessing wildly. I take it this particular shot in the dark was on target, and you were a mere child, too young to know what marriage was really about ?"

She nodded speechlessly.

" Hmph !" he said, and put his chin in his palm.

The accuracy of his " shot in the dark " had shaken Sally. She felt a sudden need to know something about this imperturbable stranger, and leaned forward. " Nick, what *do* you do ? Tell me a bit about yourself."

He looked slightly uncomfortable. " Well, as a matter of fact—I'm afraid people always find this rather ridiculous, but it's the absolute truth—I'm an inventor. Most people's idea of an inventor is a wild-haired man in filthy clothes with something in his potting-shed that's likely to go bang every now and again. But—uh—I really *am* an inventor. When I was at Oxford I thought up two or three gadgets and patented them, and a friend of mine sold them to a big commercial company, and they caught on so well I got quite a lot of money. So, being as lazy a sort of guy as you're ever likely to meet, I decided not to bother about working for a living."

He spread his hands vaguely. " I seem to have some kind of gift for seeing round awkward corners of problems. If I run low on my bank balance, I go round for a few days thinking of things people do which are irritating because they

tend to go wrong, and trying to figure out how they can be made to go right. Some of them are pretty silly—I suppose the wildest thing I ever thought up was an automatic dog-dryer. If you've ever lived in the same house as a dog, you'll know how maddening it is when Bonzo comes home on a wet night and tramples muddy footmarks into the carpet before you can get at him with a towel. So I designed a sort of kennel, filled with infra-red lamps which turn on automatically *if* it's been raining in the past two hours, as soon as the dog comes in through a special hinged flap you have to saw in the bottom of your door. Sizes available for all breeds from Yorkies to Great Danes. That one didn't catch on, of course—people couldn't be bothered to saw bits off their front doors, nor to teach their dogs to come in through the right entrance.

" Some of the other gadgets, though, worked out very well. I designed a W.C. pan that flushed itself automatically when you lowered the lid after use, connected to the main water supply instead of through a cistern, which got rid of that maddening splashing noise you get while an ordinary cistern refills itself. Then there was a device for tuning guitars and other musical instruments visually to a high standard of precision—all it consists of is a cathode ray tube, a microphone, and a device for filtering out the harmonics and leaving the fundamental. You strike the note, a profile of the waveform appears on the face of the tube, and you have a set of interchangeable transparent discs, each of which has the correct profile printed on it, which you put over the face of the tube according to which note you want to tune to. Then you fiddle with the tuning till you get the profile on the screen and the outline on the card to match up exactly. Lord knows who actually buys the thing now it's on sale, because all the musicians I know tune to the nearest piano, or failing that don't bother about getting exactly to concert pitch."

" Sounds fascinating." Sally stared at him. " And you really get enough out of these things to live on ?"

" Well, not exactly. The firm that took my first three ideas was so pleased with them they sort of put me on a regular salary. They pay me five hundred a year on condition that I produce one new gadget a year in their particular line, which is household plastics, and give them first refusal on anything which doesn't fall in that field. They must make at least five *thousand* out of the things they have of mine, so it doesn't really cost them much."

He dismissed his personal achievement with a wave. "Look, while you were getting dressed I had an idea. Can you draw ?"

Sally blinked. " I think I can—a little. I'm not sure, though, because I don't think I've tried since before—"

" Well, here's a pencil and pad of paper. Suppose you try and draw some of the things you remember. I've got a perfectly sensible reason for asking this. You seem to be able to visualise these memories of yours very clearly, but it's hard for you to put them into words, isn't it ? You can't get across the sort of little differences you want to describe. Maybe you can draw them. Let's try, eh ? Suppose we start with this outfit you were wearing as a child-bride."

Obediently, Sally took the pencil and poised it over the paper. After a moment she started to sketch awkwardly, putting the tip of her tongue between her lips as she worked like a small girl having trouble with her homework.

After a while she tore the sheet of paper off the pad and screwed it up. " It's no good," she said resignedly. " I sort of remember it from the inside, if you follow me. I mean, I was actually wearing this outfit, so I didn't get a chance to see myself in it. Maybe there wasn't a mirror, or it was supposed to be unlucky or something."

" Very possible," agreed Jenkins. " Yes, I see what you mean about remembering it from inside. How about something you saw from a distance ? Remember the black ships that came to shore in the one with the girls playing ball ? You saw them, and the men that came from them."

" That's right," Sally agreed. She took up the pencil again ; this time the sketch went ahead rapidly, and she gave a nod of satisfaction as she filled in each of the details.

" There !" she said when she had finished. " That's one of the men from the ships, battle-axe and all."

Jenkins took the pad from her. The figure was drawn in bold, definite strokes ; obviously the picture had been very clear in Sally's mind as she worked. He felt a cold shiver crawl down his spine as he studied it.

" Sally," he said gently, " there's something odd about this drawing. Are you sure it's exactly as you remember it ?"

" Why, yes !"

" Then I think you—No, I'll let you say it. Sally, the man you've drawn here has *four arms*."

VII

The sky over London had clouded up ; a chilly breeze kicked at the young leaves on the trees. Clyde West wished to God he had stopped to put on an extra sweater as well as his coat when he left the house to follow the Rowalls.

He wasn't good at this detective work ; however, he didn't think they had noticed his presence, because he rather self-consciously made use of the chance to alter his bearing, his manner of walking and the other little clues that give away identity at a distance. He reminded himself to walk like a tired man, a lively man, a lazy man, in turn. Now, though, he was getting to the stage at which he could only walk like a cold man. Which he was.

The Rowalls didn't seem to have a very clear idea of where they were going, to begin with. They had gone through all the squares in the neighbourhood, walking round each of them looking at cars. It seemed to be green MG's that interested them ; presumably that was the type of car this man Jenkins drove. West had not heard that particular part of the argument between the Rowalls ; the couple's actions, however, were filling in the gaps for him.

When they found a green MG parked in one of the squares, they went all along the nearby porches looking at the names on the doorbells. They drew blank fairly consistently. When they had covered a considerable distance from home, they halted and had an altercation on the pavement. West contrived to look at them and appear to be going nowhere in a hurry at the same time. When he saw that they were starting back the way they had come, he had to dodge into a bookshop on a corner ; he made use of the opportunity to buy a paper which would make one more slight difference to his normal appearance. Fortunately there were a good many coloured people in this district.

The Rowalls went past on the other side of the road, apparently having given up and decided to head for home. West followed them again, wondering what the hell he could have done anyway if they had found their prey. They were passing the entrance to one of the squares which they had previously thoroughly searched, when Rowall caught at his wife's arm and pointed excitedly to a shabby, elderly, dark green car which had not been there when they came this way the first time.

West felt his heart sink and his throat grow dry. Rowall was back at his old game of checking names on doorbells, and this time he had struck lucky, for he made a note on a slip of paper and then walked across the road into the middle of the square to look up at the windows of a first floor apartment.-

What were they going to do if this was the place they were looking for ?

The couple talked in low tones for a moment, and then Rowall glanced round conspiratorially. He saw no one in sight likely to take any notice ; West was in the shadow of a convenient doorway, with the conspiciously light-coloured newspaper behind his back.

Going up to the sports car, Rowall reached rapidly inside and put his hand up beside the steering wheel. He seemed to give a sharp tug. With another glance round, he stepped back, dusting his hands, and returned to his wife with a satisfied air.

He must have pulled loose the flex running to the ignition lock, West diagnosed. A convenient, if temporary, method of immobilising the vehicle. The reason for the action escaped him—but then, he was unclear about the reason for anything the Rowalls were doing at the moment.

Once again they seemed to be disputing between themselves, with Rowall getting the better of it. At length he turned and began to walk away, while his wife, with a mutinous expression, took up a leaning position against a tree from which she could survey the entrance to Jenkins's apartment, and his car. When he had gone a short distance, Rowall turned and called something indistinguishable ; his wife made an insulting gesture, and he went on his way with even greater energy and irritation.

Obviously there was a purpose in all this. West began to wish he hadn't felt compelled to try and help Sally Ercott ; now he could do nothing but stand here watching the watcher.

Twenty minutes had passed, and he was tempted to leave and go somewhere to get warm, when Bella Rowall began to shift from foot to foot. She appeared to be suffering some kind of discomfort. West realised after a second's puzzlement what the trouble must be, and had to put his hand to his mouth to stifle a laugh. Praise be for the human metabolism.

Bella Rowall stuck it out for another fifteen minutes ; then, as there was still no sign of her husband returning, she flounced off from her post with a hurt expression and disappeared, as directed by a small yellow arrow on a lamp-post, into a side

turning opposite. West seized his chance ; he ran across the road and up the steps to the door which she had been watching. He pressed the bell marked NICHOLAS JENKINS and waited anxiously for a reply, looking round nervously for fear Bella might come back before he got off the porch.

There was no mistake. Sally stared at the drawing she had executed, hoping that some miracle would transform the two brawny left arms clutching the raised axe into one left arm and one right. But he had two right arms already.

Sally's face paled. " Nick, I *must* be crazy. There never was a man with four arms like that !"

" You told me earlier not to jump to conclusions," Jenkins remarked mildly. " You seem to be jumping to conclusions yourself now. Your mind seems to be relaxing a bit already—you've told me about three of these memories so far. Any more ?"

" There've been dozens," said Sally. " Oh, all right—I'll see if I can tell you about some of them. Last night, for example . . ."

At first the recollection of the horror that the memory had brought was more vivid than the memory itself. It was like trying to call back a dream dreamt last year, and the alcoholic fog in which she had tried to lose herself muddled her.

Bit by bit an icy wind seemed to drive the fog away, and she spoke of the way the people grew hungry in a bad season, when game was scarce and ice lay thick on the rivers and the winter seemed as though it would never end. That time she had been old and toothless, and she had huddled shivering in the corner with nothing to keep her warm but one stiff old piece of hide. The young people crowded her away when she tried to get near the little fire, and bit by bit they had also stolen her clothes for themselves, no matter how much she raved and threatened to haunt them when she died. There had been no meat in the pot for days now, not even the carcase of a small animal frozen to death in the snow. The children had cried ceaselessly at first, but now most of them were too weak even to cry.

Yesterday already her grandson, now the head of the family, had started to cast meaning glances at her. Now he uttered what was in his mind, saying that the old woman was useless, she had borne her children, now she was only a gaping mouth depriving the youngsters of precious food. His wife, the fat

one from over the hill who had always hated the old woman, chimed in with the suggestion that there was even so a little meat on her scrawny frame . . .

The picture of the man advancing menacingly towards her with his killing-knife in his hand was again so vivid that it brought the sweat to Sally's forehead, and she had to grip the sides of the chair to control herself.

" I suppose that one was triggered off by the fact that I was lying on the floor trying to keep warm with only my coat to cover me," she said.

" Could be. Could you draw the man who was going to kill you ?"

Sally felt half afraid to say yes, although the man was so clear in her mind she knew she could depict him easily. She studied him mentally ; no, there was nothing incongruous or inhuman about this one. She decided to risk it, drew with swift and certain strokes, and waited while Jenkins looked at the result.

When he said nothing, she asked shrilly, " Is there anything wrong this time ?"

Jenkins put the drawing aside. " You haven't given him any hair or ears," he said reluctantly. " His head is as round as a cannon-ball."

Well, of course it was—Sally stifled the tart reply and put her hand to her shoulder-long blonde hair. In the memory, she knew beyond doubt, none of the participants had hair or external ears.

She said faintly, " He has ears like a snake's—just a slit in the skull and a hole leading to an eardrum inside."

" He would have," Jenkins agreed.

" Is that all you can find to say ?"

" Do you want to be congratulated on the vividness of your imagination or the precision of your memory ?" Jenkins asked acidly. " I mean just what I say—"

The doorbell broke loudly in on his sentence, and he glanced at his watch. " Funny—that can't be Tom Gospell already, I'm certain. Wonder who—Oh well, I'd better go see."

While he hurried downstairs, Sally took back her two drawings and studied them uncomprehendingly. She was still seeking an answer to the riddle when Jenkins came back, looking completely mystified.

" Sally do you know any West Indians ?" he demanded.

" I—I don't think so, unless maybe from before—"

" That doesn't fit at all. That was a West Indian who rang the bell. He asked if I was Nicholas Jenkins, and I said I was, and then he asked if I had a Miss Ercott here. Of course I said I hadn't, but I suppose I was so surprised I gave myself away, because he didn't believe me. He said, ' Well, tell her for God's sake to keep away from Rowall's. They know she's here. I don't know what they're fixing to do to her, but it's something horrible.' What did he mean by that ?"

" Rowall was the name of my landlord where I've been living," said Sally in a faint voice. " How did he know ? How did this man know I was here ? It—maybe it was the man who lives on the floor below me in the house."

" Yes, I decided it wasn't much good pretending you weren't here if he was out to help you. I asked how he'd found me, and he said he'd followed Rowall and his wife when they came to look for you. He said he had to go, because Mrs. Rowall was watching the house and would come back any moment, and she would recognise him. That fits, doesn't it ? And then he said something which really shook me."

Sally looked at him dumbly, like a frightened doe.

" He said, ' It doesn't mean anything to me, but maybe it will to Miss Ercott. They said they were going to have to make her look for another body.' And then he ran off."

" It sounds horrible !" Sally exclaimed. " But it *doesn't* mean anything to me. What shook you about it—the way he said it ?"

" No, not the way he said it," Jenkins replied absently, going over to the window. It was not dark yet by a long way, and he seemed to hesitate in the act as he started to draw the curtains.

" No, we don't need to be that obvious," he said. " Sally, come over here in the corner, without letting yourself be seen in the window. Look out behind the curtain—don't move it more than you can help. There's a woman down below. Do you recognise her ? '

Sally complied quickly, and nodded. " That's Mrs. Rowall all right," she said in a low voice. " Nick, what on earth am I to do ?"

" I don't think you have a lot to be afraid of," Jenkins said.

" But I have ! A nervous breakdown, and now this foul man Rowall and his wife after me—I'm damned sure it's not just his back rent he's after me for—" She broke off. " Damn it, why don't you tell me ? Do you know what's wrong with

me, can you even guess ? If I'm not already crazy, worrying's going to make me that way !"

" I can guess," said Jenkins levelly. " It's a wild guess, like the one about the child-bride, and though I was right on that point I won't necessarily be right this time. But it was this guess that made me sit up and take notice of what that negro said just now about making you look for another body.

" I don't think you're insane. I think when you get these memories you really are remembering, or visualising at any rate. And what you're seeing is life on other worlds."

VIII

" What ?" said Sally faintly in a very small voice. All her worries about what Rowall and his wife might do faded from her mind.

Giving a final glance down from the window at Bella Rowall, as though to fix her appearance in his mind, Jenkins said, " Come away from here and sit down. I shouldn't worry about this Rowall couple while you're in this apartment—I did a little tinkering a while ago, and I imagine it's burglar-proofed about as thoroughly as anywhere could be. Sold a couple of the ideas I worked out for the job . . .

" Yes, I meant what I said. It seems perfectly logical to me. Obviously there has never been on Earth a race of bald men with snakes' ears, or marauding barbarians with four arms, or alien creatures living inside mountains which steal away human beings to plant their young. If not here, then elsewhere. After all, there are millions upon millions of stars in the sky, and we know that some of them have planets. The laws of chance insist that there must be thousands of planets on which people like us could exist."

" But how could memories of these other planets be here—inside my head ?"

" Well . . . I say again that this is all guesswork of the wildest sort, but something strikes me as significant about the various episodes you've described to me. Each of them dealt with a moment in which you were on the point of death—in the tunnel with the alien creature, on the beach where you probably drowned in a pool, among these starving tribesmen who proposed to eat you. Even the memory of yourself as a child-bride might well qualify as the most vivid recollection of a

whole life, especially if you weren't really going to be married to a man, but to a deity of some kind, and accordingly sacrificed—but damn it, there I go guessing again.

" Nonetheless, my thesis stands. Each of these memories could well be the one which was uppermost when the—the consciousness, whatever that may be, carried it over into death."

"Oh, no, Nick! There must be a more rational explanation."

Jenkins shrugged. " Okay, let's try and figure one out. But before we go on, do you think in any of these visions you saw the night sky clearly enough to be able to draw the patterns of the stars ?"

She shook her head.

" Well, how about this world on which you were starving and freezing to death ? Were the winters always long ?"

Sally screwed up her forehead. " I—I think they were."

" What was it like when the spring came ?"

" Why, like the end of any other winter. I can picture it now, actually—the ice flaking off the eaves of the huts, the jams breaking in the rivers, the suns going up the sky—"

" What did you say ?"

" The suns—no, the sun, I mean. No, that's not right." Sally gave him a hurt look. " Nick, that's idiotic. But I did mean suns. Two of them. Small ones."

" That fits. The people with snakes ' ears live on a planet turning around a double star. No wonder the winters are always long—the orbit must be incredibly far out for the planet to be stable."

A great light seemed to be dawning on Sally. She said, " I think I know, Nick, where's my coat ? I'll show you !"

Jenkins hurried with her to open the wardrobe in which he had locked Sally's old clothes ; she fumbled in the pocket of the coat and produced the magazine she had sat reading (was it only last night ?) as she sobbed in terror in her empty room. " That's right," she said. " I did know. I think I'd instinctively decided the things I was remembering could never have happened on Earth."

" So you turned to the imagination of science fiction writers to see if you could find a clue to them. It's not exactly conscious logic, but it's logic."

He had a solemn, chastened expression which would have suited him better if he had been wearing his glasses. He said,

" It's like walking into the middle of that magazine you have there, isn't it ?"

Sally fought hard to keep her teeth from chattering ; her stomach felt as if it was being stirred with an egg-whick. She said, " You take it all so calmly I can't really think you believe in it."

The doorbell rang, and Jenkins looked through the window again as he spoke. " I need some time to get used to the idea. So do you, I imagine. That's Tom Gospell now—I can see his car outside. I'll go let him in."

Troubledly, Sally awaited his return with the doctor, who proved to be a huge man with an untidy red beard. He seemed unable to speak in a tone quieter than a bellow, so that from a distance his most friendly remarks sounded as if he was insulting a life-long enemy. He wore unpressed grey flannels and a tweed jacket, the pockets bulging with items of medical kit from a stethoscope onwards, and reams of scribbled notes. Sally took to him, not exactly on sight, but when he spoke to her.

" Nick tells me you're one up on the astronomers, young woman," he boomed. " Good for you. Nick, get in the bedroom and turn your back. You, young lady, take off your dress and your slip if you've got one on, and lie down on that couch. This is not an invitation, it's an order, and all I want to do is look. Nick !"

