

Science Fantasy

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The Flame Bringers

by MICHAEL MOORCOCK



MATRIX

A long fantasy story

by BRIAN W. ALDISS

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- 29 EARTH IS BUT A STAR—John Brunner
- 36 ECHO IN THE SKULL—John Brunner
- 37 CASTLE OF VENGEANCE—Kenneth Bulmer
- 38 ENCHANTER'S ENCOUNTER—E. C. Tubb
- 39 THE SOUND SWEEP—J. G. Ballard
- 40 STRANGE HIGHWAY—Kenneth Bulmer
- 41 THE GAUDY SHADOWS—John Brunner
- 42 PLANET ON PROBATION—J. T. McIntosh
- 43 BEYOND THE SILVER SKY—Kenneth Bulmer
- 44 THE BLACK CAT'S PAW—John Rackham
- 45 THE MAP COUNTRY—Kenneth Bulmer
- 46 NEED—Theodore Sturgeon
- 47 THE DREAMING CITY—Michael Moorcock
- 48 THE ANALYSTS—John Brunner
- 50 ANKH—John Rackham
- 51 THE STEALER OF SOULS—Michael Moorcock
- 52 WHERE IS THE BIRD OF FIRE?—
Thomas Burnett Swann
- 53 THE WATCH-TOWERS—J. G. Ballard

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CONTENTS

● Novelettes

MATRIX	Brian W. Aldiss	2
THE FLAME BRINGERS	Michael Moorcock	40

● Short Stories

THE SUDDEN WINGS	Thomas Burnett Swann	71
WEEKEND TRIP	Steve Hall	92
LOVE IS A RELATIVE THING	Stephen Cook	101

● Feature

BOOK REVIEWS	John Carnell	112
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Each parallel world was slightly different, no two being exactly alike — and there were thousands of them. However, what appeared a virtue in any one of them could well be a deadly sin in another.

MATRIX

BY BRIAN W. ALDISS

The four of us must have made a strange group, plodding manfully through nowhere.

Royal Meacher, my brother, led the way. His long arms and bony hands fought the wind for possession of his cloak, the shabby mantle that stayed about him no more certainly than his authority.

Next the breeze from the north plucked at the figure of Turton, our man Turton, poor old Turton, the mutant whose third arm and all but useless third leg combined with his black coat to give him from behind something of the appearance of a beetle. Over his shoulder, Turton carried Candida in an attitude of maximum discomfort.

Candida still dripped. Her hair hung down like frayed ribbon. Her left ear jogged up and down the central seam of Turton's coat; her right eye seemed to peep sightlessly back at me. Candida is Royal's fourth wife.

I am Royal's younger brother, Sheridan. I felt defeated by Candida's stare. I kept hoping that the jig-jog walk would jog the eye shut; and so I suppose it might have done had her head not been hanging upside down.

We walked towards the north, into the molars of the wind.

The road on which we walked was narrow and absolutely straight. It appeared to lead nowhere, for despite the wind a miasmal mist rose from the damp about us. The road ran along a dyke, the sides of which, being but newly constructed, were of bare earth. This dyke divided a stretch of sea. We had sea on both sides of us.

On our right, the water was appreciably less placid than the water on our left, for it was still the sea proper. On the left, that body of water had already been cut from its parent by a mole which lay ahead of us. Soon the water on our right would undergo the same fate.

Beyond it, almost as far as our vision extended in that direction, we could see another dyke extending parallel with ours. The sea was being parcelled into squares. In time, as the work of reclamation proceeded, the squares would be drained; the sea would dwindle into puddles; the puddles would become mud; the mud would become soil; the soil would become vegetables; and the vegetables—oh, yes!—the vegetables would be eaten and become flesh; ghosts of future people grew in the two halves of sea, the one with ripples and the one with waves.

Treading steadily on in the drips from Candida's hair and clothes, I looked back over my shoulder.

The vast funeral pyre we had left had shrunk now; the kiln was a tiny black pipe topped by flame. No more did we feel its heat or smell the smell of ignited bodies, but the effluvia lingered in our memories. Royal still spoke of it, rambling in and out of quotation as his habit was, addressing the wind.

"You note how the parsimonious Dutch reclaim both their land and their dead in one operation. And those grisly corpses, maligned by sea and radiation, will make excellent fertiliser from their ashes. How convenient, how concise! Occam's razor cuts precious fine, friends: the obscene fag-ends of one chemical reaction go to start another. 'Marvelous is the plan by which this best of worlds is wisely planned.' Forty thousand dead Dutchmen should guarantee us a good cabbage crop in five years, eh, Turton?"

The bent old man, with Candida's head nodding idiot agreement, said, "Back before the last two wars, they used to grow tulips and flowers here, according to the stoker at the kiln."

Dark was coming in now, the mist thickening, the sulky captive sea falling motionless as the wind died. Beyond the outline of my brother's back I could see a light; with gratitude I mouthed its ugly name: Noordoostburg-op-Langedijk.

"That mouldy powerful of cadavers would seem to be less appropriately applied to tulips than cabbages, Turton," Royal said. "And what more suitable envoi to the indignity of their deaths? Recollect your Browne: 'To be gnawed out of our graves, to have our skulls made drinking bowls, and our bones turned into pipes, to delight and sport our enemies—' how does it go?—'are tragical abominations escaped in burning burials.' Since Browne's time, we've grown a lot more ingenious! Nuclear destruction and incineration need not be the end of our troubles. We can still be spread as mulch for the genus *brassica* . . ."

"Cabbages it was, cabbages or tulips," old Turton said vaguely, but Royal was not to be deflected. He talked on as we trudged on. I was not listening. I wanted only to get off this eternal earthwork, safe into civilization and warmth.

When we reached Noordoostburg-op-Langedijk, a mere platform joined by dyke and mole to the distant land, we went into its only cafe. Turton laid Candida down on a bench. He unbent his beetle back and stretched his arms (but the third never stretched straight) with groans of relief. The cafe manager came forward hurriedly.

"I regret I cannot introduce you properly to my wife. She is religious and has passed into a coma," Royal said, staring the man out.

"Sir, this lady is not dead?" the manager asked.

"Merely religious."

"Sir, she is so wet!" the manager said.

"A property she shares with the confounded stretch of water into which she fell when the coma overtook her. Will you kindly bring us three soups; my wife, as you see, will not partake."

Dubiously the manager backed away.

Turton followed him to the counter.

"You see, the lady's very susceptible to anything religious. We came over with the party from Edinburgh specially to see the cremation down the road, and Mrs. Meacher was overcome by the sight. Or perhaps it was the smell, I don't know, or the sound of the bodies bubbling in the incinerator.

Anyhow, before anyone could stop her, backwards she went—splash!—and—”

“Turton!” Royal called sharply.

“I was just trying to borrow a towel,” Turton said.

After that, we ate our soup in silence. A puddle collected under Candida’s clothing.

“Say something, Sheridan,” Royal demanded, rapping his spoon on the table at me.

“I wonder if there were fish in those fields,” I said.

He made his usual gesture of disgust and turned away. Fortunately I did not have to say anything more, for at that moment the rest of our party came in for soup; the incineration ceremony had finished just after we left: we had left early only because of Candida.

Soup and rationed chocolate was all that the cafe offered. When the party had finished up their bowls, we went outside. I draped Candida over Turton’s shoulder and we followed.

The weather was showing its talents. Since the wind had fallen, rain had begun to fall. It fell on the concrete, in the polder, into the sour sea. It fell on to the buzz-jet. We all packed into it, jostling and pushing. Somehow, Royal managed to get in away from the rain first. Turton and I were last aboard, but Turton had been wet already.

This buzz-jet was just a missile left over from the last war and converted. Perhaps it was uncomfortable, yet it could move; we headed northwest across the sea, and over northern England, where not a light showed from the stricken lands; in a quarter of an hour the lights of Edinburgh showed bleakly through the wet dark.

Our craft was a government one. Private transport of any variety was a thing of the past. Mainly it was fuel shortage that had brought the situation about; but when the last war ended at the beginning of 2041, the government passed laws forbidding the private ownership of transport—not that they were not increasingly eager to hire their own vehicles out as production improved.

At Turnhouse airport we climbed out and made our way with the crowd to a bus shelter. A bus came after a few minutes: it was too full to take us; we waited and caught the next one; it crawled with us into town, while we stood like cattle in a truck.

That sort of thing takes the edge off what otherwise had been a very enjoyable day's sightseeing. We had had several such excursions to celebrate my demobilisation from the army.

Since the war, Edinburgh had become the capital city of Europe, chiefly because the others had been obliterated or made uninhabitable by radiation or the after effects of bacterial warfare. Some of the old Scottish families were proud of this promotion of their city; others felt that this greatness had been thrust upon them; but most of them took advantage of the shining hour by thrusting up rents to astronomical heights. The thousands of refugees, evacuated and displaced people who poured into the city, found themselves held to ransom for living space.

When we climbed out of the bus at the city centre, I became separated from the others by the crowd, that cursed anonymous crowd speaking all the tongues of Europe. I brushed off a hand that clutched at my sleeve: it came again, detaining me more forcibly. Irritably, I looked round, and my eyes met the eyes of a square dark man; in that instance, I took in no more detail, beyond saying to myself that his was a great gothic cathedral of a face.

"You are Sheridan Meacher, fellow of Edinburgh University, Lecturer in History?" he asked.

I dislike being recognised at bus stops.

"European History," I said.

The expression on his face was not readable; weary triumph, perhaps? He motioned to me to follow him. At that moment, the crowd surged forward, so that he and I were borne out of it and into a side street.

"I want you to come with me," he said.

"I don't know you. What do you want?"

He wore a black and white uniform. That did not endear him to me. I had seen enough of uniform in those weary war years underground.

"Mr. Meacher, you are in trouble. I have a room not five minutes away from here; will you please come with me to it and discuss the situation with me? I assure you I will offer you no personal harm, if that is why you hesitate."

"What sort of trouble? I know of no trouble?"

"Let us go and discuss it."

I could look after myself with this fellow; with that knowledge I shrugged my shoulders and followed him. We went together down a couple of back streets, towards the Grass-market, and in at a grimy door. The man with the gothic face preceded me up a winding stair. At one point a door opened, a dim-lit hag's face peeped out at us, and then the door slammed again, leaving us in the gloom.

He paused on a landing and felt in his pocket. He said, "I shouldn't think a house like this has changed much since Dr. Johnson visited Edinburgh." Then in an altered tone, he added, "I mean—you did have a Dr. Johnson, Samuel Johnson, didn't you?"

Not understanding his phrasing—yet I had not taken him for other than an Englishman—I said, "Of course I know of Johnson; he visited this city to stay with his friend Boswell in—about 1773, I would say."

In the dark he sighed with relief. Sliding a key into a lock he said, "Of course, of course, I was just forgetting that the road from London to Edinburgh was open by that date. Forgive me."

He opened a door, switched on a light and ushered me into his room. I went in a half daze, for his remark had shaken me. What could the man mean? Edinburgh and London had been connected—though often tenuously—for a long time before Johnson's visit. I was beginning to form ideas about this gothic stranger—and all of them were later proved wrong.

His room was bare and nondescript, a typical lodging room with a combo toilet in one corner, in another a hand generator in case the main electricity supply failed, and a screen standing on the far side of the room with a bed behind it. He went across to the window to draw the curtains before turning to confront me.

"I should introduce myself, Mr. Meacher. My name is Apostolic Rastell, Captain Apostolic Rastell of the Matrix Investigation Corps."

I inclined my head and waited; the world was full of sinister-sounding establishments these days, and although I had never heard of the Matrix Investigation Corps, I did not intend to put myself at a disadvantage by saying so. We stood looking at each other, summing one another up. Captain Rastell was a considerable man, untidy perhaps,

but prepossessing, strongly built without being bulky, a man perhaps still in his twenties, and with that extraordinary face that looked as if it could have regarded the end of the world undismayed. He smiled and moved behind his screen, to emerge dragging an object like a trunk. This he stood on its end.

The trunk was locked with some sort of a combination lock. Rastell worked it, staring at me somewhat grimly as he listened to the tumblers click.

"You had better look at the inside of this before I offer any explanation," he said.

He opened the trunk. What I saw there drew me impulsively forward. I took a good look, and a horrible faintness overcame me. I staggered and he caught me, holding me as I recovered.

Inside the trunk was a small chair, a stool with a backrest. It was fringed with various instruments that reminded me vaguely of the drills and other accessories that stand by a dentist's chair. But it was what lay behind the chair that caught me off guard.

I saw myself reflected from a screen that covered the back of the trunk; the anonymous room was also reflected there, if reflected is the word, its dimensions cramped and twisted, so that it looked as if the figures of Rastell and myself stood on the outside rather than the inside of a cube. The effect was as if I peered into a distorting mirror; but this was no mirror—for I found myself staring distractedly at my own profile!

"What is it?"

"You are an intelligent man, Mr. Meacher, and since I am in a hurry I hope that already this sight has suggested to you that there are departments of life which are a mystery to you, and into which you have not peered or cared to peer. There are other earths than this one of yours, Mr. Meacher; I come from such a one, and I invite you to follow me back to it now."

I backed away without dignity, sitting down on a chair and staring up at him. It would be tedious here, and a little shameful, to recount the terrors, hopes and suppositions that fled through my mind. After a moment, I calmed myself enough to listen to what he was saying. It went something like this:

"You are not a philosopher, Mr. Meacher, but perhaps you know nevertheless that many men spend large parts of their lives waiting for a challenge; they prepare themselves for it, though they may not guess what it is until the moment comes. I hope you are such a man, for I have neither the time nor the patience for lengthy explanation. In the matrix from which I came, we had a dramatist last century called Jean Paul Sartre; in one of his plays, a man says to another, "Do you mean to say that you would judge the whole of someone's life by one single action?" and the other asks simply, "Why not?" So I ask you, Mr. Meacher, will you come with me?"

"Why should I?"

"You must ask yourself that." In the circumstances, what monstrous assumptions behind that remark!

"You will come? Excellent!" he said, coming forward and taking my arm. Unthinkably, I had risen, and he had taken my rising for assent. Perhaps it was.

What is the nature of the authority that one man can have over another? Unprotesting, I allowed myself to be led over to the seat in his—let me use his own term—his portal. He saw me settled there and said, "This is nothing that you are unprepared for; you may be astonished, but you are not surprised. It will be news for you, but probably nothing upon which you have not privately speculated, when I tell you that the earth as you know it is merely a three dimensional appearance—an outcrop, a geologist would call it—of a multi-dimensional universe. To comprehend the multi-dimensional universe is beyond man's power, and perhaps always will be; one impediment being that his senses register each of its dimensions as a three-dimensional reality."

"Rastell, for God's sake, I don't know what you are saying!"

"The violence of your denial persuades me otherwise. Let me put it this way, with an analogy with which you may be familiar. A two-dimensional creature lives on a strip of paper. A bubble—that is, a three-dimensional object—passes through the paper. How does the two-dimensional creature perceive the bubble? First as a point, which expands to a circle that at its maximum is the circumference of the bubble; the bubble is then half way through the paper; the circle then begins to contract until—"

"Yes, yes, I understand all that, but you are trying to imply that this two-dimensional creature can climb on to the bubble, which is—"

"Listen, all that stops the creature climbing on to the bubble is its attitude of mind, its system of logic. Its mind needs a twist through ninety degrees—and so does yours. Join the creature's strip of paper up at both ends and you get a lively representation of your mind: a closed circle! You can't perceive the other matrices. But I can make you perceive them. A twist of the paper gives you a mobius strip, and you get a one-sided object. I'm going to give you an injection now, Mr. Meacher, that will have a roughly similar effect on your perceptions, only you will gain a dimension instead of losing it."

It was crazy! He must somehow have hypnotised me—fascinated me certainly!—to make me go as far as that with him. I jumped up from the chair.

"Leave me alone, Rastell! I don't know what you are saying, and I don't want to. I don't want any part of it. I was mad to come here and listen to—Rastell!"

His name came from my lips as a shriek. He had put his hand as if to steady me, and plunged the tip of a small hypodermic into the vein of my left wrist. A warm and prickly sensation began to course up my arm.

As I swung towards him, I brought my right fist up, aiming a blow instinctively at his face. He ducked, putting out a hand to steady me as, carried off balance, I staggered forward.

"I'd sit down if I were you, Meacher. You have nicotinic in your veins, and if you are unused to it, any exertion may make you sick. Sit down, man."

My gaze fixed on his face, with its tall lines, and the extraordinarily sensible relationship between its various features. I saw that face, graven on to my sight, as a central point, a cardinal fact, a reference from which the whole universe might be mapped; for the influence of time and event lay in that face, until it in its turn influenced time and event, and in that linkage I saw symbolised the whole wheel of life that governs men. Yes, I knew—even at the time I knew—that already I was gliding under the influence of the drug Rastell had given me. It made no difference. Truth is truth, whether you find it or it finds you.

two

When I sat down in the seat, it was with a motion that held the same magic dualism. For the act might have seemed a submission to Rastell's will; yet I knew it was more vitally a demonstration of my will, as inside the universe of my body a part of me called my will had brought into play a thousand minute responses, as blood and tissue co-operated in the act. And at the same time that this dramatic and cosmic act was in progress, I was hearing the voice of Rastell, booming at me from a distance.

"In this matrix of yours, I understand you passed through what is now referred to as the Tobacco Age, when many people—this applied particularly to the first half of last century—were slaves to the tobacco habit. It was the age of the cigarette. Cigarettes were not the romantic objects portrayed by our historical novelists; they were killers, for the nicotine contained in them, though beneficial to the brain in small quantities, is death to the lungs when scattered over them in large quantities. However, before the cigarette finally went out of production towards the end of the sixties—how are you feeling, Meacher?—it won't take long—before the downfall of the cigarette firms, they developed nicomiotine. Because the firms were in general bad odour, the new drug lay neglected for fifty years; in fact in this matrix of yours it is neglected still, as far as I can ascertain."

He took my wrist and felt my pulse, which laboured beneath my skin like a man struggling to free himself from imprisonment in a sack. Sunk in a whole ocean of feeling, I said nothing; I could see the benefit of remaining unconscious all one's life. Then one could be free to pursue the real things.

"You probably won't know this, Meacher, but nicotine used to retard the passing of urine. It set in motion a chain of reactions which released a substance called vasopressin from the pituitary gland into the bloodstream; when the vasopressin reached the kidney, the excretion of water taken by the mouth was suppressed. Nicomiotine releases noradrenaline from the hypothalamus and from the tegmentum of the mid-brain, which is the part of the brain that controls consciousness and the functions of the consciousness; at the same time, the drug builds up miodrenaline in the peripheral

blood vessels. This results in what we call an "attention transfer." The result—I'm simplifying here, Meacher, because you probably aren't taking this in normally—the result is a dislocation of consciousness, necessary to switch over from one matrix to another. The flow of attention is to revert to my former analogy, given a mobius twist and tagged on to the next matrix.

"The seat on which you sit is in a circuit which can be tuned to various vibratory levels, each of which corresponds to a matrix. I move this lever here, and you and the portal will slip easily through into the matrix from which I have come. Don't think of it as going through a barrier; rather, you are avoiding a barrier.

"The effects of this technique can also be achieved by long mental discipline; it was this that the yogi were unwittingly reaching out for when they—ah, you are sliding through now, Meacher. Don't be alarmed."

I was not alarmed. I was standing outside my own shell and seeing that to all of us come moments of calm and detachment; that stillness might be the secret that only a handful of men in any generation stumbles on. And at the same long-drawn moment of time I was aware that my left foot had disintegrated.

No dismay assailed me. For the right foot had disintegrated too, and the wisdom and symmetry of this event merely pleased me. Everything was disintegrating into mist—not that I took it seriously, although for a moment I was frightened by the basilisk stare of my jacket buttons, staring up unwinkingly at me, so that I was reminded of those lines of Rimbaud's about "the coat buttons that are eyes of wild creatures glaring at you from the end of the corridors." Then buttons and Rimbaud and I were gone into mist!

A feeling of sickness preceded me into Rastell's matrix.

I sat up shivering in the seat, my head suddenly clear and my body temperature low. The drug had built up to a certain pitch and then abandoned me. It was as if a passionate love affair had been ended by an unexpected desertion, a betraying letter. In my misery, I looked about me and saw a room very like the room I had left. It was the same shape, it had the same doors and windows, with the same prospect out of the window; but the curtains were not drawn, and it was light outside. I fancied the furniture was

slightly different, but had not taken in the other room clearly enough to be positive. One thing I was sure of: the other room had not contained a little ugly man dressed in a one-piece denim suit and standing motionless by the door, staring at me.

Disappointment, anger, fear ran through me. Uncertainty, too. How could I be sure that I had not roused from a long unconsciousness, that this was not a trick of some kind? Where was the wretched Rastell? I got to my feet and ran behind the screen at the other side of the room. Nausea hit me as soon as I moved. Fortunately, there was a basin fitted to the wall. When I had been sick, I felt a little better.

As I emerged shakily from behind the screen, I found Rastell there.

"You'll soon feel better," he said. "The first time's always the worst. Now we'll have to get a move on. Can you walk all right? We'll catch a cab in the street."

"Where are we, Rastell? This is still Edinburgh, isn't it? What's happened?"

He snapped his fingers impatiently, but answered in a quiet voice.

"You have left the Edinburgh of AA688, which is how we designate your home matrix. We are now in the Edinburgh of AA541. In many vital respects, it much resembles the matrix you have left. In some ways you will find it identical. Only the workings of chance have brought divergencies from what you at first will think of as the norm. As you adjust to inter-matrix living, you'll realise that the norm does not exist. Let's move."

"I don't understand what you are saying. Are you saying that I may find my brother and his wife here?"

"Why not? It's quite possible that you may find yourself here—here and in a thousand other matrices. It seems to be a property of matter to imitate itself in all matrices and of chance to modify the imitations."

He said this as if repeating some sort of received idea, walking over as he did so to the shabby fellow, who, all this time, had stood patiently unmoving by the door. Despite my confusion, I saw this fellow wore a bracelet over his denims below one knee; from the bracelet radiated four short arms that seemed to bite into his flesh. Rastell produced a key from his pocket and thrust it into a lock in the bracelet. The

four arms fell outwards, and hung loosely from their hinges on the bracelet's rim. The man rubbed his leg and hobbled round the room, restoring his circulation. He kept his eye on both Rastell and me, but especially on me, without looking at either of us directly, and without speaking.

"Who is this man? What are you doing?" I asked.

"He might have tried to escape if I had not locked him still," Rastell said. He produced a bottle from under his tunic. "They still have whisky in this matrix, Meacher, you'll be glad to hear; have a good pull—it will help you take control of yourself."

Gratefully, I drank the warming stuff down from the bottle.

"I'm in control of myself, Rastell. But this talk of matter imitating itself in all matrices—it's like a vision of hell. For God's sake, how many matrices are there?"

"There is not time to go into all that now. You shall have the answers if you help us. As yet, in any case, we have uncovered more questions than answers. Verification of the existence of the multi-matrix universe was only made some twenty years ago; the Matrix Investigation Corps was only established fifteen years ago, in 2027, the year the Fourth World War broke out in your matrix. In this matrix, the war did not take place."

"Rastell, I'm sorry, you must return me to my own world. I want no part of this."

"You are a part of it. Dibbs, help Mr. Meacher to the door."

Dibbs was the voiceless one. He came towards me, keeping his eyes to the ground, but looking nastily alert as he advanced. I backed towards the door. Rastell grabbed my arm and pulled me round, not unkindly.

"You don't want to be mauled by a slave. Pull yourself together and let's get along. I know it's a shock at first, but you are a man of intelligence; you'll adjust."

I knocked his hand away.

"It's because I'm a man of intelligence that I reject all this. How many of these matrix worlds are there?"

"The Corps measures consciousness in dees. Spaced three dees apart from each other lies an infinity of matrices.... Yes, an infinity, Meacher, and I see the word does little to reassure you. Only a few dozen worlds are known as yet. Some are so like this that only by a few details—the taste

maybe of the whisky, or the name of a Sunday newspaper—do they differ at all; others—we found one, Meacher, where the earth was in an—an improperly created state, just a ball of turbulent rivers of mud, lying under permanent cloud.”

He opened the door as he was speaking, and we went together down the winding stair, and out into the street by a grimy door.

It had been evening when I went into that house, or a house like it. Now it was an iron grey day, with a daylight forged to match the stones of the city. Oh yes, this was Edinburgh all right, unmistakably Edinburgh, and unmistakably not the Edinburgh I had been born in.

The buildings looked the same, though a slight strangeness in the pattern they presented made me think that some of them were altered in ways I did not recollect. The people looked different, and dressed differently.

Gone were the shabby and talkative crowds among which Royal and I had travelled only a short while before. The streets were almost empty, and those that travelled on them were easily observed to fall into two classes. Some men and women there were who travelled the streets with their heads held high, who walked briskly, who smiled and saluted each other; they were well dressed, in what I thought of then as a ‘futuristic’ style, with wide plain collars and short cloaks of what looked like a stiff leather or plastic. Many of the men wore swords.

There was another class of man. They did not greet each other; they moved through the streets with no grace in their carriage, for whether they walked or loped—as many of them did—they kept their heads down and looked about only furtively from under their brows. Like Dibbs, they all wore denims, like him they bore the bracelets below one knee, and like him they bore a yellow disc on their backs, between their shoulder blades.

I had plenty of time to observe these people for Rastell, as he had promised, had got us a cab, and in this we set off in the direction of Waverley Station.

The cab amazed me. It would have held four men at a pinch, and it was worked by manpower. Three denimed men—I was already, I think, referring to them mentally as

the slave class—were chained to a seat behind the cab; Dibbs climbed up with them to make a fourth; together they worked away at foot pedals, and that was the way we moved, propelled by four sweating wretches!

In the streets ran several similar cabs, and even sedan chairs, which are well suited to the uneven nature of Edinburgh's topography. There were also men riding horseback, and the occasional conventional lorry. I saw no buses or private cars. Remembering how the latter class of vehicle had been forbidden in my own matrix, I asked Rastell about it.

"We happen to have more manpower than we have fuels," he said. "And unlike your wretchedly proletarian matrix, here most free men have leisure and find no need to hurry everywhere."

"You impressed on me the need for hurry."

"We are hurrying because the balance of this matrix is in a state of crisis. Civilization is threatened, and must be saved. You and others like you from other matrices are being brought here because we need the perspective that an extra-matrixial can give. Because your culture is inferior to ours does not mean that your abilities may not be valuable."

"Inferior? What do you mean, inferior? You look to be a couple of centuries behind us, with your antiquated sedans and these anachronistic pedal cabs."

"You don't measure progress by materialist standards, Meacher, I hope?" Up came his gothic eyebrows as he spoke.

"Indeed, I don't. I measure it by personal liberty, and from the bare glimpse I have had of your culture—your matrix, you have here nothing better than a slave state."

"There *is* nothing better than a slave state. You are a historian, aren't you, a man capable of judging not simply by the parochial standards of his own time? What race became great without slave labour, including the British Empire? Was not classical Greece a community of slave states? Who but slaves left all the lasting monuments of the world? In any case, you are prejudging. We have here a subject population, which is different thing from slavery."

"Is it to the people concerned?"

"Oh, for Church's sake, be silent, Meacher. You do nothing but verbalise."

"Why invoke the church about it?"

"Because I am a member of the Church. Take care not to blaspheme, Meacher. During your stay here you will naturally be subject to our laws, and the Church keeps a firmer hold over its rights than it does in your matrix."

I fell gloomily silent. We had laboured up on to George IV Bridge. Two of the slaves, working at the furthest extent of their chains, had jumped down from the back of the cab and pushed us over that stretch of the way. Having crossed the bridge, we began to go steeply down by The Mound, braking and free-wheeling alternately, though a flywheel removed most of the unpleasant jerkiness from this method of progress. Edinburgh Castle, grandly high on our left, looked unchanged to me, but in the more modern part of the town before us I saw much change, without being able to identify any particular bit of it with certainty; for Royal, Candida and I had not lived very long in Edinburgh.

Whistles sounded ahead. I took no notice, until Rastell stiffened and drew a revolver from his pocket. Ahead, by the steps of the Assembly Hall, a cab had crashed and turned over on to its side. The three slaves attached to it could be seen—we had them in sight just round the bend—wrenching at their chains, trying to detach them from the cab. A passenger had survived the crash. He had his head out of the window and was blowing a whistle.

"The subs have allowed another crash—this is a favourite spot," Rastell said. "They get too negligent."

"It's a difficult corner. How can you tell they allowed it to happen?"

Giving me no answer, Rastell half opened the door of our cab and leant out to shout at our slaves.

"Hey, you subs, stop this cab at once. I want to get out. Dibbs, jump down!"

We squealed to a halt on the slope. When Rastell jumped out, I did the same. The air was cold. I was stiff and uneasy, very aware that I was so far from home that the distance could not be measured in miles. I looked about, and Dibbs and the three peddlers watched me with their eyebrows.