Jenkins disappeared, chuckling, and Gospell ostentatiously turned his back and fished out his stethoscope. He looked up at the ceiling and whistled.

Sally hesitated. Well, he was a doctor, but she had expected slightly more preamble than this brusque command to get ready for examination . . .

She found she had already taken off her dress.

" I'm ready," she said in a low voice, and Gospell turned.

" Hmph ! Wish I could run into young women like you when I'm out on my rounds. Sorry if the stethoscope's cold, but it's not exactly the height of summer—"

Briskly he checked her heart, her lungs, her reflexes, the dilation of her pupils ; made her stand on one leg with her eyes closed and noted how long she lasted without falling, told her she could get dressed again and while she was doing so gave her some simple problems in mental arithmetic.

" Young woman," he growled when she had solved them, " aside from the fact that you don't seem to have been eating

or sleeping properly lately, you're in damned good health. Let's have a look at your scalp."

With surprising gentleness the blunt fingers probed among the roots of her hair. " No—no sign of a blow or injury of any sort," Gospell told her. He pocketed his instruments and called for Nick to come back.

" Sit us down and let's hear what you've got to say," he suggested, pulling a large and elderly pipe from another of his overloaded pockets and tamping tobacco into it as he spoke. " Sorry to have gone for you so promptly, young woman—what is your name, anyway ?"

" Sally."

" Suits you. What was I saying ? Oh, yes—I wanted to take you by surprise, so to speak. Sometimes psychological odd-balls show up better that way. What Nick had been telling me struck me as so improbable I wanted to make sure you weren't off your rocker. Sorry to have doubted you, Nick."

Jenkins was conscious of Sally's puzzled eyes on him. He explained quickly, " Tom—uh—thinks I'm wasting myself on gadgets."

" You are, damn it ! If you weren't so congenitally lazy you'd be where you belong, in a mental hospital. On the *staff*, damn it," he added to Sally as he saw a mischievous glint in Jenkin's eye.

" However." He broke a match trying to strike it for his pipe, cursed, and lit a second one. " All right, Nick. Go over it again, slowly, from the beginning, and forgive me in advance if I tell you the whole idea's bunkum." He sat back in his chair with a resigned expression.

Jenkins went over the whole story, in detail, passing Gospell Sally's drawings when he came to them, and finishing with the mysterious message from the West Indian who had come to warn Sally of what the Rowalls were up to.

" Make her look for another body ?" said Gospell incredulously. " Who do they think she is ? Burke and Hare ?"

" It fits, doesn't it ? Even the form of words fits. If I make any sense out of what's happened, it only adds up to the certainty that you, Sally "—he turned and looked directly at her—" remember existence on some other planet or planets ; that the Rowalls know ; and that somehow the fact that you remember is dangerous to them. Make you look another body—not kill you. Think it over."

" I have done," said Sally tremulously. " And it makes me terrified."

Gospell was combing his beard with his fingers. " And you say that's the Rowall woman out there watching this place. I thought maybe the occupants of the Bayswater Road were beginning to overflow up this way. All right, granted it has a kind of lunatic consistency, this theory of yours. Who are these Rowalls supposed to be ?"

" I don't know," said Jenkins. " But it looks as if somehow it can't just have been chance when Sally first had these visions of hers and discovered she couldn't remember her home and so on, she found herself in Rowall's place and couldn't get away."

" Are they doing anything except keep an eye on the house?"

" Not a thing."

Jenkins looked round and judged that it was now dark enough to draw the curtains. He got up and did so, and stiffened on looking down into the square.

" Well, Rowall himself has turned up again now. His wife seems to have gone. But he's only standing there watching. I hope he didn't notice me looking at him."

" Well, whoever or whatever the Rowalls may be, the booby-traps you've rigged up around this flat ought to keep them out," Gospell grunted. " Um—couldn't you immobilise him by ringing Scotland Yard and laying an information about his living on immoral earning, or something ?"

" I suppose we could," said Jenkins doubtfully, but Sally shook her head.

" Please . . . I don't want to have to try and explain what's happened to me to the police or anyone else."

" You might have trouble, at that," Gospell agreed. " I don't know exactly what I can do for you, young woman—Sally. It might be wise for you to have a head X-ray, in case there's some kind of damage I can't see. Speaking off-hand, it would be a waste of time. I could recommend you to a psychiatrist I know, but he'd probably try and beat these memories of yours into Freudian analogies with real-life and wind up by inventing a complete life story for you. I think the best I can possibly do is to write you a prescription for some tranquillisers, just in case it gets too much for you to bear again —but don't take them unless you're forced to.

" In all probability, whatever the true nature of your peculiar memories, they've been precipitated by a shock. It would be my guess that when you've had a chance to get used

to an ordinary life again, you'll find your own memories come back bit by bit. I don't know of anyone I could better commend you to the care of than Nick here, who's one of the level-headedest people I know. You're taking on a load of trouble, Nick, but if you think it's better that way than a hospital—"

Sally realised this must refer to something they had discussed before Gospell came up to the flat. She said, " Oh, no ! I mean—Nick, I couldn't impose on you. You've spent pounds on me already today, and I can't let you—"

" You want to go back to Rowall's ?" put in Nick glacially. "Of course not. You're broke—I'd cheerfully make you a sizeable loan if I thought you just wanted to get the hell out of here, but what would you do ? I'm not proposing to imprison you, damn it ! Even if Rowall knows you're here, you're perfectly safe for the time being, and as soon as I can track down anyone who used to know you, or your family or whoever, I'll be rather relieved to unload the worry on to them.

" Meantime—and it should only be a few days—that bedroom's yours ; I often turn it over to visitors and sleep in here on the couch. Ask Tom's opinion, why don't you ? The only real alternative, I'm afraid, is a hospital—and maybe you wouldn't find such sympathetic listeners there."

Sally hesitated, but she knew his arguments had force.

" Settled," said Jenkins, and got to his feet. " Come on, Tom—I'll go downstairs with you. I have to go out and do some shopping for supper. And I forgot to get Sally a toothbrush."

IX

Sally was alarmed at the idea of being left alone ; Jenkins patiently took her on a tour of the devices he had fitted up to burglar-proof the flat. " And if the worst comes to the worst, ring the police," he finished. " We don't even know for sure if Rowall means to do anything, remember."

His voice sounded hollow and unconvincing even to himself, but Sally nodded a reluctant acquiescence, and he gave her a bright smile as he turned to go downstairs with Gospell.

They separated on the doorstep, Gospell promising to ring later in the evening to find out whether Sally had had a recurrence of her attacks of inhuman memory. Then, looking

in his bulky overcoat like a vast and amiable bear, the doctor went back to his own car and roared into the gathering dark.

Jenkins climbed into his MG and thrust the key in the ignition lock. When he pressed the starter, nothing happened.

This was not an unknown phenomenon with a twenty-year-old car, even one which had been doctored by an owner with a taste for fiddling with gadgetry. Jenkins swore, and glanced round at the vague shape of Rowall standing across the road watching his flat—probably, now watching him.

Trying to assume a nonchalant air, he got out, lifted the bonnet and checked half a dozen obvious possible faults. It was not until he had been through the list that it occurred to him the damage might be deliberate.

He got back in the driver's seat and felt behind the dash ; dangling ends of flex met his probing fingers. If that was all, he could fix it in no time ; he got out his penknife and a roll of insulating tape from the glove compartment and squirmed under the dash so that he could see what he was doing.

Still contorted into an uncomfortable position, he put his hand round to the starter, pressed it, and discovered that he had successfully settled the problem. Dusting his hands and muttering curses, he wriggled back into the driving position.

" All right, Mr. Jenkins," said a quiet voice with a hint of north country accent. " Don't move till I tell you to."

Jenkins felt his heart stand still. The man must have opened the passenger's door very quietly while he had his head behind the dash ; he stood there with his face shadowed by the brim of a soft hat, and in his right hand there was something which looked very much like a gun.

" Who the devil are you ?" Jenkins said harshly, trying to decide whether it was dark enough inside the car for him to engage first gear and accelerate out of the way before the other could react.

" You probably wouldn't know me, Mr. Jenkins," said the man. " However, you doubtless recognise this weapon in my hand. I think I'm rather good with it."

" You're out of your mind," said Jenkins, and let his hand fall to the brake lever, releasing it.

A noise no louder than a paper bag bursting, and he felt and saw the spurt of hot gas as Rowall casually fired the gun across his face. " You take a lot of convincing for a person afraid of death," he said. " Leave the brake alone till I tell you you can use it."

He got into the passenger's seat, contriving to keep the gun aimed at Jenkins, and slammed the door. " All right. I want you to take me to number five, Mamble Row."

" Where on earth is that ?" Jenkins snapped. " And what the hell do you think you're doing, ordering me about as if I was a taxi-driver ?"

" If you don't do as I tell you, I shall shoot you."

" Murder happens to be a crime." Jenkins felt the sweat crawling down his face now.

" Not fatally. Enough to cause you considerable pain. Now start moving ! You know very well where Mamble Row is—you nearly ran over a girl there this morning. The one you picked up so neatly afterwards."

" So ? Has something happened to her since ?"

" No, but it will." Rowall—it *must* be Rowall—grinned unpleasantly. " You tripped over something very important, Mr. Jenkins, and it's for your own good that I'm trying to keep you out of the way—just for a while, just long enough to get the girl out of your flat."

" So you're a burglar too ?" Jenkins managed—somehow—to match and even surpass Rowall's grin. " Well, I wish you luck if you try and break into my place. I spent two weeks working on the alarms and booby-traps."

Rowall shrugged. " That doesn't matter. Sooner or later, if we can't get in the girl will have to come out, or she will walk across a window and we can shoot her. I'd prefer it a different way myself. But now start driving !"

The sudden menace in his tone, combined with the menace of his casual previous remarks, made Jenkins shiver. Obediently he engaged the gears and moved away.

Drive the wrong way ? Look for a policeman and pull up with Rowall on the policeman's side ? Try and crash the car into a lamp-standard ? Possibilities flitted through his mind ; he dismissed them one by one. It would probably suit Rowall's purpose just as well to have him, Jenkins, laid up in hospital after a crash, or with a serious but not fatal bullet-wound, as captive in his own house. Better to stay in possession of his faculties and hunt desperately for an opportunity of escape.

They had not turned into Mamble Row when Rowall said abruptly, " Stop the car here."

Jenkins obeyed. Obviously, he wouldn't want Jenkins's car parked conspicuously within a short distance of his own house

if anyone did discover what had happened. He hoped for an opportunity to accelerate away if Rowall got out first; Rowall had thought of that one, too, and told him to switch the engine off immediately.

With Rowall at his elbow, he was forced to walk briskly towards the house. Anyone passing them would have failed to see the gun, for it was shrugged into Rowall's coat-sleeve.

Not for a moment did his captor's vigilance relax; even when they reached the doorstep of the house, the man did not distract himself by trying to use a key; he merely reached for the bell and rang sharply twice. After a moment his wife came to the door and opened it. Her plump face was pale; her eyes widened in wonder.

"So you managed it!" she said. "Didn't think you were capable of it."

"Shut up. It was too simple for you to think of. I just waited till he was fixing that car of his, and ordered him to bring me round. Let us inside."

They took him into a shabby living-room; typical of its kind with a tattered three-piece suite, a dispirited fire burning, many knick-knacks and ornaments. The dust was thick on everything except the chairs. The carpet looked as if mud had been trodden into it after every fall of rain for twenty years. One yellow bulb illumined the stained ceiling and the dingy brown wallpaper.

They made Jenkins sit down in one of the armchairs; that was ingenious, for the springs sagged so much he sank deep into it, eliminating the possibility of his jumping suddenly to his feet. He composed himself and tried to look as if he didn't understand, as if he thought he was in the hands of maniacs.

Maybe he was.

Rowall locked the door carefully and dropped the key in his pocket; he had put away his gun, but its weight could be seen distorting the shape of his coat. Now he turned and looked at Jenkins.

"Afraid enough to keep your mouth shut now, aren't you?" he said with a sneer. "Well, now I'll tell you the answer to your questions. I brought you here to give you a choice: turn loose that girl you picked up and let her come back here where she belongs—or know that you've been the cause of her meeting an unpleasant death."

Bella Rowall leaned forward. " That bothers you, doesn't it ? Well, it doesn't bother us ! You'd have a lovely time answering questions about what you've been doing with her, I think—wouldn't you ? Picking up a crazy girl and taking advantage of her—"

Jenkins was suddenly boiling with uncontrollable rage. " You—bitch !" he said. " You make me want to spit in your face. Standing back and watching the poor girl drink herself crazy—I suppose you get some kind of satisfaction out of that, knowing you can't kill her—"

" *What* ?" said Rowall. The silence was like a fog in the room. Jenkins sat very still, wondering if Rowall had believed his ears.

He had. And now he rounded on his wife, his face turning scarlet with rage. " Now look what this filthy softness of yours has brought us to !" he yelled. " I told you, I *told* you if we let her loose she'd run into someone with enough intelligence to listen to her—"

He swung back to Jenkins, while his wife babbled, " We had to do it that way ! We had to drive her crazy before she died, in case she remembered—you said so yourself, you agreed when we started—"

It was suddenly very clear to Jenkins what had happened.

Rowall was bending over him, his eyes screwed up in insane fury. " What did the girl tell you ?" he demanded. " Why did you listen to her ? How do you know what has happened to her ?"

Jenkins shook his head. Somehow he managed to smile contemptuously.

" You swine ! You bastard, Jenkins !" Rowall's voice was climaxing towards incoherence. He swung back to face his wife. " Don't just stand there, you blubbering fool ! We've got to fix the Ercott girl ! If she found one person to tell who believed her, she'll go looking for others ! There's no knowing how many she may manage to convince before she's done."

Jenkins tried to heave himself out of the chair ; Rowall saw the motion and punched him back in his seat. Head reeling, Jenkins barely saw him leave the room.

As the time ticked away, Sally wondered anxiously what had happened to him. She tried to relax and tell herself not to worry ; she tried to look at Jenkins's books, tried to think about the strange memories she had. No good, she could not concentrate.

An hour had passed. She dropped into a chair and looked round the empty apartment. It was lonely by herself—almost as lonely as that unfurnished room in Rowall's house. It reminded her of . . .

It was not altogether lonely, to be by herself on this isolated planetoid, to look into the frozen vastness of the sky. She could look at the blue sun yonder and think of the Chidnim who lived by its warmth, at the orange-yellow one and picture the Tansules under it, at the pure white one overhead and remind herself that that one shone on the Iark.

But in spite of her best efforts, she had sometimes to remember that those suns were all distant, and that the nearer orbs were prey to the hordes of the Yem. That between her and her own people stretched lightyear on empty lightyear of interstellar space, as implacably hostile as the hostile Yem themselves. That there was nothing sheltering her from the hostility of either but the shell of the observation station.

When the situation laid siege to her mental defences, she lost herself in her job ; she did so now, moving to her instrument panels gracefully as ever, cocking her head to survey the dials in a way that had attracted the attention of many a masculine eye.

Now, as she looked over the readings, she felt a sudden intense cold, as if her mind had frozen. Surely not me, *she pleaded with the fates ;* surely not me, not here !

For life seemed suddenly very sweet for its own sake, and too precious to be wasted on the deserts of space.

And yet that was what the instruments told her. They spoke mutely of a swarm of the mindless spawn of the Yem passing onwards and outwards in another gigantic seeding ; they spoke of the many which had passed close enough to this lonely planetoid to tell that here she was, and the Yem spawn did not have conscious logic to tell them that there was only one of her and that their second generation would die on the sterile rocks.

Her slender, agile arms reached for controls ; her long, green-scaled hands glinted iridescently in the lights. There was only one service she could perform for her people in the few moments left to her : to tell them that the swarm was on its way, and that they had lost one of their most valuable forward observation posts.

She spoke swiftly, and received the answering condolence of a speaker who knew as well as she that her position was hopeless.

Then she went to the transparent door of the airlock and looked up achingly one last time at the stars.

The Tansules' sun blurred and wavered. There was the spawn. Clawing their way along the distortions of space in a manner too subtle for the minds of her people to define, they knew only that somewhere nearby was an instrument for their future reproduction.

She waited till the swarm had grounded, knowing that once it had grounded it was helpless to return to the spaceways, and then blew the air from the lock.

Her last thought was of the baffled less-than-consciousness of the Yem spawn stopping—not dying, for they were not yet fully alive. Stopping. Then thought stopped too.

Sally was crying when she returned to reality. That creature had been so beautiful, so graceful, even if she had not been human as she herself defined the term. To think of such loveliness being wasted on the lonely dark filled her with a boundless misery.

And yet that loveliness was not altogether gone, she realised of a sudden. For she, Sally Ercott, remembered it.

She got to her feet and paced around the room. Somehow that point seemed immensely important.

Fumbling, Sally groped towards the knowledge of a tremendous truth, while the enemy fumed and fought and struggled to prevent her.

X

The door slammed, but did not lock. Bella Rowall yelled after her husband—" What the hell do you want me to do ?"

" Shut that Jenkins up and come back to his place !" Rowall snapped in answer ; then the outside door crashed shut.

Jenkins's head was still ringing from the cruel blow he had received. Back deep in his brain, he was cursing the slowness of reaction the dizziness brought, for before he could recover himself sufficiently to climb out of the slack-springed chair, Bella had had time to fumble in a handbag lying on a table near her, and to bring out another gun, a twin of the one Rowall had been carrying.

She looked at him as she raised it. " Too bad you know as much as you do," she said steadily. " You'd make a fine subject for me."

Jenkins licked his lips, his head clearing at last. He said with false bravado, " Going to make me look for another body ?"

Bella's eyes widened, and the gun shifted for a moment from its aim. " How the hell could you know about that ?"

" I keep my mind open," said Jenkins bluntly.

" So . . . That settles it, my friend. I might have given you a comparatively quick and merciful death if you hadn't said that. As it is, I shall have to treat you slowly. I wonder what would be the best way of driving you insane."

Jenkins shuddered at the calm, considering tone she used. He said, " That's what you were trying to do to Sally Ercott, wasn't it ? You didn't make it. Why ? What's the object ?"

" I should have thought it was simple enough. Unless you die insane, then you'll remember—perhaps—what happened to you and who did it. I think I shall shoot you in the legs and arms and then knock you unconscious. That'll mean you stay alive till we get back. I hope that fool of a husband of mine doesn't kill the Ercott girl without giving me another chance to try and fuddle her brain for her—she's too dangerous to be allowed to take her memories with her."