"Better follow me, Meacher," Rastell called. He had begun to run towards the wrecked cab. One of the slaves there had wrenched his chain from its anchorage in the flimsy metal of the cab. Moving forward, he swung the loose end of the

chain and brought it across the head of the passenger. The whistling stopped in mid-note. The passenger sagged to one side, and then slid out of our sight into the cab. By that time, the slave had jumped on to the top of the cab and turned to face Rastell. Other whistles began to shrill. A siren wailed.

When the slave on the cab saw that Rastell carried a gun, his expression changed. I saw his look of dismay as he motioned to his fellows who were still captive and jumped down behind the cab. His fellows stood there trembling, no longer trying to get away.

Rastell did not fire. A car came tearing up the hill with sirens wailing and bucked to a halt between Rastell and the upturned cab. Black and white uniformed men jumped out. They wore swords and carried guns. On the roof of the car was a winking sign that read CHURCH POLICE. Rastell hurried over to them. I stayed where I was, half in the shelter of our cab, undecided, not wanting any part of anything. Dibbs and his fellow subs stood where they were, not moving, not speaking.

A crowd was collecting by the steps of the Assembly Hall, a crowd composed of the ruling class. The sub who had broken loose was kicked into the back of the police car. While the others indulged in argument I had time to look at the police car more carefully. It was an odd vehicle, driven, I felt sure, by an internal combustion engine, a powerful beast, but without the streamlining that is characteristic of the cars I grew up with. It had a double door set in either side, and another, through which the wretched sub was pushed, at the back. Its windows were narrow, pointed, and grouped into pairs, in the style of windows in the Early English churches; even the windscreen had been divided into six in this way. The whole thing was elaborately painted, in white and light blue and yellow. Why not, I thought, when you have plenty of time and slave labour is cheap?

Rastell was returning, though the debate round the steps of the Assembly Hall was still on.

"Let's get on," Rastell said. He signalled curtly to Dibbs and the subs. We all climbed aboard and resumed our journey. I looked at the crowd about the church police car as we passed it. With a start, I thought I recognised one of the hangers-on in the crowd. He looked much like my

brother Royal; then I told myself that my nerves were being irresponsible.

"There's too much of that sort of incident," Rastell said. "This trouble flared up all at once a few years ago. They must have a leader."

"I'd guess they also had a cause. What will happen to the man who broke free from the cab and coshed the passenger? "

"That sub? " He looked at me, his lips curving in a smile not entirely free from malice. "He struck a churchgoer. I was not the only witness. He'll be hanged at the castle next week. What else could we do with him? He'll be granted last rites."

t h r e e

The grand stretch of Princes Street, a street fit for any capital, was changed, although many of the buildings were as I knew them. Their rather commercial gaiety had gone. They presented a drab uniformity now. Their windows were unwashed; the goods displayed for sale in the shop windows looked uninviting. I peered eagerly at them as we thudded by at a stiff walking pace. The big car showrooms had gone, the shops were not piled with the gadgets I knew. On the pavements, greater variety was in evidence. Many people were about, looking cheerful as they shopped. Few slaves in sight, and I now observed that among the free some looked far less prosperous than others. Sedans, pedal-cabs, four-wheel bicycles and little electrically powered cars moved busily about. I was sorry when we halted before a large grey building and Rastell signalled me to alight.

"This is the headquarters of my chapter," he said, as we pushed through the doors with Dibbs following.

"I believe it's a block of offices in my matrix."

"On the contrary, it is the Commission for Nuclear Rearmament. Are you forgetting already how war-orientated your matrix is? " He relented then, and said in less ironic tones, "However, you'll probably find us too religious. It's a matter of viewpoint really."

The place was bustling. The foyer reminded me of an old-fashioned hotel; its furniture was cumbrous and oddly

designed, reminding me of the styles of Elizabeth II's era, fifty years ago or more, except that everything was so colourless.

Rastell marched over to a noticeboard and scanned it.

"We have half-an-hour before the next history briefing for extra-matriculals. I'll see you are found a room where you can wash and rest. I have one or two people I ought to see. We'll meet again, shortly, at the briefing."

He signalled a passing servant, a girl dressed not in denims but in a curious black and white pantaloons. I felt anxious at leaving Rastell, my one contact with my own matrix. He interpreted my expression, and arched one of his eyebrows.

"This sub girl will take good care of you, Meacher. Under the dispensation, she will serve you in any way you may require."

As he disappeared, I thought, not an unlikeable devil, given better circumstances. I followed the sub girl, noting the yellow disc between her shoulder blades. She led me up one flight of stairs and along a corridor, and opened a door for me. When I was inside, she followed, locked the door, and handed me the key. Despite myself, I began to get ideas. In that awful dress, she looked foolish, and her face was pasty, but she was young and with good features.

"What's your name?"

She pointed to a button on her dress. On it was the name Ann.

"You are Ann? Can't you talk?"

She shook her head. A sensation like cold needles prickled in my chest; it occurred to me that I had not heard a word from Dibbs or from the slaves by the upturned cab. Moving towards her, I touched her chin.

"Open your mouth, Ann."

Meekly, she let her jaw hang. No, her tongue was there, as well as several teeth that needed stopping or pulling. The helplessness of the creature overwhelmed me.

"Why can't you speak, Ann?"

She closed her jaw and lifted up her chin. On the whiteness of her neck ran an ugly red scar. Uncheckably, the tears sprang to my eyes. I clasped her thin shoulders and let anger burn over me.

"Is this done to all slaves?" Shake of head. "To some—to most of them?" Nod. "Some sort of punishment?" Nod. "Hurt you?" Nod. So remote! "Are there other men like,

me, from other matrices, along this corridor? " Blank look, " I mean, other strangers from other places like me? " Nod. " Take me to one of them."

I gave her the key. She unlocked the door and we went into the corridor. At the door of the room next to mine she stopped. Her key fitted that lock, and the door swung open.

A fellow with a thatch of wispy yellow hair and stubble all round a great leg of jaw sat at a table eating. He ate with a spoon, furiously. Though he looked up as I came in, he did not interrupt the ladling of food into his mouth.

" You're an extra-matrical? " I asked. He made noises of assent into his stew.

" So am I. My name's Sheridan Meacher. We can't agree to give these people any help to bolster up their regime. Their entire system is evil, and must be destroyed. I'm trying to get people to help me."

He put his spoon down. He stood up. He leant over the table.

" What's evil about the system here, jack? "

I showed him Ann's scars, explaining what they were. He laughed.

" You want to come and have a look at my home matrix," he said. " Ever since an unsuccessful revolution ten years ago, the Chinese have employed all scholars in chain gangs. They're busy making roads across the Cairngorms."

" The Chinese? What have they to do with it? "

" Didn't they win the third world war in your matrix? "

" Win it?! They didn't even fight it! "

" Well, then, you're just lucky, Jack, and if I were you I'd be inclined to keep my trap shut."

Before I had backed out of his room, he was again spooning stew into his mouth.

In the next room was a little plump man, red in the face and bald of head, who jumped quickly back from his sub girl as I entered.

" I'm extra-matrical like you," I told him, " and I don't like what I have seen here so far. I hope you feel that these people should not be encouraged in any way."

" We've rather got to make the best of things now we're here, that's my feeling," he said, coming forward to look at me. " What don't you like about this place? "

"I've only just arrived, but this system of slavery—it alone is enough to convince me that I can't possibly support the ruling regime. You must feel the same."

He scratched his bald head.

"You could have worse than slavery, you know. At least slavery guarantees that a part of the population lives about the level of animals. In the Britain of my matrix—and I expect you have found the same—the standard of living has been declining ever since the beginning of the century, so much so that some people are beginning to whisper that communism may not after all be the solution we—"

"Communism in Britain? Since when?"

"You sound so surprised, anyone would have thought I said democracy. After the success of the General Strike of 1929, the first communist government was established under the leadership of Sir Harold Pollitt."

"All right, thanks very much. Just tell me this—will you back me in opposing this regime of slavery?"

"Well, I don't oppose you in opposing it, comrade, but first I'd want to know a little more—"

I slammed the door on him. I backed out so hurriedly, I bumped into another man moving rapidly down the corridor. Brought up short, we regarded each other. He was young and dark, about my weight and height, with a high bridge to his nose, and I liked the look of him immediately.

"You're an extra-matrical?"

He smiled and held out his hand. When I held out mine, he grasped my elbow instead; so I grasped his elbow.

"My name is Mark Claud Gale. I'm on an errand of revolt, and you look like a possible conscript. None of these spineless fellows will back me up, but I'm not going to give this government any help—"

"Ah, count me with you all the way, Mark. Well met! I am Sherry Meacher, and I also am recruiting. If we stick together and defy the regime, others may follow our example, and we will see that we are returned to our own matrix. And then perhaps the slaves—"

The brazen tongue of a bell interrupted me.

"Time for the historical briefing," Mark said. "Let's go and learn what we can, Sherry; the knowledge may be of use to us later. By my shrine, but this is an adventure!"

This aspect of the matter had not struck me before, but to have this dependable ally heartened me immensely, and I felt ready for anything. A heady and pleasurable excitement filled me. I could not wait to get to the briefing, and to hear, to listen, to be assaulted and insulted by a barrage of new facts that—only a day ago—would have seemed the wildest fantasy.

A pair of dark-clothed church police appeared at the head of the stairs and began ushering us down. The bald man from communist Britain (but for all I knew there were a million communist Britains) tagged on with us, but did not speak. Ann disappeared as we pressed downstairs. Counting heads, I noted that there were twenty-two of us. As we filed into a hall at the back of the foyer, we found another thirty-odd people awaiting us; from the variety of clothes they were wearing, it was apparent that they were also extra-matriculials.

We sat at long tables on benches, and looked at the head table, which stood on a dais and contained three men, each with a secretary, and church police standing behind them. One of the three men was Rastell; he gave no sign of having noticed me, and I wondered if I should ever have occasion to speak to him again.

A bell sounded, and one of the men on the dais, a white-haired man of good bearing, rose to his feet.

"Gentlemen and sinners, you are welcome in this peaceful matrix. We thank you for coming here to offer us help and wisdom. I am the Lieutenant Deacon Administered Bligh, and with me are the two members of my committee. Captain Apostolic Rastell is now going to give you a brief history of this matrix, so that you may have a correct perspective. A sub will come round distributing pens and paper to all who wish to make notes."

Rastell rose, bowed slightly to Bligh and went straight into his talk.

He spoke for almost two hours. From the body of the hall, hardly a whisper came. We listened fascinated to the history of a world like ours, and yet so hauntingly unlike. Rastell's version was heavily trimmed by propaganda, yet the man's own personality enlivened even the heaviest passage of dialectic.

A few instances of the strange things Rastell told us must suffice. In this matrix, the concept of nationality had not risen as early as it had in the matrix I knew. In my home matrix (AA688 Rastell had called it, and I had committed the number to memory) German and Italian nationality had not been achieved until the second half of the nineteenth century, but the other great European countries had achieved unity several centuries earlier. In this matrix in which I now found myself, the kings of England and France had been less successful in their struggles against the feudal lords; one reason for this was, I gathered, that the church had looked less favourably on the concept of earthly kingdoms.

England had only become a united kingdom in 1914, at the time of the French-German war, in which Britain was neutral and the United States of America sold armaments to both sides. In the first world war of 1939, the alignment of power was as I knew it, with a Nazi Germany fighting against Britain and France and, later, America and Russia entering as their allies, while Japan fought on the same side as Germany. Japan, however, had been Christianised. The Americans, having been less attracted to a less heavily industrialised Europe, had turned their attention and their missionaries to Japan earlier than they had done in my matrix.

This led to a crisis in the conduct of the war. American and British scientists developed an atomic bomb. Before using this weapon against the Japanese and German enemy, the thirty-fifth president of the United States, Benedict H. Denning, consulted with the Convocation of Churches. The Convocation was a powerful group. It not only forbade the use of such a weapon against nominally Christian countries; it gradually took over jurisdiction of the weapon. The war lasted until 1948, by which time the Church was completely in control of all nuclear power development.

A long and hard war had vitiated both the U.S. and her allies. At the end of the conflict, weak governments fell and a strong church rose as a challenging power. Its rule had spread to other countries, particularly to Europe, which was occupied after the war, not by armed forces, but by battalions of churchmen.

Since that date, almost a century ago, Mother Church had

kept the fruits and the secrets of nuclear power under her voluminous skirts. The exhaustion of natural resources had necessitated the employment of subject populations, but there had been no war since 1948. The rule of religion poured out its benefits on to all mankind. What Rastell did not mention were any negative or suppressive results of this rule.

Some of these suppressions were obvious enough. With an autocratic central control and the lack of incentives that wars provide, scientific and technological developments had dropped away. World population, on the other hand, had risen steeply—Rastell mentioned at one point that, after the amalgamation of the Grand Christian Church in 1979, methods of contraception were universally discouraged. The new populations were born into slavery.

“We have been able to turn away from materialism because we have a large subject population to perform the menial tasks of the world for us,” Rastell said. It struck me at the time that this was a neat way of saying that almost every nation without mechanical labour is forced to use slaves.

From what he said, and from what he omitted, it became apparent that almost the only scientific development since the 1960's was the portals and trans-matrical travel. The Church had not encouraged space travel. No doubt they would have been shocked to learn of the Battle of Venus in the Fifth World War, in which I had taken part.

When Rastell had finished speaking, a stunned silence lay over the hall. It had grown dusk while he talked; now lights came reluctantly on as we returned to awareness of our own situation. I could see by the faces about me that to many of the extra-matricals, Rastell's material had been more astonishing than I found it.

What amazed me most was the way the Church had departed from what it represented in my matrix. Rather glibly, I decided that it was the possession of nuclear power that had worked the change. Such a possession would have needed strong men to control it, and obviously the strong men had ousted the meek. Another case of absolute power corrupting absolutely. So I said to myself, with the Church cast as villain of the piece. Then Administered Bligh rose again, and made me doubt my own reasoning.

"Now that you have a perspective with which to work," he said, "we can proceed to place before you the problem with which we are faced. As most of you will know, you were brought here to give us your help. All of you are students of history in some form or other. A meal is going to be served to you right away; afterwards, we shall explain the problem in detail and invite your advice; but now I will put it to you in general terms, so that you can consider it while you eat.

"We try to instill into our subject population the eternal truth that life in this world is always accompanied by sorrow, alike for those that lead and those that are led, and that they must expect to find their rewards for virtue in the hereafter. But subs do not learn. Several times they have risen against their masters. Now—I will tell you frankly, gentlemen—we are faced with a much more serious revolt. The subs have captured the capital; London is in their hands. The question we are going to ask you, with all its ramifications, is this: will leniency or harshness be the most effective way of dealing with them? In giving us your answers, you must bear in mind the parallels with your own times."

He sat down. Already plates were clattering. Subs of both sexes poured forth from doors at the far end of the hall, bearing food.

The little bald man from communist Britain was sitting next to me.

"An interesting poser, that," he said. "Leniency is always striking to the uninformed mind, if it is properly stage-managed."

"These people are dogs, spineless hypocrites," Mark told him. "And you must come from a nasty, boot-licking culture if you can seriously give their problem a minute's thought. Don't you agree, Sherry?"

He had a merry, honest face. It banished my doubts.

"It cheers me immensely to hear that they are having trouble in London. There are about fifty extra-matriculials here, Mark. Quite a few of them must feel as we do and will refuse to help this regime. Let's find them and get them together—"

Mark held up his hand.

"No, Sherry. Listen!" He leant forward to speak confidentially. Bald Head also leant forward to catch his words. Mark placed his palm over the man's nose and pushed him away.

"Go and play in the bushes, smoothpate," he said. To me he said, "Two's never a crowd. An undisciplined bunch of men is nothing but a pain in the kilt. I know, I've had experience. In my own matrix, I'm History Instructor in one of our military schools. I've served all over the world—I only got back from legion duty in Kashmir a week before these people caught me. Believe me, these people are used to dealing with slaves, not free men; the two of us can get away with murder."

"What are you planning?" I had a nasty feeling that I had let myself in for more trouble than I had bargained for.

"First we test their resourcefulness. At the same time we get weapons. Can you fight, Sherry? You look to me a warrior."

"I fought in World War V, on Earth and Venus."

"All these world wars! My matrix is completely different—we have only local campaigns. Much more sensible! When we have time, we must talk and talk—and listen, of course. Just now, we must get to the kitchens. Kitchens are always well stocked with weapons, even if these curs are vegetarian."

He did not wait for my agreement. He had slipped from the bench and was off, bent double so that he could not be seen from the dais. I did the only possible thing. Glad in my heart to be committed, I followed.

Double swing doors of heavy wood led into the kitchen. We barged in. It was a huge place, and gave an impression of darkness rather than dirt, but all the equipment looked to me incredibly old-fashioned.

There was an overseer with a short whip in his hand who saw us at once and came towards us. He had a long raw face and sandy eyebrows — yes, an Edinburgh type, I thought, even as I cast about and noted that there was only one other overseer in the whole place, to watch over the activities of perhaps thirty slaves. A plan formed in my mind.

"Leave this one to me," I told Mark.

As the overseer came up, with a "What do you gentlemen want, pray?" on his lips, I swung up a metal tray from a table at my right hand. The edge of it caught him clean across the bridge of his nose, and he dropped as if dead. Startled, I saw he had a yellow disc between his shoulder blades.

"I'll get the other blighter," Mark said, clapping my shoulder as he passed.

There were thick-handled mops standing in buckets against one wall. I seized one and ran it through the handles of the doors into the hall. That would settle them for a minute or two. Another pair of swing doors led to a scullery; I fixed them in the same way. One other door led from the kitchen, a wide door that gave on to a courtyard. Pushing a great wooden table, I smashed it against the door and jammed it shut.

Turning, I saw that Mark had settled with his overseer. By now the slaves had grasped that something had happened. They dropped their various tasks and stood gaping at us. Grabbing a butcher's knife that lay on a bench, I jumped on to the bench and spoke to them.

"Men, you can be free! It's a man's right to be free! Arm yourselves and help us fight those who oppress you. You are not alone. If you help us, others will help you. Now is the time for revenge. Arm yourselves! Fight for your freedom! Fight for your lives!"

I saw Mark turn to me in amazement and horror. Even more surprising to me was the response of the subs. They knotted together in fear, gazing at me as if I was about to kill them. Taken off balance, I waved my arms and shouted. A hammering at the hall doors roused them. Crying, they rushed for it, and began to try and tear away my mop, each impeding the other in their anxiety.

Jumping down among them, I pushed them back. They were flimsy and frightened.

"I'm trying to help you! Don't let them in—they'll kill you. You know they'll kill you. Barricade the doors with the tables!"

All they did was shrink back. A few uttered a sort of unvoiced cry.

Mark roughly grabbed my arm.

"Sherry, by my shrine, you're crazy! These are slaves! Scum! They are useless to us. They won't fight — slaves never do unless they have tasted better days. Leave them. Arm yourself and let's get out of here."

"But Mark, the whole idea—"

He shoved a great bunched fist under my jaw, swinging it without touching me in time with his words.

"The idea is to overturn this Church regime. I know where my duty lies—with the free, not with the servile. Forget these slaves! Grab a bigger knife and move."

"But we can't leave these people—"

"You liberal fool, we can and we will!" He ran across to a long lead sink and pulled a heavy chopping knife from it, tossing it to me. As I caught it, he bellowed again at me to move. By now, the hammering on the kitchen door had grown in volume. They were seriously alarmed, and would be breaking in in a minute. The slaves cowered in a group nearby, watching Mark and me anxiously. I turned and ran after Mark.

He pointed to a heavy goods lift in one corner. We ran to it.

"It only leads upstairs."

"That'll do. Get in, and haul."

We jumped into the cumbrous contraption. It could be manhandled from inside by the ropes that supported it.

"Hey, stop!"

At the shout, both Mark and I turned. The overseer I had laid out with the tray was staggering towards us.

"Let me join you," he said. "I'd sooner die than carry on as I am. I'll fight on your side."

"You're an overseer. We don't want you!" I said.

"No, wait," Mark said. "He is a promoted slave, isn't that right, fellow? They generally have plenty of fight in them because they've learnt the difference between better and worse. Climb in, man. You can show us the layout of this place."

The overseer climbed in beside us, and helped to haul away on the ropes. We creaked up into darkness. As we bent to the task, Mark said, "We want church police uniforms as quickly as possible. Then we can walk out of the building with any luck."

"Should be easy enough," grunted the overseer. "Friends,

whether we meet death or daylight, my name's Andy, and I'm glad to be of your company."

"We're Mark and Sherry, and that tray was not delivered in anger."

"Man, I'd thought you'd cleft my skull in two pieces. I must work off my sorrow on a churchgoer as soon as possible."

He hadn't long to wait before he did that. As we emerged on to the ill-lit first floor landing, a portly man in gaiters and some sort of ecclesiastical garb was passing the hatchway: As he turned, saw us, and opened his mouth, I leapt out at him. He gave a shout before I could bring him to the ground, and almost immediately a police officer appeared. I'll never forget his look of horrified surprise as he rounded the corner and came upon three wild men. He went for his gun far too late. Andy was there, sinking a steel blade through his jacket, through his chest, into his heart. He died with the look of surprise still frozen on to his face.

"Ah, blood of the bull, neatly done, my noble lads!" Mark exclaimed. He pulled open a nearby door, and we dragged the two bodies into the room. A wood fire burned in an old-fashioned grate. It looked as if the occupant of the room might be back fairly shortly.

"We've got two good sets of clothing here," I said. "You two climb into them if they'll fit. I'll see what goes on outside. I'm sure you wouldn't want anyone to catch you with your trousers down."

The portly man in gaiters was unconscious. Mark gagged him before beginning to strip off his clothes.

f o u r

Prowling in the corridor, I could hear a din from below. It seemed to be rising from the lift shaft. I knew we were in the thick of trouble, and the knowledge only delighted and excited me. As I got to the head of the stairs, I heard a footstep on them, and knew someone was almost at the top of them, ascending rapidly but quietly. A sort of broom cupboard on wheels stood by me; hurriedly I slid behind it, into the shadows, not sure whether I had exposed myself to view or not.

Whoever it was had gained the landing. A sort of fury to attack—based perhaps on fear—overcame me. I heaved the cupboard away from the wall and flung myself out. Falling, the cupboard struck the newcomer, sending him spinning against the wall. I was at his throat before I realised it was Rastell.

"Mark!" I called. He appeared almost at once, and we dragged Rastell into our room and shut the door. Mark drew his knife.

"Don't kill him, Mark. I know him."

"Know him? He's our enemy, Sherry. Let me skewer him and you can wear his uniform. It's about your size."

"Aye, skewer him, or I will," Andy said.

"Leave him alone," I said. "We'll strip him and leave him tied up here, but I won't see him killed."

"Well, look sharp," said Mark, and he and Andy lowered their knives.

Rastell's face had turned an ashy shade of white. He made no protest as I pulled off his jacket and trousers. I hated to see him look so craven.

"Remember what you said, Rastell? 'Men spend large parts of their lives awaiting a challenge.' Well, here it is!"

He did not answer a word. As I tugged his garments on to myself, I turned to Mark.

"What's the plan?"

"These people aren't efficient, or they'd never have failed to post guards over us in the hall. After all, they had no particular reason to think we should be friendly. But they can get mobilised against us more quickly than we can gather a force together against them. So we must leave Edinburgh."

"There is a police car outside. We could steal that and join the rebellion in London, if either of you can drive," Andy said. He was over by the window, peering out at the back of the building.

"In my matrix, transport is publicly owned, and I'm no driver," I said.

"In mine, one learns to drive as part of the initiation rites at puberty," Mark said. Going to stare down at the car with Andy, he said, "We'll try it. Hurry up and get those clothes on, Sherry. But we won't try for London. We must leave Edinburgh the way we came—by the portal machines. The

one that brought me here was up on Arthur's Seat, and there were others beside it. We can drive there straight away. Once we get back to our own worlds—Andy, you can come to mine with me—we can muster aid there, and then reappear in London, armed and properly prepared to fight. My government would welcome the chance."

I was not sure whether mine would, vitiated as the nation's resources were after a long thermonuclear war, but in outline the plan was a good one. It was no time for argument. Having buttoned up Rastell's tunic over my chest, I ripped a length of cord from the blind on the window and tied Rastell to the bars at the back of a cumbersome sofa. As I finished doing this, something creaked in the corridor. We all three turned to the door at once.

"It's the lift going down!" Andy exclaimed. "Come on, Sherry, they're on to us."

With a whoop, Mark grabbed up a heavy rug that lay before the fire. Burying his hands in it, he seized the fire-basket out of the fireplace and ran with it blazing and smoking out of the room. He flung it, and burning logs, basket, and rug went flying down the lift shaft after the lift. Hardly pausing, he ran to the top of the stairs with us after him. We raced down together.

A half dozen church police, revolvers at the ready, came charging along the lower corridor. We met them at the bottom of the stairs. Before Mark could do anything rash, I gripped his arm and called to the police, pointing wildly back up the stairs as I did so, "Quickly, they're up there—second floor! Cover them while we go and get the hoses!"

Cheering, the police burst past us. The look of delight on Andy's face! As we ran to a rear exit, we could hear screams from the direction of the kitchen. I wondered if the lift was on fire, or if the slaves were being beaten for failing to stop us.

We broke out into a courtyard, under surveillance from a hundred windows. Although it was dark, several slaves were about, unloading meat from a van, lighting their way with long waxy torches. Nearer to us stood the car we had seen from the upper window; a policeman in the black and white uniform sat at the wheel, holding a paper, but looking

uneasily about. As I wrenched open his door, he flung the paper in my face and fumbled for his gun. Yelling like a savage, I threw all my weight on him, knocking him sideways across the seat, springing on top of him. Andy had piled into the back seat. His hands came over to grasp the wretched man round the neck. At the same moment, the gun exploded.

Its noise, breaking only a foot away from my ear, seemed almost enough by itself to kill me, though the bullet tore through the roof. The man was struggling violently under me, but for the present I could do nothing; all fight had gone from me. I lay across the policeman while Andy choked the life out of him.

As they were struggling, Mark had started the car. His hands ran all over the controls as he tested their functions. It bucked as he cursed it, and then moved forward. In a daze I saw what happened next.

Two police officers came dashing out of a doorway slightly ahead. The revolver shot had brought them. They were armed only with swords. Without pausing, they both jumped on to the running board on the near side of the car. Unfortunately some of the narrow windows were open, and so they clung there. One managed to draw his sword, thrusting it in at Andy, who still struggled with my man. He let go and grasped the wrist that held the sword. As if in slow motion, as we slowly rolled forward, I saw the other hanger-on unsheath his sword and bring it through the window, preparing to settle Andy before he settled me. I could do nothing. The concussion of the explosion so near my head still left me dazed. I just slumped there, looking at the well-tended sword blade as it stabbed towards Andy.

Gathering speed, Mark slewed the wheel. He headed for the meat van. Slaves shrieked and scattered. Mark swerved again, missing the other vehicle by inches. A flaring torch splashed over our front windows. Agony distorted the faces of our two hangers on. Their heads twisted, their mouths gaped open, their swords dropped, as they were crushed between the two vehicles and fell away from our sight.

Andy was patting us both on the back and cheering. He produced a small flask of whisky—which he found in the hip pocket of the trousers he had commandeered and made me take a sizeable swig. My throat burned and I felt better.

The fellow I was half-lying on was unconscious. Together, Andy and I dragged him over into the back seat.

"This is a crazy car to drive," Mark said, but he was doing well. We were clear on to the streets now. There was no sign of alarm here, and Mark was driving slowly, so as not to excite attention. The streets were ill-lit, and little traffic was about. I had no idea of the time, but it could not have been later than eight o'clock, yet hardly a soul could be seen. The slaves, I thought, probably had a curfew; the rest were probably in bed or at prayers.

"It'll be wonderful to get another place to live," Andy said. "And while I think of it, slow down, Mark, and turn right here up Hanover Street. There's a big government store up at the top here, Peace Militant it's called, that supplies only to officials, I've heard. One of the fellows in the kitchen had to work here once for a time. If we can get there it'll be shut for certain—we can break in and find some of these portals."

Mark shifted gear, and we growled up hill. Off Princes Street, lights were few and far between. At the top of the road we found the store. It was a great solid granite block with little pinchpenny ecclesiastical windows in which goods darkly lay. A board above a barred door said Peace Militant. Andy groaned.

At that moment I was taking another mouthful of his whisky. I turned to see what was the matter. The man he had half strangled had revived and thrust a knife between his ribs. He was just withdrawing it as I turned. Dim light shone on the blade, and by that same tawdry glow I saw his teeth as he growled and came at me. I was already at him with the bottle.

The heel of it caught him in the eye. Involuntarily, he brought his hand up, and I grasped his wrist and wrenched the knife from his grip. He yelped. My fury was back. Climbing over the seat at him, I bore him down into the darkness, while the knife—his own knife!—sunk down and carried him into a night from which there would never be a dawn.

I found Mark was shaking me.