The gun came up, and Jenkins braced himself for his last chance, wondering with odd detachment how he managed to feel so calm.

The door creaked.

Bella glanced towards it involuntarily, and Jenkins leapt to his feet. In the same moment the door swung wide, and there in the opening was a menacing brown figure. Startled, Bella Rowall began to turn the gun towards the newcomer—and Jenkins kicked with all his strength at the arm carrying the weapon.

The woman cried out with the pain, and her grip relaxed convulsively ; then she struck open-handed at Jenkins's face, and three nails clawed flesh from his left cheek, barely missing his eye. He had to step back to recover his balance.

In the doorway, Clyde West followed the fall of the gun with his eye, took a decision, and went three steps forward with his fists bunched. Before Bella Rowall could poise her bulky body to attack him, he had driven a punch aimed for the point of her chin, but slightly off course—into her soggy jowls.

She shook her head and appeared to ignore the impact, going for West and pummeling him, head down. Jenkins put one bloody hand on her shoulder, set his right leg behind her

legs and heaved with all his strength ; she tried to step back-backwards, tripped over his outstretched foot, and fell with a cry of despair.

Jenkins had not let go of her shoulder when she lost her balance ; with her fall, the material of her dress ripped bare her greasy-skinned nape and back. And there was something . . .

She heaved herself to her knees, panting, and glared at the two men. She opened her mouth as if to say something, and then launched herself unexpectedly at Jenkins legs, wrapping her arms round his knees and hurling him to the floor.

Clyde West swung one leg over her back and bent so that his right arm went round her throat. He braced himself and straightened ; she tried to roll on one side, to kick at him, to get her chin down and bite him. She failed, and he lifted inexorably. The woman's face purpled as she was raised bodily by the arm under her throat.

Jenkins wriggled his legs free and staggered to his feet. He whipped off his tie. " Can you hold her ?" he demanded of the West Indian, who nodded, panting.

" For a while, I guess," he bit out.

Jenkins stepped round behind him, knocked off Bella's shoes, and looped his tie around her ankles. She realised what he was doing and gave a spasodmic kick ; Jenkins put his foot down cruelly on hers to make her hold still, and knotted quickly.

What for her hands ? He plunged in his pocket and found the reel of insulating tape with which he had fixed the ignition of his car—tough enough to hold anything, he judged. Her hands were harder to tie than her feet, but in a short while it was done, and the two men between them managed to get Bella Rowall into the deep-sagging chair where Jenkins had previously sat.

Panting, they watched her recover from her near strangulation.

" What happened ?" West demanded. " I heard all that shrieking of Rowall's from upstairs, and when I heard your name, I knew they must have got at you. I thought they'd both gone out and left you here—I never reckoned on finding her with a gun—"

" I'm bloody glad you turned up, believe me," said Jenkins. " What can we use to immobilise her altogether ? Got any rope ? Electric light flex ? Something like that ?"

" Get you some," nodded West, and hurried from the room.

Jenkins watched Bella carefully, to make sure she was not pretending to be exhausted. She lolled sideways in the chair, mouth open, eyes closed, her torn dress exposing her gross bosom packed into her brassiere. West's return, bringing a hank of coarse rope, made her open her eyes, and try to heave herself up on her hobbled legs. Jenkins moved to stop her ; in dodging him, she fell forward, and her dress ripped further yet.

" My God !" said West. " What's that on her back ?"

For the flesh that had been exposed now was not exactly flesh.

Furiously the woman kicked and struggled to release herself from her bonds, while Jenkins bent to inspect the patch on her back. It began at the level of her shoulderblades, the normal skin uniting with something smooth and apparently a little wet, for it shone like slippery leather. It was greenish under the light from the ceiling, and it pulsed a little.

Bella Rowall abruptly stopped trying to work herself loose and began to curse them in a stream of obscenity. They paid no attention. Unable to bring themselves to touch it directly, they prodded it with a pencil Jenkins took from his pocket and found it was soft and yielding like a bladder filled with half-melted grease.

" Some men like that sort of thing, I guess," was West's bitter comment. " Myself, I couldn't touch a woman with a growth like that."

Jenkins took his penknife and slit Bella's dress further, cutting away her slip and then sawing through the strap of her brassiere. He said softly, " Maybe this isn't just a growth—it's not a cancer, or a rodent ulcer, or anything of that kind. God, it's *enormous* !"

Obscenities in Bella's shrill voice pounded at their ears as they pulled away the fabric to reveal the green patch's full extent. It ran to her waist, spreading in a rough triangle fifteen inches from apex to base, livid-green in the middle, paler at the edges. It followed roughly the same surface contour as normal skin would have adopted, not bulging enough to be visible through clothing.

Jenkins hesitated, then brought up his penknife and poised it to cut across the surface of the green area. " Man, what are you doing ?" West burst out.

" I don't know. I think I'm solving a whole row of problems," said Jenkins softly, and brought the razor-sharp blade down to the shiny wet-leather-like skin.

The skin *writhed* away from the metal, hollowing itself, adopting different contours to try and escape.

" Jesus, it's like it was alive by itself !" West muttered, and Jenkins nodded.

" I think it is." He stabbed down sharply with the knife point first, and this time the growth did not have a chance to surge out of the way. Tautly the skin ripped back, like a thin sheet of elastic ; from the gash so left, ichor with a foul putrescent smell oozed.

" That's no natural growth," said Jenkins. He looked as if he wanted to be sick. " That's a parasite of some kind—and I don't think you'll find it in any medical books."

" Look at her !" West exclaimed. " She's passed out completely."

" I don't think it's been correct to call Bella Rowall ' she ' for a long time," said Jenkins. " That thing on her back probably has outgrowths along the spinal canal—I believe that's what's been driving her."

" You mean—that thing has taken over her mind ? Jenkins you're crazy ! That's impossible !"

" Impossible ? Like the White Queen, I've believed more impossible things than that already today." Jenkins took the knife again and made another deep slashing cut across the green area at right angles to the previous one. The flow of ichor stank so much it nauseated them.

" Help me make this poor bitch comfortable in the chair," he invited, wiping the knife and folding it shut. " I guess we've given that parasite too much to think about for the time being. I'll get a doctor round to remove it later on—if it hasn't permanently ruined her ability to think for herself."

West, on the point of making an objection, thought better of it and assisted Jenkins to pack cushions around Bella's unconscious body before roping her securely in the chair.

" How about Miss Ercott ?" he asked as he tugged at the knots. " Did Rowall go after her ?"

" Yes, but I burglar-proofed the flat myself, and one man on his own would sound so many alarms—Holy Moses !" Jenkins's expression suddenly changed to one of dismayed horror. " God, am I an idiot ! The flat's burglar-proofed, but the house isn't, and if Sally had to go along the corridor to the bathroom and if Rowall had got into the hallway, he might catch her on the landing. Quick ! We've got to get round to my place right away !"

XI

" How about the gun ?" West called as Jenkins made for the door.

" Never used one !" the other flung back.

" I have—I'll bring it." West bent to pick it up, put the safety catch on and dropped it in his pocket as he followed Jenkins. Behind him, Bella Rowall forced one eyelid up a short distance ; the effort of holding it there proved too much, and she lolled again in the chair, her mouth half open, her breath coming in ugly snorts from her bruised throat.

The car was still where Jenkins had been forced to leave it ; West barely managed to catch up and fall into the passenger's seat before Jenkins roared away. Almost at once a red light halted them again, and Jenkins cursed.

" Have you a cigarette ?" he asked.

" Yeah, sure." West produced one, lit it, and passed it over as the lights changed.

" Thanks. I haven't thanked you for getting me out of that room alive, by the way. It's damned good of you to get yourself involved in this mess."

West lighted his own cigarette. " I didn't like what the Rowalls were doing to Sally. Matter of fact, I'm sort of ashamed I didn't get mixed up in it earlier."

The car squealed round a sharp corner. As soon as he had recovered from nearly being thrown out, West finished, " And you got yourself involved, didn't you ? As I read it, you only ran into Sally today."

" Ran into is right," Jenkins answered. He pulled up opposite his flat and scrambled from the car. " Light's still on," he commented. " Hope she's all right . . ."

Followed by West, he dashed into the house and up the stairs. On the landing he fumbled the key into the lock of his door. He could hear the phone ringing insistently ; the fact disturbed him, but he told himself that Sally might have been frightened to answer in case it was Rowall speaking.

As he turned the key, he called out, " Sally ! It's Nick ! Are you okay ?"

There was no reply. The phone continued to ring.

And when the door swung wide, the room it revealed was empty.

" Oh *God*," said Jenkins hopelessly. " How did the bastard do it ? How did he do it ?"

" Maybe she ran off by herself ?" suggested West. " She was pretty shaken up, wasn't she ?"

The phone stopped ringing, unnoticed.

" She doesn't seem to have left a note or anything—but I suppose she might have. Maybe if she was looking down and saw Rowall pull the gun on me and make me drive him away —or if she didn't see the gun, maybe she thought I was on Rowall's side after all . . . There hasn't been a fight or anything," he added. " Everything looks to be the way I left it."

The phone started to complain again ; almost absently he took off the receiver, and his face lightened momentarily as he heard Tom Gospell's booming voice.

" I've been ringing for ages ! What happened ? Were you petting with her already, or something ?"

" Tom, she's gone, and I think Rowall got at her. That's her landlord—the one who seems to have been trying to drive her insane, remember ? Listen carefully, and I'll tell you everything that's happened."

He launched into a rapid survey of his capture, his rescue by Clyde West, and the mysterious green parasite they had discovered on Bella Rowall's back. Gospell punctuated the story with incredulous grunts, but otherwise made no comment.

" So I suppose he must have been taking her away almost as we came to find her," Jenkins finished. " I don't know where else he might have taken her except to his own place. So I want you to come round right away to number five Mamble Row—that's his house. As fast as you can, for heaven's sake. Even if Rowall hasn't taken Sally there, we might be able to find out from his wife where he could have gone with her, and I want you to see this crazy parasite of hers for yourself."

" Number five Mamble Row—that near you ?"

" Yes, a few minutes from here."

" Right, I'll find it. See you then. God, cloak-and-dagger stuff ! Kidnapping and all—" The phone went dead on a final snort of disgust.

Jenkins turned to West. " Let's just look round and make absolutely sure she didn't leave a note," he said. " Then we must get back to Rowall's and see if she's there. You have a key for his door ?"

" Of course." West was shifting cushions, lifting books and magazines and shaking them. " Don't see anything—you ?"

Jenkins hunted briefly, running into the bedroom and the kitchen. " Not a sign," he said at length. " Okay—back to Rowall's. And this time we may need that gun ; you brought it ?"

" In my pocket. Right, let's go."

As they swung into Mamble Row, West touched his companion lightly on the arm. " Look !" he said in a low voice. " What's going on there at Rowall's ? That's old Mrs. Ramsbottom on the step, and a policeman—"

" And Mrs. Rowall !" snapped Jenkins. " What the devil's happened ?"

As he halted the car, Bella Rowall raised a dramatic arm. She was wearing a dressing-gown to hide the ruin of her clothes, and her face was ugly. " There they are, officer !" she shouted.

Together, West and Jenkins got out of the car and approached the steps on which the reception committee stood. Mrs. Ramsbottom, a large woman whose legs were swollen with oedema and who appeared to walk with difficulty and wheezing, cried out that it was a shame and a scandal. " You sh'da *seen* the way I found poor Mrs. Rowall !" she added to the police constable. " Half-naked, all tied up in the chair—and if it was those two there as done it to her, they oughta be in prison !"

The constable surveyed Jenkins and West searchingly. He glanced at Mrs. Rowall. " Are these the men you say tied you up, ma'm ?" he asked. Bella nodded triumphantly.

Jenkins, grateful for the fact that he had his glasses on for driving, and therefore looked more mature than usual, adopted his most cultured tone of voice and gave the policeman a hard glare. " Officer, what *is* this all about ?" he said. " Do I gather that this—uh—this person is accusing me of an assault of some sort ? Or is it my friend here she means ? Or both of us ?"

The policeman, impressed by Jenkins's manner and obvious self-assurance, hesitated. At length he said reluctantly, " Well, sir, this lady here "—indicating Mrs. Ramsbottom—" tells me she heard shouts for help from her landlady's sitting room, and when she managed to come downstairs she says she found her tied up in a chair with her clothes half off her. And *she* says " —he gestured at Mrs. Rowall—" that it was you and your friend that did it."

" Yes !" put in Bella. " Him with his fancy ways an' that big buck nigger he got with him, who I took into my own home like he was—"

West's face froze into a scowl, and he almost raised a fist. Jenkins trod hard on his toe, hoping the policeman would not notice, and smiled sunnily at the latter. " What an extraordinary story !" he said. " The woman must be deranged, don't you agree ?"

He wished he could see past Bella into the hallway of the house, but from the level of the road it was impossible. The constable made an entry in his open notebook, and then clapped it shut. " I'm afraid I must ask you all to come with me," he said. " Best thing for you, ma'm "—meaning Bella— " is to make a statement to the sergeant."

"I don't think I could go all that way after the shock I 'ad," said Bella with a convincing stagger, and Mrs. Ramsbottom chimed in in support of her. The wrangle was still going on when there was the sound of a car drawing up, and Jenkins glanced round.

" Praise be," he murmured to West. " It's Tom—the doctor I was talking to on the phone just now."

Gospell had a remarkably quick mind buried behind his mat of red beard and hair ; he declared his acquaintance with Jenkins, and heard the policeman briefly describe the situation.

" Well, I'm a doctor," Gospell declared, hefting his black bag in support of his statement. " Of course this woman's not fit enough to walk all the way to the police station after a shock like that. And it's stupid to keep her here on the doorstep in a dressing-gown on an evening as chilly as this." He went up the steps and took Bella's arm. " Come along, my dear," he said. " Let's get you in the warm and have a look at you."

Bella, sudden fright appearing in her eyes, tried to shake herself free, but this time Mrs. Ramsbottom chimed in on the other side. " Don't be silly, dearie !" she said. " If the kind gentleman's a doctor, you ought to be grateful to 'im !"

Jenkins breathed a sigh of quiet relief. After a moment's hesitation, the policeman nodded for him and West to go inside after Gospell. " If the doctor says she can't go to the station, I'll take her statement here," he said. " And get you to come along after."

Mrs. Ramsbottom, waddling indoors first, made to open the door of the sitting-room where Jenkins had been imprisoned.

" Not there, please !" said Bella in sudden panic, and alarms flashed in Jenkins's mind. " It'd remind me of my horrible experience," Bella was explaining, and Mrs. Ramsbottom, beaming understandingly, led the way to the kitchen at the back of the house instead.

Sally was probably in the sitting-room. Jenkins reasoned ; he tried to hang back so that he could open the door behind the constable's back, but the officer nodded him firmly into the kitchen.

And then, as he entered the room with Bella's arms still tightly gripped, Gospell displayed a trust in his friend's reliability which for ages afterwards made Jenkins go cold with awe at being so flattered. For—risking his professional standards being impugned if there was nothing to be seen—Gospel ripped the waist-cord of Bella's dressing-gown loose and flung the skirt of it up to expose her back.

There—crossed by two black-edged scars where Jenkins had slashed it with his pocket-knife—was the foul green growth.

Mrs. Ramsbottom screamed ; when she saw the green thing, she collapsed backwards against the kitchen table, her mouth working as if she was going to vomit. Bella snatched the hem of the dressing-gown out of Gospell's hands and tried to hit him across the mouth, but the doctor swayed his head back and she only brushed his beard. He was visibly shaken, but his presence of mind was unimpaired.

Turning to the constable, he said, " Sorry, officer—but did you see that green thing on this lady's back ? I had to take her by surprise to show it. It's what I suspected might be the case. She has a—uh—a very serious carcinomatous affliction of the nervous system, a rare condition but well enough recognised by medicine. I'm afraid she's proabaly subject to serious delusions."

" You mean she *imagined* she'd been tied up ?" said the policeman in amazement. " You mean—"

" That she didn't !" exclaimed Mrs. Ramsbottom, sitting up abruptly. " I saw her ! I let her loose !"

" Ah !" said Gospell. " But in this condition the lesions often lead to the most elaborate fantasy-building. Mrs. Rowall may well be completely convinced that she was tied up by the gentlemen here. In actual fact she tied herself up, I don't doubt, and tore her own dress."

The constable turned to Bella. " Well, ma'm ?" he said. " You heard what the doctor said—is what you told me true?"

" No, of course it's not true," Jenkins put in.

" How about your tie, then ?" Bella challenged, and put her hand to her mouth as if to thrust the words back.

" That's right !" said Mrs. Ramsbottom. " The gentleman hasn't got a tie, and a tie was used to fasten Mrs. Rowall's legs !"

" It'll be in the front room," she added, and got heavily to her feet as if to fetch it. But Bella, remembering what was in the front room, lost control for a moment and pushed her sharply to prevent her rising.

" Hold her !" snapped Gospell with extreme presence of mind. " She's liable to get violent. I'll give her a shot to calm her."

He dug in his bag, while the constable, Jenkins and West between them managed to hold Bella still. Shortly Gospell came over with a syringe filled in his hand.

" Novocaine," he said briefly, and lifted the dressing-gown aside to sink the needle directly into the green parasite.

After a moment, Bella's eyes grew glassy and vacant, and she went limp. They lowered her into a chair, and wiped the sweat from their faces.

XII

" Well, I must apologise to you two gentlemen," said the constable reluctantly. " I find it pretty hard to swallow that a woman could tie herself up and then claim it was two innocent men who did it—"

" It's not uncommon," said Gospell with an air of magisterial authority. " I've met it more than once in my practice as a doctor."

" Wonderful, isn't it ?" the policeman said. " It's just as well for these two gentlemen that you came along when you did, I reckon. Well—is it safe to leave the lady ?"

" I'll get this lady here to help get her in bed," Gospell said. " She'll probably have forgotten the whole thing when she wakes up. That shot I gave her will have made her sleep like a log."

Jenkins was questioning his own conclusions in his mind. If Mrs. Ramsbottom had released Bella from her bonds, and stood on the doorstep while calling for the policeman and then while talking to him, how could Rowall have put Sally in the sitting-room without her noticing and commenting ? Or—if it wasn't Sally in the sitting-room, *what was it* ?

He turned abruptly and went along the passage; the constable made a move to stop him and changed his mind. "Tom!" he called. "Come here, will you?"