"You did a good job, boy, but once is enough. Leave him. Come on, we've got to get into the shop quickly before they catch up with us."

"He's killed Andy. Andy's dead!"

"I'm sorry about it too. Weeping won't help it. Andy's dog's meat now. Come on Sherry, you're a real warrior. Let's move."

We got out on to the pavement. With an elbow, Mark stove in a window, and we climbed through. As simple as that! That terrible feeling of excitement was on me.

We began tramping through the store.

The ground floor yielded nothing, though we separated and searched. We were about to go upstairs when I found a notice board on which was a floor directory. In the light filtering in from outside, I read a line that ran: Basement: Tropical Plants, Gardens, Cafe, Library, Extra-matrical Equipment. Mark and I took the stairs at a run.

Below ground, we thought it safe enough to switch on a couple of lights. Here was the first evidence that this civilisation had some sort of aesthetic sense. Heating was on, and in the warmth basked a tropical garden. Flowering trees and shrubs, a line of banana plants, gaudy hibiscus, rioted here in carefully tended disorder. The centrepiece was a pool on which lilies floated and the lights were reflected back in dark water. Beyond the pool, the cafe had been arranged with tables and chairs out on a terrace overlooking the pool. Attractive, I thought, and we pushed past the chairs and came to the next department. Here stood a dozen portals, made in several different sizes and models.

We both cheered, dropped our knives, and got to work.

This was something about which we knew nothing. There was much to be learnt before we could return to our own worlds. To my relief, we found that the portals we came across first were primed for immediate sale and contained phials of nicomiotine as well as other drugs. There were manuals of instruction provided, and we sat down to master their contents with what patience we had.

The business of returning to one's own matrix turned out to be fairly simple. One had a preliminary injection of a fluid with a complicated name which seemed to be a kind of tranquilizer, followed by a jab of nicomiotine in the stated quantity according to one's size/age ratio, and then sat in the portal seat, the vibratory rate of which could be adjusted to

matrix numbers shown on a dial. When the drugs took and the body's vibratory rate reached the correct pitch, the return was effected.

"These people may have established a loathesome social order, but this invention is something to their credit," I said. "And if they would only educate and liberate their slaves, I can't help admiring any matrix that has escaped with no more than one world war."

"We've had no world wars," Mark growled.

"Then you look at it differently, but for the slaves."

"Sherry, you keep talking about these slaves. I'm tired of the subject. By the Phrygian birth, forget all about them. In every matrix there must be conquerors and conquered, dogs and masters. It's a law of human nature."

I dropped the instruction manual and stared into his face.

"What are you saying? We have only done what we have done, fought as we have, for the sake of the poor wretches enslaved here. What else did we fight for?"

He was crouching beside me. His face had set hard. His words fell from his lips like little graven images.

"I have done nothing for the slaves. What I have done has been against the Church."

"As far as that goes, I'm pretty startled by its conduct too. In my matrix, the Christian Church is a power for good. Though I don't belong to it myself."

"Death to the Christian Church! It's the Christian Church I fight against!" He jumped to his feet. I leapt up too, my own anger woken by his words, and we stood glaring at each other.

"You're crazy, Mark. We may not agree with the Church, but it has been the established church in Britain now for centuries. To start —"

"Not in my Britain! It's not established in my Britain. Christianity is the faith of dogs and underlings where I come from. When Rastell started to tell us his history, he talked about the Roman Empire being established in the East by Constantine the Great, and he said that Constantine, followed by an emperor he called Theodosius, established Christianity as the official creed of the Empire. Did it happen that way in your matrix?"

"Yes, just as Rastell said."

"Well, it didn't happen in mine. I know of this man you call Constantine; we call him Flavius Constantinus. Of Theodosius I have not heard. Constantinus was killed by his father-in-law, Maximian, and never became emperor. Maxentius the Great became emperor after Diocletian."

I was puzzled now, as well as angry. Gibbon no doubt would have been delighted to hear of this setback for Christianity, but its implication left me baffled.

"All this was seventeen centuries ago. What has it to do with us?"

"Everything, my friend, everything. In your matrix and in this one Christianity was imposed on the West by two misguided emperors. In mine it was stamped out, though it still survives among the barbarians and slaves whom we rule in the East, and the True Religion was fostered, and grew."

"The True Religion?"

"By my shrine, Sherry, have you never heard of the soldier's god? Then bow down before the name of Mithras!"

I saw it then, saw above all my criminal stupidity in thinking that because we seemed to have a common purpose we might have a common past. This man, with whom I had spent the fiercest hour of my life, was an enemy. How much of an enemy, I thought I saw before he did, and there lay my only advantage. He was less clear now about conditions in my matrix than I was about his. I saw that he would go back to his matrix and probably bring back a legion of warriors to tumble the unwarlike regime here. Though I wanted slavery abolished, I did not want that! The thought of inter-matrical war and conquest was horrifying; knowledge of the portals must never get back to his Mithraic world. The conclusion was obvious; I had to kill Mark Claud Gale!

He saw it in my eyes before I reached him. He was quick, Mark! As he stooped to grasp his knife, I kicked it flying and caught his shoulder with my knee. He fell, taking me with him, his fingers digging into my calf. A personal wrestle was what I did not want; he was probably in better condition than I. A weapon was what I wanted. As his right hand came up to grasp me, I planted my free knee on his windpipe and wrenched his arm down hard over it, at the same time

pulling myself loose from his grasp. Jumping up, I ran into the artificial garden.

Behind the cafe were rows of garden tools on display. He hurled a can at me before I reached them. The can struck my shoulder and bounced through the front of the cafe in a shower of glass. I turned; he was almost on me. I kicked one of the light tables between us and backed off to the racks. Feeling the shaft of one of the tools behind me, I brought it forward, flinging my weight with it as if it were a lance. I had hold of a rake. It struck Mark in the thigh as he jumped aside.

I had time to make another lunge, but he had the other end of the rake. Next moment, we were struggling face against face. He brought his skull down hard against my nose. Pain and fury burst like a volcanic eruption over me. I had him by the throat, jabbing him in the groin with my knee. He hooked a leg round my other leg, jerked it. As I fell, I stamped on his toe. For a moment he doubled in pain and the back of his neck was unprotected. Even as I chopped my hand down on it, I felt the weakness of my blow. I was dizzy from the pain in my nose.

We broke apart. The rake lay between us. Gathering my strength, I turned, brought another tool from the rack behind, and swung it in a circle. He had stooped to grab the rake. Changing his mind, he backed away, and I ran at him with the tool upraised. It was a fool's move. He ducked and let me have it in the stomach with a swinging left. I broke the shaft over his shoulders and we fell backwards into the ornamental pool.

The water was warm, but the shock of it helped me to keep my senses. It was about three feet deep. I floundered to my feet, beating off slimy lily stalks, still grasping one end of the tool. I was bellowing for breath like a hungry sea lion. Mark took longer to come up. From the way he moved, from the way his left arm hung limp and he clutched his left shoulder, I knew I had broken something useful. He turned away from me and headed for the opposite bank, where banana tress and tall grasses grew.

Compassion rose in me. I had no heart to go on. Had he not been my ally? But in that moment of weakness, he

turned and looked at me. I understood that look. We were enemies, and he was going for a weapon with which to kill me. There would be plenty about, pruning knives, shears, blades of all kinds. I could not let him get away.

He dragged himself up on to the bank, using only one arm.

The broken half of the garden tool in my hand was the business end of some sort of edging implement, with a sharp crescent-shaped blade. I threw it hard.

He staggered and grasped at the banana tree. He missed. He tried to reach the shaft in his back with his good hand, but failed. He fell back into the pool, disappearing among reeds. There was a good deal of threshing about in the water, but it stopped at last. I climbed out of the pool and headed drunkenly for the portals.

It is useless to ask me how I got through the vanishing routine. I don't know. Somehow I did all that was necessary, injected myself, tuned the portal. As I sat in the seat, I could hear noises outside, distant and meaningless, and the sound of a door being broken in, and the squeal of whistles. Then the mobius effect overcame me and I was sprawling on a crowded night club floor with three half-naked dancers shrieking their heads off. I was back home!

To say the authorities were interested is seriously to understate. One thing I could not tell them, and it saved a lot of trouble. I could not remember the classification number of the matrix from which I had escaped. There could be no going back there, except by accident. Rastell's world was safe among a myriad others.

This fortunate bit of ignorance saved me from a severe moral problem. Supposing we could have got back easily to Rastell's world, had we any right to intervene on behalf of the slaves? In any one world, there's enough trouble in circulation, without looking for it in others.

Candida says we have moral obligations to all matrices. I say we have a moral obligation not to judge other people's standards by our own. Royal refuses to believe my whole experience. We are still arguing. It's a freedom not to be despised.

Brian W. Aldiss.

The tide of evil surrounding Elric is beginning to change since his marriage to Zarozinia ("Kings In Darkness," No. 54) but he is still called upon to exert his necromantic powers in order to save a fellow sorcerer as well as his own city.

THE FLAME BRINGERS

BY MICHAEL MOORCOCK

o n e

Bloody-beaked hawks soared on the frigid wind. They soared high above a mounted horde inexorably moving across the Weeping Waste.

The horde had crossed two deserts and three mountain ranges to be there and hunger drove them onwards. They were spurred on by remembrances of stories heard from travellers who had come to their Eastern homeland, by the encouragements of their thin-lipped leader who swaggered in his saddle ahead of them, one arm wrapped around a ten-foot lance decorated with the gory trophies of his pillaging campaigns.

The riders moved slowly and wearily, unaware that they were nearing their goal.

Far behind the horde, a stocky rider left Elwher, the singing, boisterous capital of the Eastern world, and came soon to a valley.

The hard skeletons of trees had a blighted look and the horse kicked earth the colour of ashes as its rider drove it fiercely through the sick wasteland that had once been gentle Eshmir, the golden garden of the East.

A plague had smitten Eshmir and the locust had stripped her of her beauty. Both plague and locust went by the same name—Terarn Gashtek, Lord of the Mounted Hordes, sunken-faced carrier of destruction; Terarn Gashtek, insane blood-drawer, the shrieking flame bringer. And that was his other name—Flame Bringer.

The rider who witnessed the evil that Terarn Gashtek had brought to gentle Eshmir was named Moonglum. Moonglum was riding, now, for Karlaak by the Weeping Waste, the last outpost of the Western civilisation of which those in the Eastlands knew little. In Karlaak, Moonglum knew he would find Elric of Melniboné who now dwelt permanently in his wife's graceful city. Moonglum was desperate to reach Karlaak quickly, to warn Elric and to solicit his help.

He was small and cocky, with a broad mouth and a shock of red hair, but now his mouth did not grin and his body was bent over the horse as he pushed it on towards Karlaak. For Eshmir, gentle Eshmir, had been Moonglum's home province and, with his ancestors, had formed him into what he was.

So, cursing, Moonglum rode for Karlaak.

But so did Terarn Gashtek. And already the Flame Bringer had reached the Weeping Waste. The horde moved slowly, for they had wagons with them which had at one time dropped far behind but now the supplies they carried were needed. As well as provisions, one of the wagons carried a bound prisoner who lay on his back cursing Terarn Gashtek and his slant-eyed battlemongers.

Drinij Bara was bound by more than strips of leather, that was why he cursed, for Drinij Bara was a scorcere who could not normally be held in such a manner. If he had not succumbed to his weakness for wine and women just before the Flame Bringer had come down on the town in which he was staying, he would not have been trussed so, and Terarn Gashtek would not now have Drinij Bara's soul.

Drinij Bara's soul reposed in the body of a small, black

cat—the cat which Terarn Gashtek had caught and carried with him always, for, as was the habit of Eastern sorcerers, Drinij Bara had hidden his soul in the body of the cat for protection. Because of this he was now slave to the Lord of the Mounted Hordes, and had to obey him lest the man slay the cat and so send his soul to Hell.

It was not a pleasant situation for the proud sorcerer, but he did not deserve less.

There was on the pale face of Elric of Melniboné some slight trace of an earlier haunting, but his mouth smiled and his crimson eyes were at peace as he looked down at the young, black-haired woman with whom he walked in the terraced gardens of Karlaak.

“Elric,” said Zarozenia, “have you found your happiness?”

He nodded. “I think so. *Stormbringer*, my black rune-sword, now hangs amid cobwebs in your father’s armoury. The drugs I discovered in Troos keep me strong, my eyesight clear, and need to be taken only occasionally. I need never think of travelling or fighting again. I am content, here, to spend my time with you and study the books in Karlaak’s library. What more would I require?”

“You compliment me overmuch, my lord. I would become complacent.”

He laughed. “Rather that than you were doubting. Do not fear, Zarozenia, I possess no reason, now, to journey on. Moonglum, I miss, but it was natural that he should become restless of residence in a city and wish to revisit his homeland.”

“I am glad you are at peace, Elric. My father was at first reluctant to let you live here, fearing the black evil that once accompanied you, but three months have proved to him that the evil has gone and left no fuming berserker behind it.”

Suddenly there came a shouting from below them, in the street a man’s voice was raised and he banged at the gates of the house.

“Let me in, damn you, I must speak with your master.”

A servant came running: “Lord Elric—there is a man at the gates with a message. He pretends friendship with you.”

“His name?”

"An alien one—Moonglum, he says."

"Moonglum! His stay in Elwher has been short. Let him in!"

Zarozinia's eyes held a trace of fear and she held Elric's arm fiercely. "Elric—pray he does not bring news to take you hence."

"No news could do that. Fear not, Zarozinia." He hurried out of the garden and into the courtyard of the house. Moonglum rode hurriedly through the gates, dismounting as he did so.

"Moonglum, my friend! Why the haste? Naturally, I am pleased to see you after such a short time, but you have been riding hastily—why?"

The little Eastlander's face was grim beneath its coating of dust and his clothes were filthy from hard riding.

"The Flame Bringer comes with sorcery to aid him," he panted. "You must warn the city."

"The Flame Bringer? The name means nothing—you sound delirious, my friend."

"Aye, that's true, I am. Delirious with hate. He destroyed my homeland, killed my family, my friends and now plans conquests in the West. Two years ago he was little more than an ordinary desert raider but then he began to gather a great horde of barbarians around him and has been looting and slaying his way across the Eastern lands. Only Elwher has not suffered from his attacks, for the city was too great for even him to take. But he has turned two thousand miles of pleasant country into a burning waste. He plans world conquest and now rides Westwards with fifty thousand warriors!"

"You mentioned sorcery—what does this barbarian know of such a sophisticated art?"

"Little himself, but he has one of our greatest wizards in his power—Drinij Bara. The man was captured as he lay drunk between two wenches in a tavern. He had put his soul into the body of a cat so that no rival sorcerer might steal it while he slept. But Terarn Gashtek, the Flame Bringer, knew of this trick, seized the cat and bound its legs, eyes and mouth, so imprisoning Drinij Bara's evil soul. Now the sorcerer is his slave—if he does not obey the barbarian, the cat will be killed by an iron blade and Drinij Bara's soul will go to Hell."

"These are unfamiliar sorceries to me," said Elric, "They seem little more than superstitions."

"Who knows that they may be—but so long as Drinij Bara believes what he believes, he will do as Terarn Gashtek dictates. Several proud cities have been destroyed with the aid of his magic."

"How far away is this Flame Bringer?"

"Three days' ride at most. I was forced to come hence by a longer route, to avoid his outriders."

"Then we must prepare for a siege."

"No, Elric—you must prepare to flee!"

"To flee—should I request the citizens of Karlaak to leave their beautiful city unprotected, to leave their homes?"

"If they will not—you must, and take your bride with you. None can stand against such a foe."

"My own sorcery is no mean thing."

"But one man's sorcery is not enough to hold back half a million men also aided by sorcery."

"And Karlaak is a trading city—not a warrior's fortress. Very well, I will speak to the Council of Elders and try to convince them."

"You must convince them quickly, Elric, for if you do not Karlaak will not stand half a day before Terarn Gashtek's howling blood-letters."

"They are stubborn," said Elric as the two sat in his private study later that night. "They refuse to realise the magnitude of the danger. They refuse to leave and I cannot leave them for they have welcomed me and made me a citizen of Karlaak."

"Then we must stay here and die?"

"Perhaps. There seems to be no choice. But I have another plan. You say that this sorcerer is a prisoner of Terarn Gashtek. What would he do if he regained his soul?"

"Why he would take vengeance upon his captor. But Terarn Gashtek would not be so foolish as to give him the chance. There is no help for us there."

"What if we managed to aid Drinij Bara?"

"How? It would be impossible."

"It seems our only chance. Does this barbarian know of me or my history?"

"Not as far as I know."

"Would he recognise you?"

"Why should he?"

"Then I suggest we join him."

"Join him—Elric you are no more sane than when we rode as free travellers together!"

"I know what I am doing. It would be the only way to get close to him and discover a subtle way to defeat him. We will set off at dawn, there is no time to waste."

"Very well. Let's hope your old luck is good, but I doubt it now, for you've forsaken your old ways and the luck went with them."

"Let us find out."

"Will you take *Stormbringer*?"

"I had hoped never to have to make use of that hell-forged blade again. She's a treacherous sword at best."

"Aye—but I think you'll need her in this business."

"Yes, you're right. I'll take her."

Elric frowned, his hands clenched. "It will mean breaking my word to Zarozinia."

"Better break it—than give her up to the Mounted Hordes."

Elric unlocked the door to the armoury, a pitch torch flaring in one hand. He felt sick as he strode down the narrow passage lined with dulled weapons which had not been used for a century.

His heart pounded heavily as he came to another door and flung off the bar to enter the little room in which lay the disused regalia of Karlaak's long-dead War Chieftains—and *Stormbringer*. The black blade began to moan, as if welcoming him as he took a deep breath of the musty air and reached for the sword. He clutched the hilt and his body was wracked by an unholy sensation of awful ecstasy. His face twisted as he sheathed the blade and he almost ran from the armoury towards cleaner air.

Elric and Moonglum mounted their plainly equipped horses and, garbed like common mercenaries, bade urgent farewell to the Councillors of Karlaak.

Zarozinia kissed Elric's pale hand.

"I realise the need for this," she said, her eyes full of tears, "but take care, my love."

"I shall. And pray that we are successful in whatever we decide to do."

"The White Gods be with you."

"No—pray to the Demon Gods, to Arioch and Voroon—to the Lords of the Darks, for it is their evil help I'll need in this work. And forget not my words to the messenger who is to ride to the South West and find Dyvim Slorm."

"I'll not forget," she said, "though I worry lest you succumb again to your old black ways."

"Fear for the moment—I'll worry about my own fate later."

"Then farewell, my lord, and be lucky."

"Farewell, Zarozinia. My love for you will give me more power even than this foul blade here." He spurred his horse through the gates and then they were riding for the Weeping Waste and a troubled future.

t w o

Dwarfed by the vastness of the softly-turfed plateau which was the Weeping Waste, the place of eternal rains, the two horsemen drove their hard-pressed steeds through the drizzle.

A shivering desert warrior, huddled against the weather, saw them come towards him. He stared through the rain trying to make out details of the riders, then wheeled his stocky pony and rode swiftly back in the direction he had come. Within minutes he had reached a larger group of warriors attired like himself in furs and tasselled iron helmets. They carried short bone bows and quivers of long arrows fletched with hawk feathers. There were curved scimitars at their sides.

He exchanged a few words with his fellows and soon they were all lashing their horses towards the two riders.

"How much further lies the camp of Terarn Gashtek, Moonglum?" Elric's words were breathless, for both men had ridden for a day without halt.

"Not much further, Elric. We should be—look!"

Moonglum pointed ahead. About ten riders came swiftly towards them. "Desert barbarians—the Flame Bringer's men. Prepare for a fight—they won't waste time parleying."

Stormbringer scraped from the scabbard and the heavy blade seemed to aid Elric's wrist as he raised it, so that it felt almost weightless.

Moonglum drew both his swords, holding the short one with the same hand with which he grasped his horse's reins.

The Eastern warriors spread out in a half circle as they rode down on the companions, yelling wild war-shouts. Elric reared his mount to a savage standstill and met the first rider with *Stormbringer's* point full in the man's throat. There was a stink like brimstone as it pierced flesh and the warrior drew a ghastly choking breath as he died, his eyes staring out in full realisation of his terrible fate—for *Stormbringer* drank souls as well as blood.

Elric cut savagely at another desertman, lopping off his sword arm and splitting his crested helmet and the skull beneath. Rain and sweat ran down his white, taut features and into his glowing crimson eyes, but he blinked it aside, half-fell in his saddle as he turned to defend himself against another howling scimitar, parried the sweep, slid his own runeblade down its length, turned the blade with a movement of his wrist and disarmed the warrior. Then he plunged his sword into the man's heart and the desert warrior yelled like a wolf at the moon, a long baying shout before *Stormbringer* took his soul.

Elric's face was twisted in self-loathing as he fought intently with superhuman strength. Moonglum stayed clear of the albino's sword for he knew its liking for the lives of Elric's friends.

Soon only one opponent was left. Elric disarmed him and had to hold his own greedy sword back from the man's throat.

Reconciled to the horror of his death, the man said something in a guttural tongue which Elric half-recognised. He searched his memory and realised that it was a language close to one of the many ancient tongues which, as a sorcerer, he had been required to learn years before.

He said in the same language: "Thou art one of the warriors of Terarn Gashtek the Flame Bringer."

"That is true. And you must be the White-faced Evil One of legends. I beg you to slay me with a cleaner weapon than that which you hold."

"I do not wish to kill thee at all. We were coming hence to join Terarn Gashtek. Take us to him."

The man nodded hastily and clambered back on his horse. "Who are you who speaks the High Tongue of our people?"

"I am called Elric of Melniboné—dost thou know the name?"

The warrior shook his head. "No, but the High Tongue has not been spoken for generations, save by shamans—yet you're no shaman but, by your dress, seem a warrior."

"We are both mercenaries. But speak no more. I will explain the rest to thy leader."

They left a jackal's feast behind them and followed the quaking Easterner in the direction he led them.

Fairly soon, the low-lying smoke of many camp-fires could be observed and at length they saw the sprawling camp of the barbarian War Lord's mighty army.

The camp encompassed over a mile of the great plateau. The barbarians had erected skin tents on rounded frames and the camp had the aspect of a large primitive town. Roughly in the centre was a much larger construction, decorated with a motley assortment of gaudy silks and brocades.

Moonglum said, in the Western tongue: "That must be Terarn Gashtek's dwelling. See, he has covered its half-cured hides with a score of Eastern battle-flags." His face grew grimmer as he noted the torn standard of Eshmir, the lion-flag of Okara and the blood-soaked pennants of sorrowing Changshai.

The captured warrior led them through the squatting ranks of barbarians who stared at them impassively and muttered to one another. Outside Terarn Gashtek's tasteless dwelling was his great war-lance decorated with more trophies of his conquests—the skulls and bones of Eastern princes and kings.

Elric said: "Such a one as this must not be allowed to destroy the reborn civilisation of the Young Kingdoms."

"Young kingdoms are resilient," remarked Moonglum, "but it is when they are old that they fall—and it is often Terarn Gashtek's kind that tear them down."

"While I live he shall not destroy Karlaak—nor reach as far as Bakshaan."

Moonglum said: "Though, in my opinion, he'd be welcome to Nadsokor, the City of Beggars deserves such visitors as the Flame Bringer. If we fail, Elric, only the sea will stop him—and perhaps not that."

"With Dyvim Slorm's aid—we shall stop him. Let us hope Karlaak's messenger finds my kinsman soon."

"If he does not we shall be hard put to fight off half a million warriors, my friend."

The barbarian shouted: "Oh, Conqueror—mighty Flame Bringer—there are men here who wish to speak with you."

A slurred voice snarled: "Bring them in."

They entered the badly-smelling tent which was lighted by a fire flickering in a circle of stones. A gaunt man, carelessly dressed in bright captured clothing, lounged on a wooden bench. There were several women in the tent, one of whom poured wine into a heavy golden goblet which he held out.

Terarn Gashtek pushed the woman aside, knocking her sprawling and regarded the newcomers. His face was almost as fleshless as the skulls hanging outside his tent. His cheeks were sunken and his slanting eyes narrow beneath thick brows.

"Who are these?"

"Lord, I know not—but between them they slew ten of our men and would have slain me."

"You deserved no more than death if you let yourself be disarmed. Get out—and find a new sword quickly or I'll let the shamans have your vitals for divination." The man slunk away.

Terarn Gashtek seated himself upon the bench once more.

"So, you slew ten of my bloodletters, did you, and came here to boast to me about it? What's the explanation?"

"We but defended ourselves against your warriors—we sought no quarrel with them." Elric now spoke the cruder tongue as best he could.

"You defended yourselves fairly well, I grant you. We reckon three soft-living house-dwellers to one of us. You are a Westerner, I can tell that, though your silent friend has the face of an Elwherite. Have you come from the East or the West?"

"The West," Elric said, "we are free travelling warriors, hiring our swords to those who'll pay or promise us good booty."

"Are all Western warriors as skilful as you?" Terarn Gashtek could not hide his sudden realisation that he might have under-estimated the men he hoped to conquer.

"We are a little better than most," lied Moonglum, "but not greatly."

"What of sorcery—is there much strong magic here?"

"No," said Elric, "the art has been lost to most."

The barbarian's thin mouth twisted into a grin, half of relief, half of triumph. He nodded his head, reached into his gaudy silks and produced a small bound cat. He began to stroke its back. It wriggled but could do no more than glare at its captor. "Then we need not worry," he said.

"Now, why did you come here? I could have you tortured for days for what you did, slaying ten of my best outriders."

"We recognised the chance of enriching ourselves by aiding you, Lord Fire Bringer," said Elric. "We could show you the richest towns, lead you to ill-defended cities that would take little time to fall. Will you enlist us?"

"I've need of such men as you, true enough. I'll enlist you readily—but mark this, I'll not trust you until you've proved loyal to me. Find yourselves quarters now—and come to the feast, tonight. There I'll be able to show you something of the power I hold—the power which will smash the strength of the West and lay it waste for ten thousand miles."

"Thanks," said Elric. "I'll look forward to tonight."

They left the tent and wandered through the haphazard collection of tents and cooking fires, wagons and animals. There seemed little food, but wine was in abundance and the taut, hungry stomachs of the barbarians were placated with that.

They stopped a warrior and told him of Terarn Gashtek's orders to them. The warrior sullenly led them to a tent.

"Here—it was shared by three of the men you slew. It is yours by right of battle, as are the weapons and booty inside."

"We're richer already," grinned Elric with feigned delight.

In the privacy of the tent, which was less clean than Terarn Gashtek's, they debated.

"I feel uncommonly uncomfortable," said Moonglum, "surrounded by this treacherous horde. And every time I think of what they made of Eshmir, I itch to slay more of them. What now?"

"We can do nothing now—let us wait until tonight and see what develops," Elric sighed. "Our task seems impossible—I have never seen so great a horde as this."

"They are invincible as they are," said Moonglum. "Even without Drinij Bara's sorcery to tumble down the walls of cities, no single nation could withstand them and, with the Western Nations squabbling among themselves, they could never unite in time. Civilisation itself is threatened. Let us pray for inspiration—your dark gods are at least sophisticated, Elric, and we must hope that they'll resent the barbarian's intrusion as much as we do."

"They play strange games with their human pawns," Elric replied, "and who knows what they plan?"

Terarn Gashtek's smoke-wreathed tent had been further lighted by rush torches when Elric and Moonglum swaggered in, and the feast, consisting primarily of wine, was already in progress.

"Welcome, my friends," shouted the Flame Bringer waving his goblet. "These are my captains—come, join them!"

Elric had never seen such an evil-looking group of barbarians. They were all half-drunk and, like their leader, had draped a variety of looted articles of clothing about themselves. But their swords were their own.

Room was made on one of the benches and they accepted wine which they drank sparingly.

"Bring in our slave!" yelled Terarn Gashtek. "Bring in Drinij Bara our pet sorcerer." Before him on the table lay the bound and struggling cat and beside it an iron blade.

Grinning warriors dragged a morose-faced man close to the fire and forced him to kneel before the barbarian chief. He was a lean man and he glowered at Terarn Gashtek and the little cat. Then his eyes saw the iron blade and his gaze faltered.

"What do you want with me now?" he said sullenly.

"Is that the way to address your master, spell-maker? Still, no matter. We have guests to entertain—men who have promised to lead us to fat merchant cities. We require you to do a few minor tricks for them."

"I'm no petty conjurer. You cannot ask this of one of the greatest sorcerers in the world!"

"We do not ask—we order. Come, make the evening lively. What do you need for your magic-working? A few slaves—the blood of virgins? We shall arrange it."

"I'm no mumbling shaman—I need no such trappings."

Suddenly the sorcerer saw Elric. The albino felt the man's powerful mind tentatively probing his own. He had been recognised as a fellow sorcerer. Would Drinij Bara betray him?

Elric was tense, waiting to be denounced. He leaned back in his chair and, as he did so, made a sign with his hand which would be recognised by Western sorcerers—would the Easterner know it?