Gospell had bent to examine the green growth; now he hurried to join Jenkins. In a tone too low—for once—to be overheard, he said, "Nick, you're quite right about that thing on her back. It's nothing like any cancer or parasite I ever saw! Where does it come from?"

"I suspect Sally could tell us," said Jenkins. "And I think that's why Rowall was so scared of her telling people what she knew—even though she didn't yet know how much she knew." He rattled the door. "Locked," he said. "We'll have to break it down."

"Let me," said Gospell, stepping back. To the accompaniment of a cry from the constable, demanding to know what they were up to, he charged the door full on his shoulder and sent the flimsy wood crashing aside.

For an instant the horror of the scene brought them to a dead stop, as though time itself had frozen.

On the couch across the room was Sally. Her dress and slip had been taken from her, so that her back was bare. She lay as if unconscious, her knees folded, facing the back of the couch. And squatting on the floor, with his back turned to Sally's, was Rowall, stripped to the waist. The apex of a green triangular parasite could be seen between his shoulder-blades. And from the parasite a pseudopod was extending tentacle-wise, gnawing, eroding, Sally's smooth fair skin.

Gospell was still thunderstruck by the sight when Jenkins recovered and dashed forward. He struck Rowall on the back of the head, so that he slumped forward, and the extended pseudopod was torn free, leaving a reddish, inflamed patch where it had rested, but nothing more.

Then, ignoring the feebly moaning man, Jenkins picked Sally up bodily and called her by name, terrified at what might already have happened to her. After a moment he saw her eyelids flicker.

"Nick! Oh, thank heavens you came!"

The constable demanded from the doorway to know what the hell was happening, and Gospell rounded on him. "Go back to your station and get every man you can around here," he ordered crisply. "You can start by saying we're preferring charges of kidnapping against Mr. and Mrs. Rowall, if you like—but take it from me, there's bigger things involved."

The constable's eyes bugged out, and Gospell saw he was very young. On an inspiration, he added, " White slave trading !" And the constable, awestruck, ran promptly from the house.

Seeing that Sally was in capable hands, Gospell bent to examine the thing on Rowall's back. The pseudopod was still waving vaguely in the air, hunting the flesh with which it had been in contact.

Setting Sally in the chair where Bella had not been tied—the other was foul with the stinking ichor, dried to blackness—Jenkins found her dress and put it over her cold body. She seemed fully awakened, but staring into space rather than looking at anything, and he spoke to her urgently.

" Sally ! Sally, my dear, are you all right ? Please ! Do you know why all this was done to you ?"

She nodded, and licked her lips. Her eyes fell on the green foulness on Rowall's back, and strangely, instead of revulsion for the parasite, her face revealed compassion for its victim. " Poor man !" she said. " Poor weak man !"

" Sally what was he going to do ? How did he get you away from my place ? How did he get you in here without Mrs. what's-her-name seeing you ?"

" He got me away quite easily. I had to go to the bathroom and he was waiting for me when I came back, standing by the door with a gun. I could have let him kill me then—it might not have mattered—"

" *Not have mattered* ?" The incredulous outburst was from Gospell. Sally gave him a wry smile.

" I'll make it clear in a moment. It would have wasted a chance, though. So I didn't want to risk it. Anyway, he—he put his hand on my arm, and I felt a sort of little prick, and after that I felt quite helpless. But there wasn't anything in his hand—no syringe or anything . . .

" I *had* to come here. I just had to. That was all there was to it. I had to come into this room—Bella was on the doorstep, and she didn't say anything to me. Mrs. Ramsbottom was hobbling off to the corner calling for a policeman, and I don't think she noticed me come in. Then I came in here and Bella locked the door. Later, after you'd arrived, Rowall came in and took my dress off and laid me down on the couch, and—and that's all I remember till you woke me up just now."

She got to her feet, a little unsteadily, and shook out her dress so that she could pull it over head. As she wriggled it down over her hips un-selfconsciously, Gospell demanded, " Look, do you know what these green things are ?"

Sally nodded. " That's why Rowall was so scared of what I might say. Or not Rowall, really—it was the green thing that was scared. Do you remember my telling you about the time I went into the mountain to offer myself in exchange for Iwys ?"

" Why—" A fantastic possibility clicked together in Jenkins's mind. " Why, that was why you came here, wasn't it ? Where is the creature ? Is there a basement under the house ?"

" There must be. Rowall was down there, I think, getting his parasite fertilised so that he could infect me." She spoke with the most amazing self-control and composure, and Jenkins exclaimed at it.

" Damn it, woman ! How can you take all this so—so frozenly ?"

" I was terrified at first, wasn't I ?" Sally smiled at him. " That was because I didn't know what I know now. I—I can remember a very great deal. Before this happened to me, I know one of my greatest ambitions was to go round the world ; I used to sit turning the leaves of an atlas and saying the names of the places I wanted to visit over and over — Hawaii, Fujiyama, Katmandu, Crete . . . But now I've got something infinitely better, something marvellous and wonderful, which maybe no one else as ever had."

" *What* are you, then—do you know ?" Jenkins had involuntarily taken a step back.

" Not for certain. But I can guess. What I do know for certain is that I'm human."

Gospell listened to this interchange with astonishment. " Nick, blast you and your crossword-puzzle mind ! For the lord's sake, tell me what this is all about !"

" I think we'd better go look in the cellar first," Jenkins countered. " We must have proof to show to the police when our friend who was here brings them round. There's a torch in my car—I'll go get it."

He was half out of the room when he glanced back. " What happened to our coloured friend ?" he said.

"In the kitchen stifling Mrs. Ramsbottom's embryo hysterics and keeping an eye on Mrs. Rowall," said Gospell. "Why?"

"*You* go and look after them—you're the doctor. I want him to be on hand at the finish. He deserves to be."

Gospell scowled, sighed, and gave in. When Jenkins came back from fetching his torch and other pieces of equipment he thought might be valuable, West and Sally were on the steps looking down into the narrow pit of the area before the house.

"There's a basement all right," West was saying. "But it was boarded up good and solid before I moved in here. I never noticed it much."

Jenkins's torch swept the covered-in windows. "Let's go down anyway," he said. "Damn' gates chained and padlocked —have to scramble over." He suited the action to the word, and West hoisted Sally over after him, her legs swinging high in the air. She dropped lightly on the slippery downward steps. Then the negro's lanky stature followed.

"Hold the torch, Sally, will you?" Jenkins said as he set the tools he had brought with a clanking sound on the stone flags. He selected a tyre lever and went for the nails holding the boards in place.

Three or four nails torn out sufficed to release the first board. Sally made to bring the torch closer and shine it into the basement, but an exclamation from West startled her into hesitation.

"Jesus! What's that—that green shining in there?"

"That's an invader from another planet," said Jenkins in as matter-of-fact a tone as he could manage. "It's the adult of the thing on Rowall's back. I *hope* it's the only one on Earth so far."

It was too much for West; all he could do was shake his head and make comprehending noises. Jenkins went for the nails again, and soon had the entire window clear. The green luminescence was unmistakable now; it was like the light of a green-burning fire.

He took the torch from Sally and played it into the basement. As if startled, *things* that waved like a forest of crazy ferns folded back from the light. A putrid smell like the smell of the ichor oozing from Bella Rowall's back assailed their noses.

Jenkins shoved the tyre lever under the window-frame and heaved with all his strength; the rusted latch creaked and

yielded, and he thrust the window up. A pane of glass, previously cracked, shattered and fell in shards.

" My God, the thing goes all the way through !" he said, turning the torch again. " Look, it's grown over the walls, and through into the rooms beyond—Sally, is this big, or is it still small ?"

" A full-grown one is as big as a house and weighs hundreds of tons," she answered, not explaining how she knew.

Inside the basement, the green-glowing alien flesh coated the floor, swelled up round the walls, branched into the frond-like excrescences, bulged into sac-like bladders and knotted, writhing hyphae. Jenkins felt his skin crawl as he stared at it.

" What's going on down there ?" snapped an official voice from street level. A torch much more powerful than the one Jenkins held jutted its beam down towards them and transfixed them with its light like pinned butterflies.

" Is that the police ?" Jenkins called up.

" Yes ! Inspector Dougherty. What's going on ?"

" I think you'd better come down and see for yourself—it takes quite a lot of believing. Mind the steps, they're rather slippery."

Grunting and puffing, a large man descended to them. " I never heard such a thing," he complained. " White slaving—a woman tying herself up and accusing innocent men of assaulting her—" He caught sight of the thing in the basement.

" What the hell is that ?" he exploded.

" Did you ever see anything like it before ?" Jenkins demanded.

" No ! Good God, no ! It's—it's revolting. Like a giant fungus, or something !"

" Not quite," said Jenkins levelly. " But now you've seen it, come upstairs and we'll show you its offspring, and then I want a chance to tell you the whole story without interruption, and a chance to get scientists here—biologists, who can pronounce on the truth of what we're going to tell you. Tell your men to surround the house and not to let anyone come too close to this thing. It's dangerous. It can infect people, like a disease. All right, let's go back up."

* * *

XIII

The inspector studied the thing on Rowall's back carefully. He also saw the one on Bella's back. They had carried her into the sitting-room and laid her on the couch beside her husband, not allowing them to be too close in case the parasites might be able to communicate without their hosts speaking.

Inspector Dougherty turned to Gospell. "And you're prepared to swear they aren't natural?" he said.

"That's not what I said," Gospell contradicted. "Of course they're natural. But I've seen the stuff they use for blood, and I've looked at some cells I cut from them under the pocket microscope I carry around, and I am prepared to swear that neither the cells nor the 'blood' ever evolved on Earth. They just aren't like ordinary protoplasm."

Dougherty gave a helpless shrug. "It's beyond me," he grunted. "But I'll have to take your word for it—that foul thing in the basement doesn't look natural to me. So you maintain that this thing came to Earth from some other world, planted itself, grew in the cellar, planted bits of itself on these people's backs—"

"And on the backs of the customers Mrs. Rowall picked up on the street," put in Jenkins. "Lord knows how many of them are spread through London now!"

"But—why didn't the Rowalls infect Sally right away?" demanded Gospell. "It would have been so much simpler than trying to drive her insane with worry and drink!"

"I suspect because the thing in the cellar only reproduces at certain times of the year." Jenkins nodded at Sally. "I think that's another of the things on which Sally can enlighten us. Still, we'll leave her story for a moment—it's at least twice as fantastic as the rest put together."

"But how about the men who—whom Mrs. Rowall brought here, who *didn't* get infected? How could they face a woman with a thing like that on her back?" Dougherty asked.

Gospell coughed. "Inspector, it's a regrettable fact, but there are quite a lot of men who are actually attracted to deformity and disease—Stekel records a case of a person who could only obtain pleasure from a kiss which tasted of pus and blood."

The inspector shuddered. "Thank God I'm reasonably normal," he said. "All right, I suppose I have to take a doctor's word on a point like that. I wish these two with the things on their backs could speak for themselves, though."

"I shot Mrs. Rowall's parasite full of novocaine," said Gospell. "I guessed that if it could survive on a human body it would probably also be subject to an anaesthetic which affects human nerve tissue. Seems I was right. That suggests a method of dealing with the one in the cellar, too—stab a sharpened length of inch diameter piping into it and pump it full of formalin or something of that sort. Or maybe we'd have to burn it out with neat sulphuric acid. I don't know—let the biologists get at it first, I guess."

He remembered that he had started out to answer a request from the inspector, and interrupted himself. "I don't know about Rowall, though. Let's try and wake him."

But slapping of Rowall's face produced no result, and Gospell tipped his body forward with a frown. "Good God!" he said. "Look—the thing's dying!"

Shrivelling, twisting away from the host flesh arond the edges, the green parasite seemed to be decaying before it was dead.

"Amazing!" Gospell muttered. "Must be because it was fertilised and couldn't reproduce itself after all—the surface is going all granular, as if the cells were multiplying too fast for the available nourishment."

He swung round. "Help me lay him face down on the floor, and we'll see if we can save his life," he snapped at West and Jenkins.

But when they had laid him down, it became clear that nothing could save Arthur Rowall. As the body of the parasite shrank away from his body, it could be seen that it had eroded its way into his spinal column, laying bare tiny holes through which its pseudopods had directly affected his nervous tissue. The pit left by the parasite's withdrawal was fully an inch deep, and raw, as if it had been flayed.

The thing was rounding into a ball, and Sally suddenly gave a warning cry. "Put it in something—something very strong!" she ordered. "A steel canister—anything! It's going to sporulate, and when it does that, it'll explode and throw its spawn all over the place!"

"What the devil *can* we put it in?" Jenkins snapped, looking helplessly round the roon.

"How long before it explodes?" Dougherty demanded of Sally.

"Ten minutes, maybe—perhaps less."

Dougherty turned to one of his men who was standing with a bemused expression at the side of the room. "Is there a foam fire-extinguisher on the van you came in?"

" No, sir—only a CTC one, the sort you pump."

" Would a dustbin be strong enough, if the lid was weighed down ?" Dougherty asked Sally. She gave a hesitant nod.

" This is a very small one—it might be."

" Right." Dougherty peeled off his coat and flung it over the parasite, which had now detached itself from the dying Rowall completely, and was assuming a spherical shape. "Out of the way !" he snapped, and charged from the room with the thing wrapped in his coat.

" There's a damn' brave man," said West appreciatively.

There was clanging among the dustbins outside the house, and then a tense silence, lasting a minute or two. More clanging ; something was being tied round the dustbin to keep the lid down. And a sudden thudding report, followed by a smashing noise.

They rushed to see what had happened, and met Dougherty, coatless, his face slightly dirty, coming back up the steps.

" Damn' thing went off before I had the lid fastened," he grunted. " But the dustbin acted like a gun-barrel, and whatever it was that came out went slap through the window into the basement, along with the lid, which bust the window out. As far as I can see, the basement is already crawling with the stuff, so no harm's done. Is it ?" He looked at Sally.

" No," she said with obvious relief. " Thank goodness for that, Inspector. It was very brave of you."

" Nothing of the kind !" snapped Dougherty. " To tell the truth, I didn't believe anything was going to happen at all. I want to know now, this moment, how the hell you—excuse me—how you knew that thing was going to go bang like that. I want to know how you know so much, in fact. And I'm going to tell myself I'm not dreaming as often as I can, but I feel as if I've walked into a science fiction nightmare, and I expect to see Frankenstein any moment now."

Sally hesitated. She looked very youthful and attractive, her hair a little untidy but honey-coloured and shining around her head, her eyes ringed with tiredness but blue and clear, her dress rumpled but emphasising her young, shapely body. She looked all wrong to be the person who held a secret on which the fate of more than one race might depend.

" All right," she said. " Come back in the sitting-room and I'll tell you the whole story."

They found Gospell laying Sally's discarded slip, for want of any other covering, over Rowall's prostrate body. In answer to an inquiring glance from Dougherty, the doctor nodded.

" Pretty well the moment you took that thing off him," he said. " Air got into his spinal column, the fluid drained off, and his brain stopped working. That's what it amounts to. If the thing on his wife's back survives the novocaine, though, I expect we can remove it under hospital conditions and at least give her a short lease of life."

Dougherty gave a comprehending nod, and turned to Sally. " Right," he said crisply. " Let's have it."

" Well, it begins a long time ago, and a very long way from Earth," said Sally, and as she spoke she seemed to be looking through space, through time, and seeing the events she was describing . . .

They grew, first of all, on a world where the people were very much like human beings. Very much indeed. They were vast, plant-like organisms, and because they were so huge and there was only one planet, they competed fiercely with each other for living-room. Perhaps by chance, perhaps as a weapon in the struggle for survival, they became intelligent.

They reproduced in two ways, essentially similar but not identical. First there was the normal way ; when the need to propagate the species moved them, they put forth tendrils and snared small animals at random, by planting a tiny thorn-like spike in their flesh. As soon as the spike entered their bodies, the animals felt an irresistible urge to go to the place where the creature grew—usually, in the heart of a mountain, or in a network of burrows and tunnels under a forest or plain. There the creature placed on them a bud from itself ; the bud, not truly intelligent but parasitic on the brain of the victim, detached from the parent, was taken by the limbs of the host to a new home, where it made its adopted body dig it a fresh tunnel. When the tunnel was dug, the creature used the animal's body as its first food.

When they became intelligent, they saw that the best hosts for their young were human beings ; therefore they sent their creeping tendrils often many miles to a human village or town and selected healthy, strong young people as carriers for the new-budded individuals.

There was also the second, emergency method of reproduction. When one of the creatures could not find suitable host animals for the fertilised buds, reflex caused the buds to develop differently from the normal pattern ; the cells multiplied wildly, generating gases and building up vast pressures

which at last burst forth, destroying the parent but hurling millions on millions of spawn-cells into the sky.

Possessed of a rudimentary instinct towards finding a host, armed with an evolution-born miracle which allowed them to sense a suitable animal over huge distances, the spawn drifted with the winds, hunting, seeking.

Over millennia, watching the human beings which now formed their sole source of host animals, the creatures learned much which they would not have discovered for themselves. On the planet where the creatures first grew, it was crowded ; no matter how carefully they chose hosts for their offspring, it was hard to find a place where an older-established growth was not already bleeding the earth of the essential minerals and organic residues on which the newly-planted buds would otherwise have fed. So most of the new plants starved to death ; so the depredation of the human beings reached a level at which it could be tolerated, and civilisation grew.

Being essentially unlike the things which preyed on them, the human-like race inquired about the nature of the universe. Watching them, always watching them, listening to them, the predators learned of other worlds in space, learned of the possibility of other planets suitable to them.

Being, as has been said, essentially unlike human beings, the predators could pass some at least of their acquired knowledge to their descendants ; They had earlier deliberately developed their offspring so as to make them ideally suited to use human hosts, and now they likewise developed their offspring to adapt to any species similar to the one on their home-world.

Then, calculatingly, deliberately, they deprived certain of their number of the opportunity to find hosts. Reflex took over ; controlled, held back for as long as possible. Until—explosion, an explosion which rocked the planet, gave rise to blasting, boiling winds that laid waste whole forests and many human cities.

" And," said Sally very softly, " that was how the Yem set off to conquer the universe. For they had not merely—taught, you might say ; yes, taught their offspring to use races of other worlds as hosts. Subtly, no one quite understands how, they had used the human-gained knowledge of the nature of the universe to teach their spawn how to drift from star to star on radiation-pressure. The journeys took millennia, at first, until evolution fined down unsuitable characteristics. When it had done its work, the spawn of the Yem was perfectly adapted to spread throughout the cosmos."