He did. For a moment he faltered, glancing at the barbarian leader. Then he turned away and began to make new passes in the air, muttering to himself.

The beholders gasped as a cloud of golden smoke formed near the roof and began to metamorphose into the shape of a great horse bearing a rider which all recognised as Terarn Gashtek. The barbarian leader leaned forward, glaring at the image.

"What's this?"

A map showing great land areas and seas seemed to unroll beneath the horse's hooves. "The Western lands," cried Drinij Bara. "I make a prophecy."

"What is it?"

The ghostly horse began to trample the map. It split and flew into a thousand smoky pieces. Then the image of the horseman faded, also, into fragments.

"Thus will the mighty Flame Bringer rend the bountiful nations of the West," shouted Drinij Bara.

The barbarians cheered exultantly, but Elric smiled thinly. The Eastern wizard was mocking Terarn Gashtek and his men.

The smoke formed into a golden globe which seemed to blaze and vanish.

Terarn Gashtek laughed. "A good trick, magic-maker—and a true prophecy. You have done your work well. Take him back to his kennel!"

As Drinij Bara was dragged away, he glanced questioningly at Elric but said nothing.

Later that night, as the barbarians drank themselves into a stupor, Elric and Moonglum slipped out of the tent and made their way to the place where Drinij Bara was imprisoned.

They reached the small hut and saw that a warrior stood guard at the entrance. Moonglum produced a skin of wine and, pretending drunkenness, staggered towards the man. Elric stayed where he was.

"What do you want, Outlander?" growled the guard.

"Nothing my friend, we are trying to get back to our own tent, that's all. Do you know where it is?"

"How should I know?"

"True—how should you? Have some wine—it's good—from Terarn Gashtek's own supply."

The man extended a hand. "Let's have it."

Moonglum took a swig of the wine. "No, I've changed my mind. It's too good to waste on common warriors."

"Is that so?" The warrior took several paces towards Moonglum. "We'll find out, won't we? And may be we'll mix some of your blood with it to give it flavour, my little friend."

Moonglum backed away. The warrior followed.

Elric ran softly towards the tent and ducked into it to find Drinij Bara, wrists bound, lying on a pile of uncured hides. The sorcerer looked up.

"You—what do you want?"

"We've come to aid you, Drinij Bara."

"Aid me? But why? You're no friend of mine. What would you gain? You risk too much."

"As a fellow sorcerer, I thought I'd help you," Elric said.

"I thought you were that. But, in my land, sorcerers are not so friendly to one another—the opposite, in fact."

"I'll tell you the truth—we need your aid to halt the barbarian's bloody progress. We have a common enemy. If we can help you regain your soul, will you help?"

"Help—of course. All I do is plan the way I'll avenge myself. But for my sake be careful — if he suspects that you're here to aid me, he'll slay the cat and slay us, too."

"We'll try to bring the cat to you. Will that be what you need?"

"Yes. We must exchange blood, the cat and I, and my soul will then pass back into my own body."

"Very well, I'll try to—" Elric turned, hearing voices outside. "What's that?"

The sorcerer replied fearfully. "It must be Terarn Gashtek—he comes every night to taunt me."

"Where's the guard?" The barbarian's harsh voice came closer as he entered the little tent. "What's . . . ?" He saw Elric standing above the sorcerer.

His eyes were puzzled and wary. "What are you doing here, Westerner—and what have you done with the guard?"

"Guard?" said Elric—"I saw no guard. I was looking for my own tent and heard this cur cry out, so I entered. I was curious, anyway, to see such a great sorcerer clad in filthy rags and bound so."

Terarn Gashtek scowled. "Any more of such unwary curiosity my friend, and you'll be discovering what your own heart looks like. Now, get hence—we ride on in the morning."

Elric pretended to flinch and stumbled hurriedly from the tent.

A lone man in the livery of an Official Messenger of Karlaak goaded his horse southwards. The mount galloped over the crest of a hill and the messenger saw a village ahead. Hurriedly he rode into it, shouting at the first man he saw.

"Quickly, tell me—know you ought of Dyvim Slorm and his Imrryrian mercenaries? Have they passed this way?"

"Aye—a week ago. They went towards Rignariom by Jadmar's border, to offer their services to the Vilmirian Pretender."

"Were they mounted or on foot?"

"Both."

"Thanks, friend," cried the messenger behind him and galloped out of the village in the direction of Rignariom.

The messenger from Karlaak rode through the night—rode along a recently made trail. A large force had passed

that way. He prayed that it had been Dyvim Slorm and his Imrryrian warriors.

In the sweet-smelling garden city of Karlaak, the atmosphere was tense as the citizens waited for news they knew they could not expect for some time. They were relying on both Elric and on the messenger. If only one were successful, there would be no hope for them. Both had to be successful. Both.

three

The tumbling sound of moving men cut through the weeping morning and the hungry voice of Terarn Gashtek lashed at them to hurry.

Slaves packed up his tent and threw it into a wagon. He rode forward and wrenched his tall war-lance from the soft earth, wheeled his horse and rode Westwards, his captains, Elric and Moonglum among them, behind him.

Speaking the Western tongue, Elric and Moonglum debated their problem. The barbarian was expecting them to lead him to his prey, his outriders were covering wide distances so that it would be impossible to lead him past a settlement. They were in a quandary for it would be disgraceful to sacrifice another township to give Karlaak a few days' grace, yet...

A little later two whooping outriders came galloping up to Terarn Gashtek.

"A town, lord! A small one and easy to take!"

"At last—this will do to test our blades and see how easy Western flesh is to pierce. Then we'll aim at a bigger target." He turned to Elric: "Do you know this town?"

"Where does it lie?" asked Elric thickly.

"A dozen miles to the South West," replied the outrider.

In spite of the fact that the town was doomed, Elric felt almost relieved. They spoke of the town of Gorjhan.

"I know it," he said.

Cavim the Saddler, riding to deliver a new set of horse furniture to an outlying farm, saw the distant riders, their bright helmets caught by a sudden beam of sunlight. That the riders came from off the Weeping Waste was undoubtable—and he recognised menace in their massed progress.

He turned his mount about and rode with the speed of fear, back the way he had come to the town of Gorjhan.

The flat, hard mud of the street trembled beneath the thudding hooves of Cavim's horse and his high, excited shout knifed through shuttered windows.

"Raiders come! 'Ware the raiders!"

Within a quarter of an hour, the head-men of the town had met in hasty conference and debated whether to run or to fight. The older men advised their neighbours to flee the raiders, other younger men preferred to stay ready, armed to meet a possible attack. Some argued that their town was too poor to attract any raider.

The townspeople of Gorjhan debated and quarrelled, and the first wave of raiders came screaming to their walls.

With the realisation that there was no time for further argument came the realisation of their doom, and they ran to the ramparts with their pitiful weapons.

Terarn Gashtek roared through the milling barbarians who churned the mud around Gorjhan: "Let's waste no time in siege. Fetch the sorcerer!"

They dragged Drinij Bara forward. From his garments, Terarn Gashtek produced the small black cat and held an iron blade at its throat.

"Work your spell, sorcerer, and tumble the walls quickly."

The sorcerer scowled, his eyes seeking Elric, but the albino averted his own eyes and turned his horse away.

The sorcerer produced a handful of powder from his belt pouch and hurled it into the air where it became first a gas, then a flickering ball of flame and finally a face, a dreadful unhuman face, formed in the flame.

"Dag-Gadden the Destroyer," intoned Drinij Bara, "you are sworn to our ancient pact—will you obey me?"

"I must, therefore I will. What do you command?"

"That you obliterate the walls of this town and so leave the men inside naked, like crabs without their shells."

"My pleasure is to destroy and destroy I shall." The flaming face faded, altered, shrieked a searing course upward and became a blossoming scarlet canopy which hid the sky.

Then it swept down over the town and, in the instant of its passing, the walls of Gorjhan groaned, crumbled and vanished.

Elric shuddered—if Dag-Gadden came to Karlaak, such would be their fate.

Triumphant, the barbarian battlemongers swept into the defenceless town.

Careful to take no part in the massacre, Elric and Moon-glum were also helpless to aid the slaughtered townspeople. The sight of the senseless, savage bloodshed around them enervated them. They ducked into a small house which seemed so far untouched by the pillaging barbarians. Inside they found three cowering children huddled around an older girl who clutched an old scythe in her soft hands. Shaking with fear, she prepared to stand them off.

"Do not waste our time, girl," Elric said, "or you'll be wasting your lives. Does this house have a loft?"

She nodded.

"Then get to it quickly. We'll make sure you're unharmed."

They stayed in the house, hating to observe the slaughter - madness which had come upon the howling barbarians. They heard the dreadful sounds of carnage and smelled the stench of dead flesh and running blood.

A barbarian, covered in blood which was not his own, dragged a woman into the house by her hair. She made no attempt to resist, her faced stunned by the horror she had witnessed.

Elric growled: "Find another nest, hawk—we've made this our own."

The man said: "There's room enough here for what I want."

Then, at last, Elric's clenched muscles reacted almost in spite of him. His right hand swung over to his left hip and the long fingers locked around *Stormbringer's* black hilt. The blade leapt from the scabbard as Elric stepped forward and, his crimson eyes blazing his sickened hatred, he smashed his sword down through the man's body. Unnecessarily, he clove again, hacking the barbarian in two. The woman remained where she lay, conscious but unmoving.

Elric picked up her inert body and passed it gently to Moonglum. "Take her upstairs with the others," he said brusquely.

The barbarians had begun to fire part of the town, their slaying all but done. Now they looted. Elric stepped out of the doorway.

There was precious little for them to loot but, still hungry for violence, they spent their energy on smashing inanimate things and setting fire to the broken, pillaged dwellings.

Stormbringer dangled loosely in Elric's hand as he looked at the blazing town. His face was a mask of shadow and frisking light as the fire threw up still longer tongues of flame to the misty sky.

Around him, barbarians squabbled over the pitiful booty; and occasionally a woman's scream cut above the other sounds, intermingled with rough shouts and the clash of metal.

Then he heard voices which were pitched differently to those in the immediate vicinity. The accents of the reavers mingled with a new tone—a whining, pleading tone. A group led by Terarn Gashtek came into view through the smoke.

Terarn Gashtek held something bloody in his hand—a human hand, severed at the wrist—and behind him swaggered several of his captains holding a naked old man between them. Blood ran over his body and gushed from his ruined arm, spurting sluggishly.

Terarn Gashtek frowned when he saw Elric. Then he shouted: “Now Westerner, you shall see how we placate our Gods with better gifts than meal and sour milk as this swine once did. He'll soon be dancing a pretty measure, I'll warrant—won't you, Lord Priest?”

The whining note went out of the old man's voice then and he stared with fever-bright eyes at Elric. His voice rose to a frenzied and high-pitched shriek which was curiously repellent.

“You dogs can howl over me!” he spat, “but Mirath and T'aargano will be revenged for the ruin of their priest and their temple—you have brought flame here and you shall die by flame.” he pointed the bleeding stump of his arm at Elric—“And you—you are a traitor and have been one in many causes, I can see it written in you. Though now . . . You are—” the priest drew breath.

Elric licked his lips.

“I am what I am,” he said. “And you are nothing but an old man soon to die. Your gods cannot harm us, for we do not pay them any respect. I'll listen no more to your senile meanderings!”

There was in the old priest's face all the knowledge of his past torment and the torment which was to come. He seemed to consider this and then was silent.

"Save your breath for screaming," said Terarn Gashtek to the uncomprehending priest.

And then Elric said: "It's bad luck to kill a priest, Flame Bringer!"

"You seem weak of stomach, my friend. His sacrifice to our own gods will bring us good luck, fear not."

Elric turned away. As he entered the house again, a wild shriek of agony seared out of the night and the laughter which followed was not pleasant.

Later, as the still burning houses lit the night, Elric and Moonglum, carrying heavy sacks on their shoulders, clasping a woman each, moved with a simulation of drunkenness to the edge of the camp. Moonglum left the sacks and the women with Elric and went back, returning soon with three horses.

They opened the sacks to allow the children to climb out and watched the silent women mount the horses, aiding the children to clamber up.

Then they galloped away.

"Now," said Elric savagely, "we must work our plan tonight, whether the messenger reached Dyvim Slorm or not. I could not bear to witness another such sword-quenching."

Terarn Gashtek had drunk himself insensible. He lay sprawled in an upper room of one of the unburned houses.

Elric and Moonglum crept towards him. While Elric watched to see that he was undisturbed, Moonglum knelt beside the barbarian leader and, lightfingered, cautiously reached inside the man's garments. He smiled in self-approval as he lifted out the squirming cat and replaced it with a stuffed rabbit-skin he had earlier prepared for the purpose. Holding the animal tight, he arose and nodded to Elric. Together, warily, they left the house and made their way through the chaos of the camp.

"I ascertained that Drinij Bara lies in the large wagon," Elric told his friend. "Quickly, now, the main danger's over."

Moonglum said: "When the cat and Drinij Bara have exchanged blood and the sorcerer's soul is back in his body—what then, Elric?"

"Together, our powers may serve at least to hold the barbarians off, but—" he broke off as a large group of warriors came weaving towards them.

"It's the Westerner and his little friend," laughed one. "Where are you off to, comrades?"

Elric sensed their mood. The slaughter of the day had not completely satiated their blood-lust. They were looking for trouble.

"Nowhere in particular," he replied. The barbarians lurched around them, encircling them.

"We've heard much of your straight blade, stranger," grinned their spokesman, "and I'd a mind to test it against a real weapon." He grabbed his own scimitar out of his belt. "What do you say?"

"I'd spare you that," said Elric coolly.

"You are generous — but I'd rather you accepted my invitation."

"Let us pass," said Moonglum.

The barbarians' faces hardened. "Speak you so to the conquerors of the world?" said the leader.

Moonglum took a step back and drew his sword, the cat squirming in his left hand.

"We'd best get this done," said Elric to his friend. He tugged his runeblade from its scabbard. The sword sang a soft and mocking tune and the barbarians heard it. They were disconcerted.

"Well?" said Elric, holding the half-sentient blade out.

The barbarian who had challenged him looked uncertain of what to do. Then he forced himself to shout: "Clean iron can withstand any sorcery," and launched himself forward.

Elric, grateful for the chance to take further vengeance, blocked his swing, forced the scimitar back and aimed a blow which sliced the man's torso just above the hip. The barbarian screamed and died. Moonglum, dealing with a couple more, killed one but another came in swiftly and his sweeping sword sliced the little Eastlander's left shoulder. He howled—and dropped the cat. Elric stepped in, slew Moonglum's opponent, *Stormbringer* wailing a triumphant dirge. The rest of the barbarians turned and ran off.