XIV

" But I still want to know how you know all this !" blazed Dougherty. " All right, you fit all the facts together very neatly. I presume that when these Yem, as you call them, got to Earth, they found human beings like us suitable, and one of them planted itself in the cellar here and used the Rowalls to provide it with hosts for its—its buds. But how do you know ?" His voice was almost pleading. " Or is it all wild guessing ?"

Sally shook her head. " Not at all. You see, the Yem had another reason for wishing to conquer the universe, besides simply the need to propagate their kind. They were afraid of revenge.

" Maybe they made the discovery when they used human beings as hosts for their buds—after all, the parasites directly contact their hosts' nervous systems. Probably it was then that they discovered something the human beings themselves didn't know. Sealed off from consciousness by the terrifying, mind-shaking experience of *being born* after having died, there were memories. The wrong memories."

In fact, without the knowledge that these memories existed in human minds, the Yem would not have undertaken their incredible task of spreading across the lightyears. They knew that the people they used as hosts recalled lives on other planets than their own ; what the Yem feared was that on some other world, a human might remember how his own kind had been preyed upon, and determine to set his alien cousins free . . .

If the Yem had not spread, leaving their own world, it would never have happened. Yet the certain knowledge that there were races like their victims drove them to their fate.

They had already been hurling their spawn between the stars for thousands on thousands of years when they were, for the first time, discovered by a race that came to meet them—a race very far advanced in all the sciences, including those of the mind. Visiting a Yem-infected world when they started to explore space, this race—green-scaled, graceful, too far different from their cousins to become a prey to the Yem themselves, but like enough to them to sympathise and wish to set them free—determined that somehow it must halt the onward surge of the parasitical monsters.

Their study of possible tactics led them first to the discovery of the hidden memories locked in their subconscious—for they shared in this fantastic pool of inter-racial memory too—and then to the ironical fact that the danger the Yem feared, the possibility of one of their victims recalling what had been done to him on an alien planet, was negligible, for the experience brought madness before death, and madness so distorted the hidden memories that even if they were made available to consciousness consciousness could not comprehend them.

But then they investigated the nature of the thing which conveyed the memories from mind to mind, and found that it was not an entity but a sort of resonance. They could not define or isolate it ; all they could say was that it was a frame of reference set up by certain brain-reactions—and those reactions included the things that set aside humanity in all its multiplicity of bodily forms : the capacity for love, the appreciation of beauty, the need to inquire into the universe's nature.

And, though they could not isolate this thing that passed from personality to personality, they could direct it. So they did. They taught each of their own kind by skilled psychological instruction how to bring his or her own memories to light ; then, how to bring them to light in the mind of the inheritor of them, if the planet on which the inheritor lived was a victim to the hordes of the Yem. In this way, the green-scaled and graceful race could multiply its own efforts a millionfold; it was not numerous enough to undo the millennia-long work of the Yem alone, but it could give its cousins the knowledge needed to save them.

So the lovely—girl—who had died on a lonely outpost in space had not truly died ; she lived in Sally's memory, and through Sally she would save Earthborn humanity from the Yem.

" I've remembered everything," Sally said quietly. " I was walking to Paddington Station to go and spend the night with a friend in the country—that was why I had an overnight bag with me, and quite a lot of money. I was passing near this house and somehow I sensed the presence of the Yem in the basement. That triggered the memories. And I must have been half out of my mind with revulsion and fear. All I knew was that I had to get close to it, find out what it was.

" Rowall must have known—or rather, the thing controlling him—that the danger the Yem had so long feared threatened

their tenuous beachhead on Earth. I think Rowall was probably a much less intelligent man than his wife, who saw that the only way to put a stop to me was to drive me, or rather simply let me drive myself, insane. Rowall's choice was to kill me out of hand ; as he said, make me look for another body. His wife, though, wanted to make sure I couldn't repeat the feat of remembering on some other planet. And driving me mad was the only way to insure that."

She looked at Dougherty. " Well ?" she said. " I have to admit that I never thought anyone would believe me—till I met Nick here, who not only believed me but I think saw the whole truth before I told him. Didn't you, Nick ?"

Jenkins took off his glasses and rubbed them with his handkerchief. " I wouldn't say that," he answered cautiously. " But I have an odd sort of mind—Tom says it's a crossword-puzzle mind. I sort of have the knack of putting two and one-and-a-half together . . . Yes, nothing you've said contradicts what I'd guessed."

" But good lord !" said Dougherty, staring. " If this *is* true, even if we poison the thing in the cellar, how the hell do we track down all the customers of Mrs. Rowall's who've been infected ?"

West, who had been listening in silence from near the door, spoke up. " I think I can tell you, Mister Inspector," he ventured. " I've been living here for quite a while, and I've often been worried about whether I ought to tell the police Rowall—poor devil !—was living off what his wife brought in . . . Anyway, one time I did some prowling when they were out, and if you go into the bedroom next door to here, you'll find a tin box with some names and addresses on bits of paper. I thought they might maybe be regular customers' names; now I'm pretty sure they're the people the Rowalls managed to plant their parasites on."

" Go and look and bring 'em in here !" snapped Dougherty, and the constable who stood beside West obeyed smartly. In a moment he came back, with the tin box.

" Found it in plain sight," he said.

Dougherty riffled through the contents. " All right, we'll investigate some of these people. If I get this straight, we can assume that they've probably died a filthy death in some burrow dug for the benefit of the thing on their back—right?" Sally nodded. " I'll tell Missing Persons at the Yard to see if

the names here match their files ; if they do, and if the scientists agree with Dr. Gospell here that this thing in the cellar isn't from Earth, then we'll start digging for the others and burn or poison them."

He turned to go out, head bent over the list of names in the box. As he was on the point of departure, he glanced back. " I *still* don't really believe it," he said in an aggrieved tone, and vanished.

Clyde West shook his head. " Man, this is straight from marijuana," he said with a deep sigh. " But it hangs together for me. I don't know 'bout you, but my belly's getting acquainted with my backbone, and if they bring in scientists and so forth we're going to have a damned busy time answering questions. I got some food in my room—eggs, bread and butter, and I got coffee. Can I interest anyone ?"

" Not me, thanks," Gospell answered. " I'm going to get the body out of here, and then Mrs. Rowall to hospital and see if the surgeons can pull that thing off her back."

" Nick ? Sally ?" West looked inquiringly at them.

" Why," said Jenkins, almost surprised, " yes, please ! I'd clean forgotten that I originally went out to buy something for supper. I'm starved."

" Right," said West cheerfully, and they heard him clatter up the stairs. Halfway to the top of the first flight, he halted and looked at them through the broken-open door.

" Man, was I ever a lucky s-o-b ! Suppose they'd been short of customers to put these things on—they might have stuck one on me . . ." But he seemed more relieved at the escape than upset by the possibility, and even began to hum as he went on upstairs.

Ambulance men came and removed first Bella Rowall, then Rowall's dead body, draping Sally's slip over a chair and covering the corpse with one of their red blankets. They pulled the door to behind them as well as they could, and left Jenkins alone with Sally.

" I forgot to get the toothbrush, too," Jenkins ventured, and she gave him a tired smile, picking up her slip and looking to see if it had been stained by being put over Rowall's corpse. She brushed a little dust off it, and shivered slightly.

" Would you mind holding the door shut ?" she said. Jenkins, assuming that the shiver was due to a draught, obliged, setting his back to the panels to hold the broken door closed.

" Just want to put this thing on," Sally explained, dropping the slip over the chair again to leave her hands free as she pulled her dress up. " It's chilly in here."

Startled, Jenkins began to say something about going out of the room if she wanted him to. Sally shook her head free of the dress and picked up the slip.

" Don't be silly," she said, selecting the cleanest part of the carpet on which to step into it. " You saw me in my undies when you rescued me from Rowall's parasite, didn't you ? In actual fact "—she put her arms through the shoulder-straps and wriggled to settle the garment around her body—" you did a lot more than look."

A mischievous twinkle accompanied the words, and was still there when her head disappeared into her dress again. When she next was able to look at him, however, her expression was serious.

" Nick," she said, " I'd just like to tell you something. I don't know if it's your peculiar two-and-one-and-a-half sort of mind, or what, but you've been wonderful to me, and if you hadn't believed me when I told you a crazy-sounding story, I think I really would have gone out of my mind. It still seems pretty fantastic to me, even though I got the whole thing straight in my head before Rowall came and caught me at your place."

Jenkins felt slightly embarrassed, and tried a modest laugh which didn't come off.

" So—well, I'd like to remind you of what I said before. I said there was one thing I was absolutely sure of—do you remember what it was ?"

" That you were completely human," Jenkins quoted correctly.

" That's right. Would you like me to prove it ? Don't say no, because I'm going to." She patted her hair back about her head. " You'd better stay where you are, in case someone tries to interrupt."

And she walked up to him and kissed him firmly and very pleasantly on the mouth. After a moment, he put his arms around her, and proceeded to establish that she was not only entirely human, but entirely feminine as well.

" If you did that purely out of gratitude," Jenkins said in a slightly breathless tone, " you ought to do it to Tom as well, for being open-minded enough to accept this fantastic story and strip off Bella Rowall's dressing-gown the way he did, and to

Clyde West for saving my life when she had a gun pointed at me, and Inspector Dougherty for risking being blown up by that thing in the dustbin, and—"

" Grub up !" said West cheerfully from the stairs. " I'm going to put it on a tray and bring it down." He paused, and finished with a chuckle, " I noticed you'd shut the door."

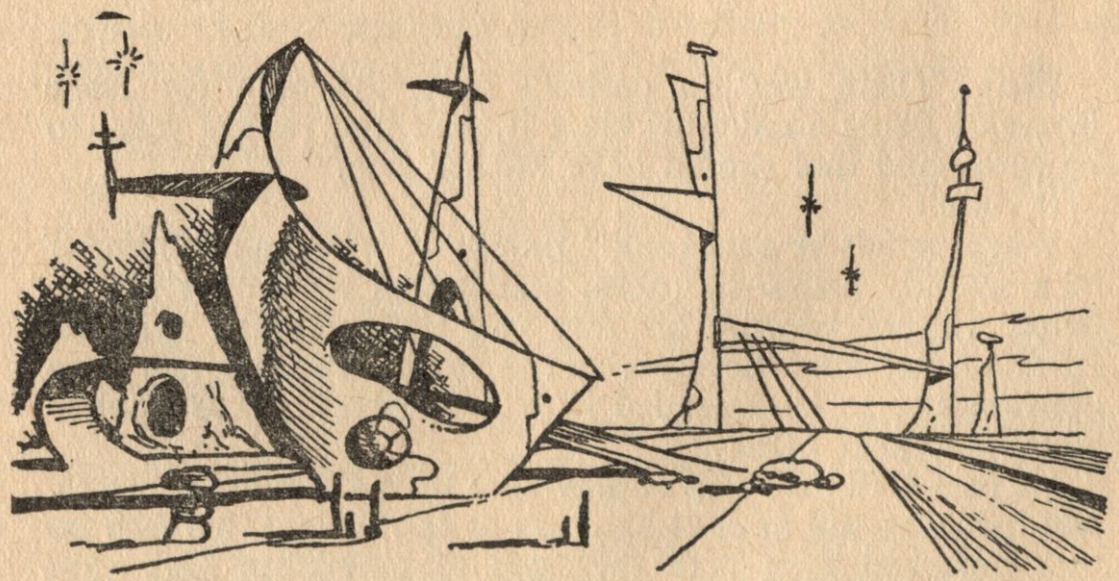
" Aren't people nice ?" said Sally with a contented sigh, and turned towards the middle of the room.

"Jenkins ! You there ?" Dougherty's voice called. " Could you come down to the basement right away ? And bring Miss Ercott with you—we've got a biologist here who wants to—"

" *And* considerate," said Jenkins in mock disgust. " What do we do—tell him to bring the food outside ?"

Sally pulled a face, the *moue* turned into a smile, and arm-in-arm they went out to explain how to save mankind.

—John Brunner



If you discovered something which all humanity ought to have—but apparently didn't believe in, or want—how would you go about introducing it to them? And how frustrated might you become before the goal is reached? If ever!

THE LONG EUREKA

BY ARTHUR SELLINGS

1820. There was no dashing from the bath for Isaac Reeves. Being a cautious man, it took him twenty years to be sure—and that should have warned him.

It didn't.

When he felt he could say "Eureka!" it was all to himself in a scantily furnished room, and it was no louder than a fierce whisper because his rent was three months overdue. In any case, after twenty years it sounded rather less than appropriate, so he amended it to "Quotha! I was right!" which sounded better.

He peered in the scrap of glass that served him for a mirror. His hair was still as soot-black as at thirty-eight, his face no more marked than with the lines of fanaticism and want which had been there two decades before. He took from a worm-eaten press his thirty year old best grey breeches and jacket, bore the Flask reverently from the shelf and set off for London and the Royal Society.

1822. He was ushered, his grey suit rumpled and threadbare by now, into the presence of the President of the Royal Society, Sir Humphrey Davy.

" Ah, Mr. Reeves. Take a seat. I understand you fancy to have discovered a new manner of catching salmon."

" Well, no sir," said Isaac stoutly. " I have discovered the great dream of all chemists—the Elixir of Life."

" What's that, sir ?" Sir Humphrey roared, his face purpling. " But my man Sydney—"

" A stratagem," Isaac explained airily. Then his confidence, which, like his suit, had worn woefully thin, crumbled. "Please, sir, listen to me. I had to think of some way, and I knew of your interest in salmon fishing. I've been trying for two years to see you. But they told me that Elixirs were on the black list, like Touchstones and Perpetual Motion Machines, so—"

Sir Humphrey gave a spluttering sigh. " Very well, Mr. Reeves, I'll give you two minutes. The study of error may occasionally be of service on the hard road to Truth. Mmmm, I must remember that. Now, Mr. Reeves, Natural Philosophy concerns itself with the discovery of the rules of the Universe, not with the quest for chimerae. A Perpetual Motion Machine, indeed !"

Isaac coughed. " An Elixir, sir. Mine is an Elixir."

" *Hrumph*, yes. Alchemy, sir, sheer alchemy. It is a sad tribute to this wonderful age of discovery in which we live that so many young men are led astray by wild dreams."

" I am not a young man. I am sixty years of age."

The savant peered at Isaac nervously. " Yes, Mr. Reeves, I'm sure. Ah—on what do you base your . . . your Elixir." He held the word at arm's length.

Isaac eagerly seized what he thought was his chance. " I take the active principle of pitchblende, sir, and—"

" The active principle of pitchblende ? You refer to uranium ?"

" Well, no sir. To a substance which I have refined from the mineral and which behaves very strangely. For one thing—"

" Thank you, Mr. Reeves," said Sir Humphrey coldly. "We are plainly in the realm of alchemy, as I surmised. Your two minutes have lapsed, sir. Be so good as to depart."

" But, listen, sir, I beg you. I have it here. I—"

" Sydney ! *Sydney* ! "

Sydney entered, all six feet seven of him . . .

1827. They met in a locked room over *The Creaking Bedstead* tavern by Bishopsgate. At last Isaac had the confidence of his workmates. Forced to work for a living, and having no experience at all, he had laboured in a brewery for the past five years. It was back-breaking. But he was patient. By now he had learned to be.

"At last," he announced to the six of them, "I can tell you."

They looked at him conspiratorially from behind great tankards.

"Yes, my friends, I have worked with you for long enough now to know that I can trust you. The time has come to share my secret."

"*A-ah*," they growled expectantly.

"Together we shall go forward," said Isaac, waxing eloquent. "Nothing shall prove impossible to us. We shall be the spearhead of a great movement that will grow and grow until the whole world shall marvel—until the whole world shares our dream!"

His listeners looked at each other with a kind of glory in their eyes. In the chorus of acclamation, a wild-eyed Welshman hissed to his neighbour, "There's one for you, Idris bach. The gift of tongues he has. He will be the leader of the workers' movement."

"Yes, my friends," said Isaac, "and here it is." He withdrew the flask of clear liquid from his coat and held it up. "One dose nightly for a week and we shall be sharers of the secret. One man's example is not enough, I have learned that. But together—" he looked from face to face—"together we . . . we . . ."

He faltered. Something was wrong, the way they were looking at him—

The way they were closing in.

1830. "Oh, Isaac," the moon-faced blonde simpered, "I'd do anything for you, anything at all. I'd die with you, Isaac, if you asked me."

Isaac trembled with the knowledge that the moment for which he had striven for many months had arrived. "But . . . will you *live* with me, Agnes, for ever?"

"Oh, Isaac, you mean . . . marriage?"

"Well, not exactly that, I—"

He recoiled, staggering.

" That's for you, you rake !" the blonde shrieked. " And that and that— "

1832. " 'Ere, what's this ?" exclaimed the moon-faced blonde. This was another moon-faced blonde—the fifth, to be precise—moon-faced blondes being the mode just then. " Me gin don't 'alf taste queer. What you done to it ?" Her stupid eyes widened. " I know ! You're one of them body-snatchers. Help, police ! Police !"

1838. " Well, Reeves," the Governor said. " In a minute or two you'll be free. Now, look after yourself. You're not at all the usual run we get in here—cutpurses and whore-mongers. Heaven only knows what came over you that night six years ago, committing assault on a common alley woman. What's the trouble, man, eh ? The usual one, drink ? "

" Yessir. I mean, no sir. Look, in my term here I haven't said a word about it, ever since they laughed at me at the trial. I didn't want to cause any more trouble. But I'm beginning to get fed up with it all. Why can't somebody, just *one* person, believe me ? "

The governor, who was a kinder man than his job allowed him to seem, nodded sympathetically at Isaac's obvious distress.

" What was it ? Some kind of medicine you claimed to have invented, wasn't it ?"

" Medicine ?" Isaac said scornfully. " It's the Elixir. One dose a night for a week and anyone can become immortal. Barring violent accidents, of course."

" Mm-mm, a large claim."

" I know. But—you remember me when I was brought here six years ago. Have I changed ?"

" We-ell." The governor peered at him. " No, I can't say you have. But, then, what's six years ? Some of my men—" he spoke with almost parental pride—" have been in here fifty."

" Perhaps," said Isaac impatiently. " But how old do you think I look ?"

" I don't know, about forty, forty-two, I suppose."

" Well, I'm actually seventy-six."

" Yes, you claimed that when you were admitted, that you were born in 1762. But, you know, anybody—"

"I know," said Isaac wearily. "Anybody can claim that. Don't you think I've heard it often enough? And when I tell them they can look up the entry of my birth in the Dunmow parish register, they say, 'Ah, but how do we know that's you? It could be your grandfather, or anybody.' That's the kind of thing I've had to put up with for eighteen years now."

"But can't you find anybody who knew you when you were a lad—who could testify to your claim?"

Isaac shuddered with mortification. "No. For one thing we lived in the heart of the country, miles from anywhere. Anybody who did know me would be dead now—or so doddering nobody would ever believe them."

"Yes, I see that. It's deuced awkward."

"*Awkward*! It's tragic. So is the fact that I can't even demonstrate with short life-cycle animals—it's fatal to any creature but a man." Isaac's face knotted. "But I'll show them yet. I'm a genius, and I'm immortal. I won't be thwarted. I'll—"

He saw the alarmed look on the governor's face and subsided. "One man of intelligence is all I want. You, sir, will you try it? If you'll hand over my bundle of belongings now. Thank you. I have a bottle here. Just try it."

The governor edged away in his chair. "No, I don't think so, Reeves, thank you. In my position, you understand—"

"I understand," Isaac said wearily. "Everybody's the same."

The governor brightened. "I tell you what, Reeves. Why don't you go out to one of the new lands being opened up? Australia, say. No, better not Australia—most of the inhabitants there have been sentenced to hard labour for life; they might not fancy that term being extended. I know, *America*. There's a country for you. Pushing the frontiers out like madmen. New horizons opening up. New creeds. I hear they'll listen to the craziest things out there . . . I mean—"

But Isaac hadn't heard the unwitting slight. His brain had just caught fire.

1842. *New York*. Isaac had been here for over three years now. But he hadn't got any further. He was rapidly getting disillusioned. These Yankees were certainly open to new creeds, but there were so many of the latter about now, from Mormonism to Spiritism, that his own simple call to faith

had been elbowed aside. People wanted something fiercer, more ecstatic.

But there had been one prize, thanks to a chance discovery by a drunken fellow-inmate of a cheap rooming-house. The Elixir, rubbed into the feet, was a sovereign remedy for corns. The demonstrability of this function, while in painful contrast to the utter indemonstrability of its primary one, at least served to keep penury at bay, while enabling Isaac to build up stocks of the precious fluid. But he was no nearer his goal of a race of Immortals.

And then he had an idea.

Quelling a natural reserve that made him shrink from making an exhibition of himself, he resolved now to do just that. He went to see Phineas T. Barnum.

"I," he announced to the great showman, "am eighty years old."

Barnum blew a cloud of cigar smoke. "I'm Phineas T. Barnum."

"You don't understand. I want you to put me on show. I'm eighty years old."

"I heard you. You don't look a day over forty."

"That's the point," Isaac beamed.

Barnum groaned. "Look, mister. I don't care if you're two hundred and eighty. You look forty. So do millions of other people. You got to have something people can see. Like my latest find, General Tom Thumb. He's twenty-five inches high and can dance the polka. What can you do?"

"Well . . . I can sing. I could sing *God Save The Queen* if . . . if you think it would help."

His words died. One look at Barnum's face was enough. Isaac turned on his heel and slunk away, knowing that he had failed again.

1843. The great idea came to him in broad daylight on 42nd Street. He had passed, not long since, a great open-air revivalist meeting. Somewhere in his mind, that and a memory of that interview with Phineas T. Barnum, which still rankled, set up a chemical reaction.

This time he shouted "*Eureka* !" at the top of his voice, causing a brewer's team to take to furious flight, dray and drayman and all.

Three days later Isaac was ready. The covered wagon was waiting, plastered with signs and loaded with provender and

supplies of what was now labelled as Dr. Reeves's Wonderful Elixir. A single dubious horse made up the outfit. That and a buxom but surprisingly supple dancer whom he had enticed from a saloon. Her name was Boneless Bertha, and she could play *Yankee Doodle* on a tin whistle while tying herself in a knot.

He set off for the Golden West in high spirits.

This was where the real men would be—the men destined to be the New Men. New York was just the same as London—dedicated to the pursuit of money and the fleshpots, its horizons already pulled in upon itself. But out here—with Boneless Bertha to pull in the crowds wherever they stopped, why, with the years the whole West would be sprinkled with the New Men.

He tagged on to the end of a wagon train and followed it as it lumbered straight across the plains.

It went straight until nightfall when it pulled off into a circle. And then Isaac, whose view up to now had been confined to the back of the wagon in front, felt heavy in his chest. He could see now the signs that were spread along the sides of at least half the wagons. One read *Doctor Abanazer's Magic Show and Oriental Elixir.* Another proclaimed *Professor Kenworthy's Life and Hair Restorer Show,* another *Lord Samson's Electric Pills ; Astonishing Feats of Strength.*

Isaac wearily took hold of the reins again and pulled his horse round.

"Hey, when do we eat?" came the plaintive voice of Boneless Bertha from the rear.

"Not till we get right back to New York," Isaac told her, choking with frustration.

1844. Isaac had his chest tattooed all over with a crossed Old Glory and Union Jack, dated and signed by the tattooist. He then had the tattooist sign a statement, witnessed by a notary public, and issued a brief resume of his career to the New York papers, which some of them, it being August and a dead time for news, printed, not without facetious comment.

Isaac, undeterred, pasted them in a scrap-book, locked up his supply of Elixir and took a job as a clerk in a dry goods store. He was immortal. He could wait.

1845 - 1895. He waited.

1896. He walked into a newspaper office, his scrap-book confidently under one arm.

" I am Isaac Reeves," he announced to the editor, placing the scrap-book on his desk. " I am one hundred and thirty-four years old." He removed his jacket and started to unbutton his shirt.

" Wait !" cried the editor. He pulled open a cabinet and threw down a file.

" Confirmation !" Isaac exulted.

" Yeah, seven times over."

" Wha—what's that ? "

" You're the eighth. Tattoo, clippings, the lot."

" But— but—" Isaac stuttered, his indignation mixed with incredulity that anybody in his right senses would voluntarily take on a task which he himself was forced to.

" It's the notoriety," said the newspaperman, as if reading Isaac's thoughts. " You type of people just lap it up, don't you ? "

" I'm not any type of people," said Isaac haughtily. " I'm Isaac Reeves, and if I thought it would knock any sense into you I'd ram that file down your throat."

" Ah ah, careful, grandpa. Old bones, you know."

1907. In his room, in his seventy-ninth rooming-house, Isaac asked the nine hundred and fiftieth person, " Why don't *you* try it ?"

This time it was Jevins, a fellow-boarder. Jevins was fortyish, a philosophical kind of man who had retired young on the royalties from a typewriter patent. He was one of the more intelligent people of whom Isaac had asked the question.

Jevins plucked at his right ear-lobe.

" Come on," Isaac insisted. " You've known me for ten years now. You know I'm not a crank. All right, I'm a crank on one thing only. But I'm normal enough otherwise, aren't I ?"

" That's how it is with most people," Tom said drily.

Isaac started to feel annoyed, but quelled it.

" All right. But what beats me is this : I offer you what I've offered hundreds of people before—the chance to be immortal like me. Seven doses, and you'll never get a day older. Yet you've refused a dozen times. *Why* ? "

" I'm a Republican. Have *I* ever convinced *you* ? "

" *Please.* This is surely more vital. This isn't politics. *This* you can prove."

" The same way you have ?" He saw the hurt look in Isaac's face. " Sorry, but isn't that what all those other people must have thought ? ' If it works, why isn't this man famous ?' "

" If you're so clever why ain't you rich, in other words," Isaac said bitterly.

" I guess so. You see, all the time all kinds of people are trying to convince a person that they have *the* solution. So a person soon builds up a resistance. And a claim like yours— "

" So you simply don't believe me," Isaac said huffily.

" Aw, don't make me feel awkward. It's a matter of faith. It's never any good arguing with people about faith."

" Hell !" Isaac exploded. " If it only made hair sprout on the spot !"

Jevins shook his head sadly. " You've got a long-term claim. So I'm afraid you've got a long-term job of convincing on your hands. But how old d'you say you are? Nearly hundred and fifty ? Surely you could have settled down long enough to convince someone ? Didn't you ever marry ?"

Isaac's laugh was hollow.

" Question two first : I couldn't marry a woman unless I could persuade her to try the Elixir—otherwise . . . well, I mean, it's bad enough meeting everybody else's disbelief without having to live with it."

" I can understand that."

" And marriage is for life. Two mutually opposed facts."

" Ah," said Jevins sagely.

" Question one : I know I *ought* to have settled down. Heaven knows, I've tried. But can you imagine what it's like when you know you've always got a lifetime in front of you ? But every place you settle, you start trying to convince people. Then, sooner or later, you look around and know that you've become just a neighbourhood joke. Then you think, *To hell with 'em. Somewhere there'll be someone who'll believe.* And you move on."

He reached under his bed and pulled out a battered case. " Which is what I'm going to do right now."

Jevins plucked him by the sleeve. " I'd like to believe you. Honest I would. I've known you for ten years. Come back

in ten more. To the day. Fifth of December, 1918. I'll know by then."

Isaac was tempted to tell him what he could do with that offer, but he rather liked Jevins—at least he had given him an insight into the anatomy of disbelief. So he stretched out a hand.

" Okay, you're on. Take a good look at me, the way I am now. Then you'll be sure."

1918. *December fifth.* Isaac turned up. Jevins was just leaving—in a light oak box with brass handles.

1951. It came to him one May morning at breakfast.

He was pondering mournfully on the fact that if he had only been able to go on cramming knowledge into his brain these past hundred and eighty-nine years, he could astound the world with his learning and convince it that way. But, alas, the human brain was like a full bath-tub ; knowledge was always running in, but the bath kept slopping over to the same extent.

Even his memory of past events and of such notabilities as he had met became dimmer than the picture a reader could get from an old newspaper.

While his thoughts maundered on like this, he was loading cereal into his mouth, spoon by spoon.

He stopped suddenly.

He reached for the garishly coloured cereal packet. It read *KRUM, New heavenly flavour. YUM-YUM, KRUM.*

And yet—he grimaced—it tasted like chaff. But people clamoured for it. Its heavenly taste was extolled on radio and television, working on millions of subconsciouses—including his own. That absurd phrase *YUM-YUM, KRUM* had been implanted on his mind as surely as the sound track on a record.

All over, things were being sold like that. He had got used through the years to the increasing cunning of advertisers. Now they could sell a name—*any* name—and a segment of the population would buy the name and use it as directed, like automata.

So say he made no claims at all now. Just . . . *ZIPPO, A SNIPPO.* How about that ? Mm-mm, no. Ah ! *JIGGITY —HOT DIGGITY.*

Yes.

Isaac's idea of a slogan may have been primitive, but his enthusiasm for the new idea was immense. He had labels and packs printed, display stands made, then prevailed upon a neighbourhood grocer to give it a show.

Since the grocer was not long out of Italy, and America was a wonderland where a madman like this actually offered you money to display his goods, he agreed readily.

" But what ees eet, dees Jee-*geet*-ee ?"

" Entirely new product," explained Isaac glibly. " The seven-day wonder food. Biggest promotion tie-up in history."

The first day one bottle was sold.

" Biggest how you say ?" asked the grocer sarcastically, when Isaac came in at closing time. But Isaac didn't mind the sarcasm. He was wondering just who the new Immortal-to-be was.

He soon learned. The purchaser had been a woman, who had tried it on her dog. The dog curled up. A race developed between the city health department and the police as to who would catch up with Isaac first. In fact, Isaac, journeying hopefully to the store the next evening, saw the crowd milling outside.

Forewarned by the disasters of two centuries, he caught the next train out for Chicago. He learned the facts from the paper next morning.

1957. Televised test on a lie detector. Statement : " I am one hundred and ninety-five years old."

To the huge laughter of the studio audience, the needle gave an almighty kick. Isaac went away and wept. Even he was beginning to doubt the truth now.

1960. *June 30th.* Headline :

MAN FROM FLYING SAUCER
CLAIMS HE IS IMMORTAL
PROMISES IMMORTALITY TO ALL MEN

July 5th. Headline :

SAUCER METHUSELAH UNMASKED
Notorious Crank Isaac Reeves

July 7th. News item : Los Angles. Saucer man is not even Isaac Reeves, claims local man who says *he* is Isaac Reeves. Claims that his name is Americanized form of original ISK-

REVAS, that he is ten thousand years old, was born in Atlantis, and that *he* doesn't need a flying saucer. States loftily, " I teleport to Mars most weekends."

1999. Isaac was one of the first to volunteer for the new Reinsen total recall aparatus. *This* would show them, he thought grimly, and tried to imagine their faces when the machine would start tapping out memories of two hundred years ago.

The apparatus blew up on the third run, killing the unfortunate volunteer. Isaac had been next in line. The line was sent home and the apparatus sealed to await a Government enquiry. Which was as good as an eternal ban, thought Isaac.

He was right.

2103. The news broke over the world—the first star-ship was planned. Ready in two years, it would take two centuries to reach Proxima Centauri. Volunteers of good health and both sexes would be called for to maintain the population of the ship in transit.

Here was Isaac's big chance. He took it.

The officials were painfully patient.

" Mr. Reeves, you offer to treat all the crew with your preparation. But how would we be sure it would work ?"

Isaac fought down a nightmare feeling that this was where he had come in. " I'm the proof."

The officials smiled tolerantly. " We're sorry, Mr. Reeves."

" Well, treat them anyway," he implored. " It will prove my claim at last. I can wait. And it won't do any harm."

" Yes, but say it *did* work. Don't you think the ship would get rather overcrowded ?"

Isaac slumped. Either way he lost. Three hundred and forty-one years and it came to this. He felt suddenly world-weary.

" I feel world-weary," he said.

" You do ? Then why not volunteer for the flight yourself ?" The response hadn't been heartening so far. A lot of people wanted to leave Earth, but not if it meant never arriving anywhere. The leading official dug his elbow in Isaac's ribs. " We'll stretch the age limit in your case."

" Why, yes !" Isaac cried. " Proof at last !"

2105. *Star-ship I* took off to a great roar from the five million crowd assembled for the epoch-making event.

2304. Isaac prepared for planetfall on the second planet of Proxima Centauri . . . single-handed. It had to be that way because the rest of the crew had dwindled with each generation, out of disease and sheer boredom, until he was the only one left.

It was a ticklish job on his own. But Isaac was confident he could make it. Although in the six months since his last shipmate had been despatched via the airlock, he had often wondered if there were any point left in going through with it. *Unless—*

2305. Isaac stepped out onto a fair world. The local inhabitants were not long in arriving—six-legged purple beasts. Isaac's heart drooped as they came up over the horizon. Then—joy of joys—as they came nearer he could see that they had riders. Bipeds ! And *humanoid* !

They seemed peaceable, too.

Isaac got back on the landing ramp to give himself vantage.

" I am Isaac Reeves from Earth," he announced. " I am five hundred and forty-three years old. I am the discoverer of the famous Elixir. One dose nightly for a week and you can be immortal like me."

And he didn't worry at all that a year and a week would be entirely different here, not even whether he could get the raw materials. The star-ship officials, such was the infuriating two-headedness of disbelief, had been most vigilant in seeing that he took none of the Elixir on board. But Isaac was past all that by now. He didn't even care that the natives couldn't understand a word of what he was saying.

All that mattered was that they were listening reverently. Give him a few months and Great God from Stars would learn the language well enough to tell them so they *would* understand. And he'd find the ingredients here, he was sure of that ; this place was so like Earth in every other respect. Yes, just a few months . . .

2307 Terran calendar. It had taken rather longer. The language, like the natives, was a perplexing mixture of the primitive and the complicated. They lived in small villages, but they seemed to have a good grasp of chemical science—and

in that field their notation was logical and clear. So that his gathering and refining of ingredients went ahead much more quickly than his mastering the language.

By the time he was ready to impart the Great News, he already had hundreds of flasks of the Elixir ready. He told his assistant, an indefatigable young native called Ybayn, first.

" Because of your faithful service," Isaac said fulsomely, " yours shall be the privilege of being the first on this planet to share my great discovery." (It had taken him several hours to compose this short speech). " A new era will be ushered in for your people. This is all you have to do—"

He lifted up a flask and paused dramatically, his soul moved in a complex fashion. How many times had he paused thus, ready to impart the momentous news, only to be scorned, ignored or argued with ? Yet here at last, billions of miles from home and centuries from the great discovery, the dream was about to come true. For these people revered him.

He went on and, even in a tortuous alien language, his voice was charged with feeling.

" Drink one seventh part of this flask at each going down of the sun. After seven days the flask will be empty—but you will be immortal."

Ybayn's eyes grew wide, and Isaac's heart filled to overflowing.

" You . . . you mean—?" Ybayn stammered.

" Yes, man ! *Immortal* !"

Ybayn's eyes were stricken. " But . . . but, Master From The Sky, we *are* immortal. Master, what is wrong ?"

—Arthur Sellings

STUDIES IN SCIENCE FICTION

The first article in this series—"The Sons of Frankenstein"—appeared in No. 34 and dealt with the literary work of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. Sam Moskowitz continues with another of the great Masters, this article coinciding with the centenary of Doyle's birth—May 22nd, 1859—and exactly 30 years after his death —June 7th, 1930.

2. Arthur Conan Doyle

Professor George Edward Challenger, a fictional character created by Doyle, has frequently been referred to as "The Sherlock Holmes of Science Fiction." To literary critics and researchers alike, he presents unshakeable evidence that outstanding characterization is possible within the fabric of the true science fiction story. Professor Challenger appeared first in *The Lost World*, a novel serialized by *Strand* in England in 1912 and continued to figure prominently in Doyle's literary output until the publication of *The Maracot Deep*, a collection of highly imaginative stories issued in 1929.

"Challenger was one of his favourite characters and in private conversations he often alluded to him," recorded the Reverend John Lamond, D.D., in *Arthur Conan Doyle, A Memoir*, published by John Murray, London, in 1931. Lamond pointed to the Challenger science fiction series as an "indication of what he might have produced if other interests had not occupied him."

The other interests were, at first, Sherlock Holmes, and later spiritualism. The time spent on Sherlock Holmes added immeasurably to the development of the detective story and the reading pleasure of the world, but the inordinate demands on his time made by his obsession with spiritualism prevented him from devoting more effort to science fiction, which his correspondence indicated he wanted to do.

In the course of his long career as a storyteller Doyle's choice of themes covered a variety of fields. With the creation of Sherlock Holmes he emerged as the greatest single writer of detective stories of all time. But he loved the historical novel and *The White Company*, *Micah Clarke* and *The Refugees* are creditable and popular accomplishments in that field. Because of Doyle's early training as a doctor, medical science plays an important role in a great number of his stories. His intense preoccupation with spiritualism resulted in many ghost stories and weird tales, of which *The Bully of Brocas Court*, published in 1921, is frequently mentioned as his best in that vein.

His output included straightforward tales of adventure which evidenced a particular fondness for sea and African locales. Doyle also wrote *The British Campaign in France and Flanders*, a history of World War I in six volumes, as well as various collections of poetry. Towards the end of his life there were volumes of non-fiction on spiritualism and allied subjects, a few of which he subsidized himself.

Though his best science fiction was written long after the fame of Sherlock Holmes had made his name a household word throughout the world, for a brief time in his early years, science fiction competed with the historical novel, the detective story, the adventure thriller and the weird tale as the avenue along which Doyle hoped to ride to substantial literary recognition.

Arthur Conan Doyle was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, May 22, 1859, the son of Charles Doyle, an architect and artist, and Mary Foley, both Irish Catholics. He received his medical degree from Edinburgh University in 1881, but two years previously had already earned his first cheque of three guineas for a short story, *The Mystery of Sasassa Valley*, published in *Chambers' Journal* for October, 1879. That tale was a horror story concerning a legendary demon with glowing eyes who happily turned out to be two giant diamonds embedded in rock salt.

A. Conan Doyle hung out his shingle in Elm Grove, Southsea, England, a town near Portsmouth, in September, 1882, and waited for patients. Few came. He was never to be a success as a doctor, nor was his later abortive effort to establish himself as an eye specialist to bear any fruit.

At the best, as a medical practitioner, he scarcely eked out an existence. Part of the reason for his trouble lay in complete lack of support from his family and relatives when they discovered that he espoused no religion. Setting up medical practice as a religious conformist would have helped him in the England of 1882, but his disenchantment with theology, arising from the belief " that the evils of religion, a dozen religions slaughtering each other, have all come from accepting things that can't be proved," would not permit him to do so in good conscience.

In the England of that day, a graduate of a medical school could not legitimately claim the title of " doctor " until he had spent a number of years in practice and qualified further through a special thesis and examination. A. Conan Doyle obtained his M.D. in 1885 and a month later married Louise Hawkins, an attractive girl whom he had long admired.

Since his medical income was inadequate, he redoubled his efforts to write in his spare time. As a student, Doyle enjoyed reading Poe's works aloud to his parents. It was in Poe's detective stories involving C. August Dupin, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, *The Mystery of Marie Roget* and *The Purloined Letter* that Doyle received his inspiration for Sherlock Holmes. Poe's Dupin solved his criminal cases through the use of scientific deduction. Sherlock Holmes did the same.

Dupin was an engaging character who had a friend who roomed with him and who told the story, a role performed by Dr. John Watson for Sherlock Holmes. Dupin always had the French prefect of police dropping in on him for help when a particularly knotty criminal problem arose. Holmes paralleled this engaging character development by condescendingly aiding English Inspector Lestrade.

The first Sherlock Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet*, appeared in *Beeton's Christmas Annual* for 1887. Sherlock Holmes therein refers to C. August Dupin as " A very inferior fellow." Years later, Doyle poetically apologized for Holmes' ingratitude.

" To put down to me my creation's crude vanity ?
He, the created, would scoff and would sneer,

Where I, the creator, would bow and revere.
So please grip this fact with your cerebral tentacle :
The doll and its maker are never identical."

The influence of Poe was later to be found in Doyle's science fiction.

Strangely enough, the first Sherlock Holmes story created no great stir, though a second printing featuring the story was published with six illustrations by the author's father, Charles Doyle, the following year.

Micah Clarke, a historical novel, appeared in 1888, but resulted in no unusual success. Adventure stories and stories with a background of medical research continued to come from his pen, but the first important science fiction story was a short novel published in 1891, *The Doings of Raffles Haw*. The subject matter was derived from Poe's *Von Kempelen and His Discovery* and dealt with the experiences of a man who discovers a method of converting baser metals into gold.

This story ranks today as one of the finest ever written on the theme. Usually, in such tales, the method by which the transmutation process is accomplished merely serves as a backdrop for the story. Doyle, possibly because of his excellent scientific education, convincingly describes the laboratory, machinery, methods and theory by which such transmutation is made possible.

That Doyle's plots and character-types were not in any marked degree original has been pointed out a good many times by discerning critics. Ordinarily an imitator would have to play second fiddle to the man he copies, but Doyle was never an imitator in a commonplace way. *The Doings of Raffles Haw* reveals, as does Sherlock Holmes and others of his stories, an almost transcendental ability to make characters come imperishably alive from the printed page.

The intrigues surrounding the manufacture of gold are completely convincing and as the invention brings widespread unhappiness the story builds in power right up until its tragic finale. In the end the inventor destroys himself, his secret and his laboratory, after reconverting the tons of gold already created into a worthless metal.

The Sign of the Four, the second of the Sherlock Holmes' stories, appeared in *Lippincott's Magazine* for February, 1890, and was received with even less enthusiasm than the first. Doyle was now convinced that his bid for recognition must be

made with the historical novel, so he began research on *The White Company*.

Doyle loved the historical books best of all his works. In all probability he would have confined himself to historical writing exclusively if he could have been assured of success in that field.

The Doings of Raffles Haw enjoyed some success, and it is interesting to speculate whether he would have alternated his historical novels with more science fiction if the third of the Sherlock Holmes series, *A Scandal in Bohemia*, published in the popular *Strand* for July 1891, had not finally sparked reader interest, and caught on. Almost overnight Doyle was famous and *The Strand* was literally begging for more of his work.

Doyle wrote more Sherlock Holmes stories but kept setting the price higher and higher, not because he was greedy for money, but because he resented the fact that the labour involved allowed him less time for his " more important " work. *The Strand* met each new demand and gradually Doyle grew to dislike his most illustrious character and indebtedness to him.

The Captain of the Polestar and Other Tales was published by Longmans, Green and Co. in 1894. The title story was obviously inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of A, Gordon Pym*, and by plot elements and atmospheric touches in Jules Verne's *Captain Hatteras* and *The Ice Desert*.

In this story, the Captain of a sailing ship imagines he sees a floating image of a woman in the arctic whiteness. He narrowly escapes death several times as he pursues the spectral figure, which is visible to him alone. Finally he deserts his ship in the vicinity of a giant ice floe, and when his shipmates find him several days later, frozen, and with a strange smile on his face, one of them relates how the many little crystals and feathers of snow which had drifted onto him had been whirled about in a mysterious way by the wind. " To my eyes it seemed but a snowdrift, but many of my companions averred that it started up in the shape of a woman, stooped over the corpse and kissed it, and then hurried away across the floe."

The same volume contains the frequently-reprinted *Great Keinplatz Experiment* in which a professor and his student, through the use of hypnosis, exchange bodies. A number of years earlier, F. Anstey, the godfather of Thorne Smith and John Collier, had caused a minor sensation with *Vice Versa* in

which, through the use of an ancient talisman, father and son switch bodies. The derivation is almost incontrovertible, although the actual style of the story is markedly reminiscent of Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Despite all, *The Captain of the Pole Star* is an extraordinarily well-written story and *The Great Keinplatz Experiment* is amusing.

The Captain of the Pole Star was dedicated to Major-General A. W. Drayson, an outstanding late Victorian astronomer and mathematician. What made the dedication particularly significant was the fact that General Drayson introduced Doyle to spiritualism, which was to have a most profound influence on his thinking toward the end of his life.

The same year Methuen published *Round the Red Lamp*, another collection of short stories, which included *The Lost Amigos Fiasco*, a tale with more obvious originality and grounded more strongly in science than the previously-mentioned short stories. During the period when this story was written, experiments were being made in the employment of the electric chair for capital punishment in the United States.

The locale is a western American city called Los Amigos noted for its tremendous electrical generating plants. The peace officers of Los Amigos capture a train robber, and decide that in executing him, they will utilize the full power of their generators. Disregarding the warning of a local electrical experimenter, Peter Stulpnagel, they proceed. As the tremendous current surges through the condemned man, he bounds forward from his chair shouting, " Great Scott !" His hair turns white. His eyes brighten, but he does not die.

They try another power surge, but it merely lends the unfortunate man's cheeks a healthy glow. Giving up on the electricity they string him up, but after dangling for hours he still lives.

The United States Marshal, exasperated, empties a six shooter into the desperado, but only evokes the complaint that they have ruined a perfectly good suit.

Peter Stulpnagel advances the explanation that since electricity is life, while small shocks will kill, great voltage has merely made a superman out of their victim and even if they put him in jail, he probably will outlast the prison. That is how the affair came to be known at the *Los Amigos Fiasco*.

We see then, that up until 1894, Doyle had increasingly begun to experiment with tales that roughly were recognizible as science fiction, but he was to drop this tack for another eighteen years, conceding by default to the young H. G. Wells, who was to become pre-eminent as a writer of scientific romances during the same period.

The reasons were obvious. Sherlock Holmes had by now achieved a fabulous world-renown. The public began to buy his historical work, *The White Company*, *The Refugees and Micah Clarke*, in great quantities, despite the less-than-enthusiastic reviews of the critics. The year 1894 also saw the creation of another character which the public took to their hearts, Brigadier Gerard. With all these successes contributing to his prominence at the same time, Doyle could well afford to take a cavalier attitude towards science fiction.

Each year after 1894, his fame progressed with giant steps. Medical practice he abandoned as an encumbrance. He volunteered and participated in the Boer War. He almost refused knighthood, because there was some question as to whether it was being offered to him for the creation of Sherlock Holmes or because of his objective work, *The War in South Africa : its Cause and Conduct*, which when translated into many languages, refuted most of the atrocity charges brought against the British.

For ten years he abandoned the writing of Sherlock Holmes, resuming to disprove the charges brought against him that he had lost his skill in " whodunits." But no one challenged him to write science fiction. So when *The Terror of Blue John Gap*, a short science fiction story, appeared in *The Strand Magazine* for September, 1910, it was little more than a happenstance. But it signified that in science fiction, as in other fields, he had matured as a writer.

This little known story shares with *The Horror of the Heights*, the distinction of being one of his finest science fiction short stories. It deals with a bear-like creature, as large as an elephant, which is a nightly marauder in North-West Derbyshire. The creature is stalked to its lair by Dr. James Hardcastle, but outwits and overcomes him. Dr. Hardcastle is fortunate to escape with his life. The writing is excellent and the theory as to the creature's origin postulates the existence of giant caverns inside the earth, where bizarre conditions have

given rise to plants and animals that ought never to see the light of day.

While the theoretical concept stems from Verne's *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, we begin to find Doyle adding a new dimension to an old idea, and plotting and writing in a manner distinctly his own.

There seemed to be no special reason why Doyle should have returned to the serious writing of science fiction, as he did in 1912. If it had happened in 1909 it might have been attributed to his presiding at the centenary dinner of the birth of Edgar Allan Poe at the Metropole, in which he paid homage to the memory of a man whose inspiration had profoundly influenced every aspect of his early work.

Perhaps it was the example of H. G. Wells, a friend and correspondent, who had established his reputation in the world of the scientific romance. Whatever the reason, he wrote to Greenhough Smith, editor of *The Strand*, regarding *The Lost World*: "I think it will make the very best serial (bar special S. Holmes values) that I have ever done, especially when it has its trimming of faked photos, maps, and plans. *My ambition is to do for the boys' book what Sherlock Holmes did for the detective tale. I don't suppose I could bring off two such coups. And yet I hope it may.*"

The truth was out. A. Conan Doyle was determined to build for himself a reputation in science fiction as great as the one that caused him to be canonized by detective story lovers. When *The Lost World* appeared it seemed that it was almost within his ability to accomplish that feat. The basic idea, like that of *The Terror of Blue John Gap*, was unabashedly inspired by Verne's *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, but superior elements of characterization, humour and pace that Doyle added to the idea set it distinctly apart.

The lead character, Professor Challenger, if not the finest drawn character to come out of science fiction, at least is on a par with Verne's Captain Nemo, Burrough's John Carter and Stanley G. Weinbaum's aliens. The dumpy, barrel-chested, black-bearded, bad-tempered, intolerant, egotistical, driving, but truly brilliant Challenger, in spite of his faults, or possibly because of them, bubbles into believability from the black type of the printed page.

We enjoy reading about him, even when his exploits and accomplishments fail to involve fantastic events. As we get to

know him better we find that he is a man of sincerity, possessing true loyalty to his friends and acquaintances, a redeeming sense of humour and a wealth of tender affection towards his tiny, fragile wife. The people that surround him : E. D. Malone, the young, athletic Irish reporter ; Lord John Roxton, the adventurer and Professor Summerlee are all cut from a fine literary cloth.

Professor Challenger attempts to convince the leading scientific society of England that he has evidence to support the existence of prehistoric monsters on a South American plateau. In answer to ridicule, he offers to prove his claim if the Society will send an observer with him on an expedition. Professor Summerlee is assigned the role.

Together with Malone and Roxton they locate the plateau and also the fabulous and truly terrifying beasts from out of Earth's past, which were long presumed to have become extinct. After a series of adventures which involve saving a race of virtually modern natives from primeval, apelike dawn men, they return to England.

The ending is dramatic and unforgettable. They have lost most of their evidence in making their escape back to civilization. As Challenger tells what he has seen and professor Summerlee confirms it, they find themselves confronted with derisive laughter. The audience demands as proof nothing less than one of the antediluvian beasts in the flesh. Sardonically, Professor Challenger orders a cage brought onto the platform. The door is opened. He makes coaxing little noises and abruptly there is pandemonium as an immense, leathery-winged, red-eyed, saw-beaked pterodactyl sails out into the auditorium in blundering, fear-inspired flight. It squeezes through an open window and later is seen perched on the roof of Queen's Hall for two hours. Soldiers bolt their posts in wild terror when they sight the demon shape flying across the face of the moon. It is last sighted by a ship in mid-ocean as it wings its lonely way towards South America. Professor Challenger has won his point !

Superb characterization, coupled with fine humour and good science lifted *The Lost World* above the level of the average adventure story. As a result, the novel was an instant success and new editions began to multiply. The following year *The Poison Belt*, " being an account of another amazing adventure of Professor Challenger," began in *The Strand* for April, 1913.

This novel has always been overshadowed by the fame of *The Lost World*, but it is outstanding in its own right. For this story, Doyle borrowed from his perennial source of inspiration, Edgar Allan Poe, to enlarge on the idea presented in *The Conversation of Eros and Charmion*, wherein the atmosphere of the earth is " poisoned " by a change resulting from conditions in outer space. In this novel Challenger, foreseeing catastrophe, gathers his wife and the three companions of his previous adventure in an air-tight room in his home. There, sustained by containers of oxygen, they watch the entire world come to a catastrophic stop. The penetrating British humour stands up even across the gulf of the years. As they prepare for the hour of doom, Challenger turns to his manservant, and says quite calmly, " I'm expecting the end of the world today, Austin."

" Yes, sir," the servant replies. " What time, sir ?"

Doyle strikes a telling blow at the theory of the survival of the fittest when in all London, the only person who appears to be alive after the earth is stricken is an asthmatic old woman, who thought she was having an attack when the character of the atmosphere began to change and fed herself oxygen out of a container she kept at her bedside for emergencies.

The philosophical description of the world's extermination provided by Doyle is a classic. Speaking through Challenger's lips he says, " *You will conceive a bunch of grapes which are covered by some infinitesimal but noxious bacillus. The gardener passes it through a disinfecting medium. It may be that he desires his grapes to be cleaner. It may be that he needs space to breed some fresh bacillus less noxious than the last. He dips it into the poison and they are gone. Our gardener is, in my opinion, about to dip the solar system, and the human bacillus, the little mortal vibrio which twisted and wiggled upon the outer rind of the earth, will in an instant be sterilized and out of existence.*"

The Lost World and *The Poison Belt* provided evidence that Doyle had it in him to be one of the greatest science fiction writers of all time. To add substance to the possibility is the corroborated fact that he loved Professor Challenger above all of his literary creations. It is reported that he used to assume Challenger disguises solely to startle his friends. He regarded Challenger as the science fiction version of Sherlock Holmes, unraveling scientific mysteries with the same skill and alacrity as his detective fiction counterpart solved crimes against society.

The Horror of the Heights, published in *Everybody's Magazine* for November, 1913, which followed *The Poison Belt*, may be the source from which flying saucer acolytes have derived the imaginative concept that alien and incredible life forms dwell in the upper atmosphere of the earth. The concept, for the year 1913, was a novel one and Doyle's handling of the theme was skillful indeed.

So we can see that Doyle was at the peak of his ability as a science fiction writer, that he was capable of *consistently* producing tales in the genre that were models of their kind. His ability as a very logical type of prognosticator was dramatically demonstrated when in *Danger* ! a novelette published in *Strand* for February, 1914, he detailed in fictional form how Britain could be brought to her knees by submarines. The story recommended tunnels under the channel and also made mention of airplanes with engine silencers as valuable war weapons. *Danger* ! caused quite a stir and some people later accused Doyle of giving Germany the formula for submarine warfare.

The fantastic masterpieces of H. G. Wells were getting fewer and further between. A great romancer of the scientific tale had arisen in America, Edgar Rice Burroughs, whose Tarzan was to challenge Sherlock Holmes for world-wide popularity proving himself no less a master of characterization than Doyle. Years later, Burroughs' famous novel, *The Land That Time Forgot*, owing a debt to *The Lost World*, in the development of its unique evolutionary theory was to reveal that Doyle could lend as well as borrow. But now, this was the man Doyle had to surpass to emerge pre-eminent in the field.

Then a strange thing happened. A. Conan Doyle, who had been an agnostic since his youth, found religion. But it was not the religion of the orthodox. Years earlier his first wife had died and he had married Jane Leckie, a woman whom he loved very dearly. Friends and relatives of Doyle's were killed during World War I, but the hardest blow was when his wife's brother, Malcolm Leckie, joined the list. At a seance he believed that he had received a very personal message from Leckie, an emotional experience which caused him to write : " It is absolute lunacy, or it is a revolution in religious thought —a revolution which gives us an immense consolation when those who are dear to us pass behind the veil."

The writing of science fiction was now forgotten. Sherlock Holmes became only an infrequent, irksome task. Doyle

threw himself wholeheartedly into the cause of spiritualism. Books with titles like *The New Revelation*, *The Vital Message*, *Wanderings of a Spiritualist*, poured from his pen. When no one would publish them, he paid the cost himself. He travelled widely, preaching the new religion and devoting his energies to defending its adherents. In a ten year period he spent well over £250,000 for the cause. This took such curious turns as *The Coming of the Fairies*, published by George H. Doran in 1922, in which, in photos and text, Doyle lent his name to championing the physical existence of actual little people.

It is questionable if Doyle would have returned to science fiction again, had it not been for Hollywood. *The Lost World* was made into a motion picture and distributed in 1925, starring such prominent screen personalitities as Wallace Beery, Lewis Stone and Bessie Love. The prehistoric monsters, recreated for the screen, were masterfully done, and the public took the film to their hearts.

Sometime later *The Poison Belt* was filmed in England.

The same year as the release of *The Lost World*, Doyle fans were electrified to learn that *The Strand* would feature a new Professor Challenger novel, the longest one yet, titled *The Land of the Mist*. They might have been justifiably uneasy had they known that the pre-publication title of the novel had been *The Psychic Adventures of Edward Malone*.

As it was, dismay was widespread when reading revealed that Challenger, who is now somewhat older and has lost his wife, receives a message from her from the spirit world (much in the same manner as Doyle was contacted by Malcolm Leckie) and is converted to spiritualism.

The appearance of *The Maracot Deep* as a four-part novel, beginning in the October 8, 1927 issue of *The Saturday Evening Post*, indicated a renewal of interest in the writing of science fiction by Doyle. A new scientific hero, Professor Maracot, was created and Atlantis rediscovered. There are elements of good story telling, but the scientific premise of the tale is marred by the introduction of spiritualism.

Two other Professor Challenger stories were to follow and these were collected into a book with *The Maracot Deep* in 1929, less than a year before Doyle's death. The shorter one, *The Disintegration Machine*, deals with a man who invents a device for dissolving solids into atoms and threatens to sell it to a foreign power. Professor Challenger disposes of the problem

by dissolving the inventor in his own machine. The story is as weak as it sounds.

The other, a novelette, *When the World Screamed*, is something else again. In it, Professor Challenger drills a deep tunnel into the bowels of the earth and causes every live volcano on the face of the planet to erupt simultaneously and an earth-shaking scream of pain to issue forth when a giant drill pierces a soft, membraneous substance, eight miles beneath the surface, thereby proving that our plane is one gigantic living creature covered by a hardened crust.

Doyle had written no Sherlock Holmes stories since the appearance of *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes* in 1927. His last important contributions to science fiction date from that year. Twice before he had been on the verge of establishing himself as a master of prophetic fiction. First in 1894, when he was forgivably detoured by the unexpectedly overwhelming reception of Sherlock Holmes. Then again in 1915, when family tragedies diverted him to spiritualism. His last creative achievements were destined to be stopped by the spectre of death, which escorted him beyond the veil on July 7, 1930.

Most of the world would never know that Doyle carried with him to the beyond two fascinating secrets : first, that he had been Sherlock Holmes in real life, actually solving famous crimes by the methods Watson described in the " Sacred Writings." Secondly, that Professor Challenger was merely an uninhibited version of himself. As far as he was concerned, it was a good joke to let them go on believing that it had all been just fiction.

—Sam Moskowitz

Even the most down-and-out specimen of humanity is likely to be useful somewhere, sometime. What would such a wreck be worth in the world of space travel?

SOMEBODY WANTS YOU

BY E. C. TUBB

The Medic was neatly dressed in a uniform of green and white, the golden insignia of his profession and rank outlined over his heart, the coveted symbol of the Life Centre winking from his shoulders. He glanced at the sheaf of papers in his hand then looked at Smeldon with an air of faintly contemptuous irritation.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But you have nothing that we could use."

"Nothing?" Smeldon sat upright on the hospital couch and pulled the issue-gown tighter around his scrawny shoulders. "You sure, Doc?"

" Positive." The Medic gestured with the sheaf of papers. " The lab report leaves no doubt. Buying any part of you is out of the question."

" Now wait a minute." Smeldon was a thin, undersized runt of a man but no one likes to be told that he isn't even considered fit for fertilizer. " I'm alive, ain't I ? I'm a free, white Terran, and I'm in pretty good shape. What's the objection ?"

" You really want to know ?"

" Perhaps not." Smeldon had a sudden conviction that he would be happier if left in ignorance. " But can't you use a quart of blood ?"

" We don't need blood now ; we can make our own substitute."

" Tissue cultures then ? You must need those."

" Sure, but we like to pick the best we can get." The Medic unbent a little. " Look at it this way. You're a rich man and you want a new set of glands. You wouldn't want to be fitted up with a second-rate set taken from a below-optimum donor, would you ?"

" Well—"

" Of course you wouldn't. And anyway, Life Centre wouldn't supply anything but the best. We are only interested in tissue cultures taken from the choicest specimens of humanity. It is," he said piously, " a question of professional ethics."

" All right." Smeldon was getting desperate. " What about whole organs ? I can spare a kidney or a lung and, if the price was right, I could let you have an eye or—" His voice faded as he saw the Medic's expression. " No ?"

" No."

" Why not ?"

The Medic rustled the lab report.

" Damn it ! Quit waving those papers at me." Smeldon was getting angry. " You can't tell me that some spacehand, say, with an eye short would worry too much about where a replacement came from. A guy like that wouldn't worry about ethics, only about getting another eye. What's wrong with one of mine ?"

" Both eyes defective in colour vision," read the Medic. " Right eye antismatic, left eye operating at only fifty percent of efficiency." He looked up from the report. " How would a man with such vision ever get back into space ?"

" All right. A kidney then."

" Marked evidence of sclerosis on both kidneys."

" Lung ?"

" Residual tars from over-indulgence in tobacco coupled with incipient cancer."

" Arm ? Leg ? No, forget that." Smeldon knew that he was letting himself be carried away. It was one thing to sell a slice of tissue so that a duplicate limb could be grown in a culture vat but quite another to actually lose the entire limb itself. Anyway, the cost of a prosthetic replacement would make the transaction unprofitable. With an organ it was different. He could, at least, get by with only one eye.

" Sorry." The Medic was obviously tired of the interview. " Frankly, we wouldn't touch any part of you as a free gift. As a physical specimen of humanity you're a dead loss."

" Thanks." Smeldon was bitter.

" Don't mention it." The Medic was bored. " Better get dressed now."

Smeldon got dressed.

" Send in the next applicant on your way out."

Smeldon nodded. At the door he paused, turned and looked hopefully towards the Medic.

" I forgot," he said. " How about A.I.D ?"

The Medic reached for a button.

Outside the Life Centre building Smeldon slowly brushed himself down and tried to ignore the amused glances of the people around him. The streets were kept almost hygienically clean so he hadn't gathered much dust but the indignity of being tossed out of the building had hurt his pride. Not such a deep hurt though as the Medic's obvious contempt. They hadn't wanted him. They hadn't even wanted one tiny single part of him. That's what hurt most of all.

He just wasn't wanted.

A group of Arcturians wandered by; a half-dozen youngsters accompanied by an adult conducting them on a tour of the latest Federation member-world, Terra. The youngsters were excited, their mandibles clashing as they shot an endless stream of questions towards the tall arachnid in their midst. The adult, stooped a little beneath the higher gravity, replied with a snappish sharpness which won Smeldon's sympathy. Some people chose a hell of a way to earn a living ! He lost his

sympathy as he noticed the bag which the adult carried slung over its carapace.

There would be money in that bag, lots of money, mostly Terran but with other, easily exchangeable tokens for other of the Federation worlds. Smeldon felt his mouth fill with saliva as he looked at the bag. The alien was obviously harrassed to the limit of endurance. It would welcome an understanding native and perhaps . . .

An elbow dug into Smeldon's ribs and a voice hissed in his ear.

" Beat it !"

" What ?" Smeldon turned, recognised the man at his side. " Fred ! Good to meet you !"

" Beat it." Fred spoke out of the corner of his mouth. " You're queering the pitch."

" Now don't talk like that, Fred," protested Smeldon. "We were buddies back in the old days. Remember that Sirian deal ? And the time we took the Vegan Beauty Queen ? And the way we sold the Atlantic Tunnel to those Capellans ?"

" Scram !"

" Is that all you've got to say to an old friend ?" Smeldon was hurt. " I'm surprised at you, Fred. Really surprised." He shook his head—his eyes, however, like those of Fred, remaining fastened on the bag slung over the alien's thorax. " How about cutting me in ?"

" What for ?" Fred snorted with impatience. " Since you got yourself grabbed and converted you ain't no good no more. You couldn't even lift a candy bar from a baby. Quit teasing yourself. Leave the pitch to them as can make use of it."

" I can be lookout."

" You can be a hospital case if you don't beat it."

Smeldon breathed hard through his nose. Here it was again ; the hard fact that he wasn't wanted being shoved into his face. Dignity demanded that he turn on his heel and walk away without another word. Desperation made him take a chance.

" I'm broke, Fred," he said honestly. " A few days free board and lodging in a hospital might be welcome at that."

" You louse !" Fred gritted his teeth and Smeldon hovered between collecting a mouthful of broken teeth or a small something as a pay-off. Greed won over hate. Smeldon forced a smile as Fred shoved a note into his hand. " Here's a century. Go buy yourself a cup of coffee."

"Thanks, Fred," said Smeldon jovially. "You won't regret this."

"Like hell I won't." Fred scowled his disgust. "Now beat it before I change my mind."

Smeldon slowed his walk, regretfully watching the money-bag dwindle from view. Not that he could have really done anything about it, Fred had been right on that point. He could dream, but he couldn't act. The standard police conversion procedure for apprehended criminals had taken care of that. The fact that the same procedure had made him unwanted by every criminal element in society was quite incidental to the main purpose.

The century bought more than a cup of coffee. It provided a small meal and a fair amount of weak beer. Smeldon hurried the meal but nursed the beer sitting at a table and letting his eyes take in the sights of the spaceport outside.

He always, when he had money, did his drinking at the spaceport. There was always the chance of some returning traveller who would appreciate a receptive and sympathetic ear. Or there were bags he could carry, cabs he could call, forlorn aliens he could direct to the right quarter. For all these services he expected to be tipped. There was also, though this was among the things of almost negligible probability, the chance of some romantic adventure with some humanoid alien, Terrans had quite a reputation for that sort of thing and, though Smeldon was no hero. he wasn't going to sell himself short.

He was a firm believer in the luck of the game but even so it came as a shock when he found the negligible probability becoming incontrovertable fact.

"Dis table taken? Yees?"

She was almost seven feet tall with a wide, stocky body and two small, prehensile horns protuding above her eyes. Her wrists were as thick as his thighs and her skin had a peculiar bluish tinge but she was obviously female, humanoid and a potential sucker. Smeldon leapt to his feet, grabbing at his beer just in time to save its contents, and made a gesture which he fondly imagined to be a bow.

"Madam, I would be honoured if you would join me."

"Tenks."

The chair creaked as she sat down. Smeldon grabbed at both beer and table and, when to his relief the chair supported

her weight, almost ran to the bar. He was after two things ; a drink so as to pin her down and information about his prize. The bartender supplied the one, a grizzled spaceman the other.

" Beta Aquaris—Funder's World." He rapped his empty glass suggestively on the bar. " The world is new to the Federation, almost as new as Terra, and the tourist trade has only just started. As far as I know she must be the first to visit Terra. Must have arrived on the *Stella Ghost*." He scowled at his still empty glass. " I'm drinking beer."

" Nice drink," said Smeldon. " Rich ?"

" Broke."

" Funder's World, I mean."

" Stinking." Again the glass rapped the bar. " Beer's cheap."

" See you later." Smeldon snatched up his own drink and returned to his table, sweating with fear in case some drifter may have stolen his pitch. He calmed down when he saw that she was still alone. He shouldn't have been surprised. As a woman, any woman, she wasn't all that attractive. Not, of course, unless it was to a male of her own race.

Smeldon set down the beer in front of her and resumed his seat.

" Sorry I was delayed," he smiled. " Just met an old buddy of mine, we shipped out together when we were boys." He jerked his head towards the scowling spaceman. " I saved his life once and he's never forgotten it."

" Neece." She spoke with an accent as thick as cream and Smeldon wondered just what brand of missionary had first set up school on her home planet. She swallowed her beer with a single gulp and he revised his opinion. No missionary he'd ever heard of could have handled his drink that fast but then no missionary would have had a gullet like her's to begin with.

" Like another ?" He anticipated her agreement and gestured towards the bartender. The next step was to feel in his pocket and then to adopt a startled, harrassed expression. " My wallet ! I've been robbed !"

" Monaie ?" She opened a purse the size of a suitcase and produced a roll of Terran currency. She tossed it towards him. " Teke et. You paie."

It was the beginning of a wonderful evening.

They switched to Scotch immediately; Smeldon hated beer, and during the second bottle he learned that her name was Zlyten and that she was a rich student interested in cultural mores. She also, so he gathered, wanted to write a thesis but just what kind of thesis he couldn't make out. For that matter he wasn't too certain about the cultural mores business either. In fact the only thing he could be sure about was that she was loaded with cash and could drink like a fish. Of the two bottles he'd only managed to down a quarter, the rest had vanished in time to the regular lifting of her arm.

He managed to do some catching up on the third bottle and even more on the fourth. Cold truth lay waiting for him at the bottom of the fourth empty.

"I'm no good," he confessed in maudlin self-pity. He craned his neck from where he rested against her ample bulges and tried to stare into her face. The prehensile horns twitched down towards him.

"Yees?"

"You wanna truth? I'm no good, thasa truth. I didn't loose m' wallet. Never had one t' lose."

"Thet rigt?"

"Sure that's right." He restrained a hiccup. "I'm a victim of fate, thasa what. A goddamned victim of fate. 's just that I wanned to know you. You mad at me?"

A hamlike hand stroked his hair. He wriggled until he could look into Zlyten's eyes. They regarded him with slate-like emotion.

"You know," he hiccupped, "you're the nicest thing that ever happened to me. You ain't Terran but you've got a bigger heart than any local girl. A lonely guy like me could go for a girl like you. You understand?"

"Unerstant."

"Good." He snuggled closer. "I'm just a lonely guy," he whimpered again. "Just a lonely guy."

The hamlike hand caressed his head again. The touch felt like a rain of gold. The prehensile horns aimed towards his brow.

"Never had a chance," he whimpered. "Just kicked around since the day I was born. Nobody wanted me even then. Just a goddamned nuisance, thas what I was. Nobody's ever wanted me. Nobody at all." He felt the injustice of it so deeply that he wanted to cry.

"Bat," she said. "Ver bat."

" Bad ain't the word for it. They should invent a new word." He struggled so that he could look into her eyes. " You know what they did to me ? They took my Union card away when I was just a kid. Threw me out of the Union of Street Janitors just because I had a little argument with the foreman. Can't work with no card. Tried to make out in the Free Labour pool but they've got Rigelians and Centaurians, all they want. Twice as strong as a man and eat only half. Tried to get other work but the robots did it better. No chance at all."

" Bat," she repeated. " Ver bat."

" Tried to make out on my own. Found a wallet, only found it, mind you, lying in the street it was. I picked it up and was looking at it to see who it belonged to so I could send it back and the police grabbed me. Converted me. Finished me for good."

" Nevair mint."

" I gotta mind. A man's gotta be wanted by someone somewhere. He's got to feel as if he's necessary." Smeldon beat one fist against the other. " Know what happened today? I tried to sell myself for spare parts. Couldn't even do that. Not even wanted as spare parts. Can you beat it ?"

" Nevair mint." The big hands stroked him as if he were a kitten. " I wat you."

" You want me ?" He could hardly believe his good luck. " You *want* me ?"

" Yees."

He had heard of it happening, of course, everyone had. The offworlder who took a fancy to a Terran and supported him in every conceivable luxury for the rest of his life. There was Vahgun who, so rumour had it, was adopted by a humanoid princess of fabulous beauty and who set him up as co-ruler over an empire of a dozen planets. There was Moffat who became the husband and advisor of a mother-nymph who was both ridiculously rich and tolerant to the point of allowing him to import Terran harem beauties. There was Golden and Lefarge and a dozen others who, so rumour said, had hit the jackpot. Now, apparently, it had happened to Smeldon.

Someone wanted him !

Someone actually wanted him. He felt like going back to the Life Centre and spitting in the Medic's eye. He felt like finding Fred and repaying him back his loan together with a

few appropriate insults. He felt like sprouting wings and flying up to touch the moon.

At long last someone actually wanted him.

"I love you," he babbled deliriously. "I love you, you great big beautifully rich woman you. I'm the happiest guy in the world."

"So glet." She held him tight against her.

"I mean it."

"Yeese." Her big hands enfolded him. "You wat to cum 'om wit me?"

"To Funder's World?" It was almost too good to be true. "Sure thing. When do we start?"

"Rit noe."

She rose and Smeldon rose with her. He had no option; she had tight hold of his arm. On the way out they passed the grizzled spaceman who took time off from his mournful examination of his beer to sneer into Smeldon's face.

"Bum," he said. "You'll be sorry."

"Hogwash." Smeldon wasn't worried, the man was obviously jealous. He sneered even wider.

"I mean it, smart guy," he said. "I could tell you a thing or two if I wanted. But I don't want."

"Hogwash," said Smeldon again, but this time not quite so emphatically as before. Maybe the guy could tell him something. Maybe—? Then he was jerked outside by the grip on his arm.

Formalities didn't take long. Terra was only too pleased to get rid of an unclassified member of an overlarge population and Smeldon soon found himself en route to Zlyten's home planet. He didn't see much of her during the trip but he didn't let her neglect worry him. In fact he didn't let anything worry him, he was too busy enjoying the novel feeling of being wanted.

And then he found out just what he was wanted for.

Funder's World was a big, rough, lately civilised planet with somewhat barbaric ways. The humanoids were all giants and the flora and fauna scaled accordingly. Zlyten took him home with her and showed him the larder and then told him just what his place would be in her household. He was small, she pointed out, and agile and, as he had admitted to her, useless for anything else. She hoped that he would be very happy and then gave him a smack over the head to make him get on with it.

Smeldon had no option but to obey.

He didn't like having to crawl through the burrows and he didn't like having to trap and poison and shoot the things he found there. Trap and poison and shoot them, moreover, before they could take care of him. It was a worrying, arduous life and he didn't even have a philosophy to help him.

A philospher would have gained comfort from the thought that it was far better to be wanted than not to be wanted at all.

Even if it were only as a rat-catcher.

—E. C. Tubb