"How bad is your wound?" gasped Elric, but Moon-glum was on his knees staring through the gloom.

"Quick, Elric—can you see the cat? I dropped it in the struggle. If we lose it—we too are lost."

Frantically, they began to hunt through the camp.

But they were unsuccessful, for the cat, with the dexterity of its kind, had hidden itself.

A few moments later they heard the sounds of uproar coming from the house which Terarn Gashtek had commandeered.

"He's discovered that the cat's been stolen!" exclaimed Moonglum. "What do we do now?"

"I don't know—keep searching and hope he does not suspect us."

They continued to hunt, but with no result. While they searched, several barbarians came up to them. One of them said:

"Our leader wishes to speak with you"

"Why?"

"He'll inform you of that. Come on."

Reluctantly, they went with the barbarians to be confronted by a raging Terarn Gashtek. He clutched the stuffed rabbit skin in one claw-like hand and his face was warped with fury.

"My hold over the sorcerer has been stolen from me," he roared. "What do you know of it?"

"I don't understand," said Elric.

"The cat is missing—I found this rag in its place. You were caught talking to Drinij Bara recently, I think you were responsible."

"We know nothing of this," said Moonglum.

Terarn Gashtek growled: "The camp's in disorder, it will take a day to re-organise my men—once loosed like this they will obey no one. But when I've restored order, I shall question the whole camp. If you tell the truth, then you will be released, but meanwhile you will be given all the time you need to speak with the sorcerer." He jerked his head. "Take them away, disarm them, bind them and throw them in Drinij Bara's kennel."

As they were led away, Elric muttered: "We must escape and find that cat, but meanwhile we need not waste this opportunity to confer with Drinij Bara."

Drinij Bara said in the darkness: "No, Brother Sorcerer, I will not aid you. I will risk nothing until the cat and I are united."

"But Terarn Gashtek cannot threaten you any more."

"What if he recaptures the cat—what then?"

Elric was silent. He shifted his bound body uncomfortably on the hard boards of the wagon. He was about to continue his attempts at persuasion when the awning was thrown aside and he saw another trussed figure thrown towards them. Through the blackness he said in the Eastern tongue: "Who are you?"

The man replied in the language of the West: "I do not understand you."

"Are you, then, a Westerner?" asked Elric in the common speech.

"Yes—I am an Official Messenger from Karlaak. I was captured by these odorous jackals as I returned to the city."

"What? Are you the man we sent to Dyvim Slorm, my kinsman? I am Elric of Melniboné."

"My lord, are we all, then prisoners? Oh, gods—Karlaak is truly lost."

"Did you get to Dyvim Slorm?"

"Aye—I caught up with him and his band. Luckily they were nearer to Karlaak than we suspected."

"And what was his answer to my request?"

"He said that a few young ones might be ready, but even with sorcery to aid him it would take some time to get to the Dragon Isle. There is a chance."

"A chance is all we need—but it will be no good unless we accomplish the rest of our plan. Somehow Drinij Bara's soul must be regained so that Terarn Gashtek cannot force him to defend the barbarians. There is one idea I have—a memory of an ancient kinship that we of Melniboné had for a being called Meerclar. Thank the gods that I discovered those drugs in Troos and I still have my strength. Now, I must call my sword to me."

He closed his eyes and allowed his mind and body first to relax completely and then concentrate on one single thing—the sword *Stormbringer*.

* See the previous stories in this series: THE DREAMING CITY, WHILE THE GODS LAUGH, THE STEALER OF SOULS and KINGS IN DARKNESS. Science Fantasy Nos. 47, 49, 51 and 54.

Until recently, an evil symbiosis had existed between man and sword and the old attachments lingered.*

He cried: "*Stormbringer! Sister Stormbringer, unite with your brother! Come, sweet runeblade, come hell-forged kinslayer, your master needs thee . . .*"

Outside, it seemed that a wailing wind had suddenly sprung up. Elric heard shouts of fear and a whistling sound. Then the covering of the wagon was sliced apart to let in the starlight and the moaning blade quivered in the air over his head. He struggled upwards, already feeling nauseated at what he was about to do, but he was reconciled that he was not, this time, guided by self-interest but by the necessity to save the world from the barbarian menace.

"Give me thy strength, sister my sword," he groaned as his bound hands grasped the hilt. "Give me thy strength and let us hope it is for the last time."

The blade writhed in his hands and he felt an awful sensation as its power, the power stolen vampire-like, from a hundred brave men, flowed into his shuddering body.

He became possessed of a peculiar strength which was not by any means wholly physical. His white face twisted as he concentrated on controlling the new power and the blade, both of which threatened to possess him entirely. He snapped his bonds and stood up.

Barbarians were even now running towards the wagon. Swiftly he cut the leather ropes binding the others and, unconscious of the nearing warriors, called a different name.

He spoke a new tongue, an alien tongue which normally he could not remember. It was a language taught to the Sorcerer Kings of Melniboné, Elric's ancestors, even before the building of Imrryr, the Dreaming City, over ten thousand years previously.

"Meerclar of the Cats, it is I, your kinsman, Elric of Melniboné, last of the line that made vows of friendship with you and your people. Do you hear me, Lord of the Cats?"

Far beyond the Earth, dwelling within a world set apart from the physical laws of space and time which governed the planet, glowing in a deep warmth of blue and amber, a manlike creature stretched itself and yawned, displaying

tiny, pointed teeth. It pressed its head languidly against its furry shoulder—and listened.

The voice it heard was not that of one of its people, the kind he loved and protected. But he recognised the language.

He smiled to himself as remembrance came and he felt the pleasant sensation of fellowship. He remembered a race which, unlike other humans (whom he disdained) had shared his qualities—a race which, like him, loved pleasure, cruelty and sophistication for its own sake. The race of Melnibonéans.

Meerclar, Lord of the Cats, Protector of the Feline Kind, projected himself gracefully towards the source of the voice.

"How may I aid thee?" he purred.

"We seek one of your folk, Meerclar, who is somewhere close to here."

"Yes, I sense him. What do you want of him?"

"Nothing which is his—but he has two souls, one of them not his own."

"That is so—his name is Fiarshern of the great family of Trrechoww. I will call him. He will come to me."

Outside, the barbarians were striving to conquer their fear of the supernatural events taking place in and about the wagon. Terarn Gashtek cursed them: "There are fifty thousand of us and a few of them. Take them now!"

His warriors began to move cautiously forward.

Fiarshern, the cat, heard a voice which it knew instinctively to be that of one which it would be foolish to disobey. It ran swiftly towards the source of that voice.

"Look—the cat—there it is. Seize it, quickly."

Two of Terarn Gashtek's men jumped forward to do his bidding, but the little cat eluded them and leaped lightly into the wagon.

"Give the human back its soul, Fiarshern," said Meerclar softly. The cat moved towards its human master and dug its delicate teeth into the sorcerer's veins.

A moment later Drinij Bara laughed wildly. "My soul is mine again. Thank you, great Cat Lord. Let me repay you!"

"There is no need," smiled Meerclar mockingly. "and, anyway, I perceive that your soul is already bartered. Good-bye, Elric of Melniboné. I was pleased to answer your call, though I see that you no longer follow the ancient pursuits

of your fathers. Still, for the sake of old loyalties I do not begrudge you this service. Farewell, I go back to a warmer place than this inhospitable one."

The Lord of the Cats faded and returned to the world of blue and amber warmth where he once more resumed his interrupted sleep.

"Come, Brother Sorcerer," cried Drinij Bara exultantly. "Let us take the vengeance which is ours."

He and Elric sprang from the wagon, but the two others were not quite so quick to respond.

Terarn Gashtek and his men confronted them. Many had bows with long arrows fitted to them.

"Shoot them down swiftly," yelled the Flame Bringer. "Shoot them now before they have time to summon further demons!"

A shower of arrows whistled towards them. Drinij Bara smiled, spoke a few words as he moved his hands almost carelessly. The arrows stopped in midflight, turned back and each uncannily found the throat of the man who had shot it. Terarn Gashtek gasped and wheeled back, pushing past his men and, as he retreated, shouted for them to attack the four.

Driven by the knowledge that if they fled they would be doomed, the great mass of barbarians closed in.

Dawn was bringing light to the cloud-ripped sky as Moonglum looked upwards. "Look, Elric," he shouted pointing.

"Only five," said the albino. "Only five—but perhaps enough."

He parried several lashing blades on his own sword and, although he was possessed of superhuman strength, all the power seemed to have left the sword so that it was only as useful as an ordinary blade. Still fighting, he relaxed his body and felt the power leave him, flowing back into *Stormbringer*.

Again the runeblade began to whine and thirstily sought the throats and hearts of the savage barbarians.

Drinij Bara had no sword, but he did not need one, he was using subtler means to defend himself. All around him were the gruesome results, boneless masses of flesh and sinew.

The two sorcerers and Moonglum and the messenger forced their way through the half-insane barbarians who were desperately attempting to overcome them. In the confusion it was impossible to work out a coherent plan of action. Moonglum and the messenger grabbed scimitars from the corpses of the barbarians and joined in the battle.

Eventually, they had reached the outer limits of the camp. A whole mass of barbarians had fled, spurting their mounts westwards. Then Elric saw Terarn Gashtek, holding a bow. He saw the Flame Bringer's intention and shouted a warning to his fellow sorcerer who had his back to the barbarian. Drinij Bara, yelling some disturbing incantation, half-turned, broke off, attempted to begin another spell, but the arrow pierced his eye.

He screamed: "No!"

Then he died.

Seeing his ally slain, Elric paused and stared at the sky and the great wheeling beasts which he recognised.

Dyvim Slorm, son of Elric's cousin Dyvim Tvar the Dragon Master, had brought the legendary dragons of Imrryr to aid his kinsman. But most of the huge beasts slept, and would sleep for another century — only five dragons had been aroused. As yet, Dyvim Slorm could do nothing for fear of harming Elric and his comrades.

Terarn Gashtek, too, had seen the magnificent beasts. His grandiose plans of conquest were already fading and, thwarted, he ran towards Elric.

"You white-faced filth," he howled, "you have been responsible for all this — and you will pay the Flame Bringer's price!"

Elric laughed as he brought up *Stormbringer* to protect himself from the insensed barbarian. He pointed to the sky: "These, too, can be called Flame Bringers, Terarn Gashtek — and are better named than thou!"

Then he plunged the evil blade full into Terarn Gashtek's body and the barbarian gave a choking moan as his soul was drawn from him.

"Destroyer, I may be, Elric of Melniboné," he gasped, "but my way was cleaner than yours. May you and all you hold dear be cursed for eternity!"

Elric laughed, but his voice shook slightly as he stared at the barbarian's corpse. "I've rid myself of such curses

once before, my friend. Yours will have little effect, I think." He paused. "By Arioeh, I hope I'm right. I'd thought my fate cleansed of doom and curses, but perhaps I was wrong . . ."

The huge horde of barbarians were nearly all mounted now and fleeing westwards. They had to be stopped for, at the pace they were travelling, they would soon reach Karlaak and only the Gods knew what they would do when they got to the unprotected city.

Above him, he heard the flapping of thirty-foot wings and scented the familiar smell of the great flying reptiles which had pursued him years before when he had led a reaver fleet on the attack of his home-city. Then he heard the curious notes of the Dragon Horn and saw that Dyvim Storm was seated on the back of the leading beast, a long spearlike goad in his gauntleted right hand.

The dragon spiralled downward and its great bulk came to rest on the ground thirty feet away, its leathery wings folding back along its length. The Dragon Master waved to Elric.

"Greetings, King Elric, we barely managed to arrive in time I see."

"Time enough, kinsman," smiled Elric. "It is good to see the son of Dyvim Tvar again. I was afraid you might not answer my plea."

"Old scores were forgotten at the Battle of Bakshaan when my father, Dyvim Tvar died aiding you in the siege of Nikorn's fortress. I regret only the younger beasts were ready to be awakened. You'll remember the others were used but a few years past."

"I remember," said Elric. "But may I beg another favour Dyvim Storm?"

"What is that?"

"Let me ride the chief dragon. I am trained in the arts of the Dragon Master and have good reason for riding against the barbarians—we were forced to witness insensate carnage a while ago and may, perhaps, pay them back in their own coinage."

Dyvim Storm nodded and swung off his mount. The beast stirred restlessly and drew back the lips of its tapering snout

to reveal teeth as thick as a man's arm, as long as a sword. Its forked tongue flickered and it turned its huge, cold eyes to regard Elric.

Elric sang to it in the old Melnibonéan speech, took the goad and the Dragon Horn from Dyvim Slorm and carefully climbed into the high saddle at the base of the dragon's neck. He placed his booted feet into the great silver stirrups.

"Now, fly, dragon brother," he sang, "up, up and have your venom ready."

He heard the snap of displaced air as the wings began to beat and then the great beast was clear of the ground and soaring upwards into the grey and brooding sky.

The other four dragons followed the first and, as he gained height, sounding specific notes on the horn to give them directions, he drew his sword from its scabbard.

Centuries before, Elric's ancestors armed with *Storm-bringer* and its lost sister-sword *Mournblade* had ridden their dragon steeds to conquer the whole of the Western World. There had been many more dragons in the Dragon Caves in those days. Now only a handful remained, and of those only the youngest had slept sufficiently long enough to be awakened.

High in the wintery sky climbed the huge reptiles and Elric's long white hair and stained black cloak flew behind him as he sang the exultant *Song of the Dragon Masters* and urged his charges westwards.

Wild wind-horses soar the cloud-trails,

Unholy horn doth sound its blast,

You and we were first to conquer,

You and we shall be the last!

Thoughts of love, of peace, of vengeance even were lost in that reckless sweeping across the glowering skies which hung over that ancient Age of the Young Kingdoms. Elric, archetypal, proud and disdainful in his knowledge that even his deficient blood was the blood of the Sorcerer Kings of Melniboné, became detached.

He had no loyalties then, no friends and, if evil possessed him, then it was a pure, brilliant evil, untainted by human drivings.

High soared the dragons until below them was the heaving black mass, marring the landscape, the fear-driven

horde of barbarians who, in their ignorance, had sought to conquer the lands beloved of Elric of Melniboné.

"Ho, dragon brothers— loose your venom—burn—burn! And in your burning cleanse the world!"

Stormbringer joined in the wild shout and, diving, the dragons swept across the sky, down upon the crazed barbarians, shooting streams of combustible venom which water could not extinguish, and the stink of charred flesh drifted upwards through the smoke and flame so that the scene became a scene of Hell — and proud Elric was Black Sathanus reaping awful vengeance.

He did not gloat, for he had done only what was needed, that was all. He shouted no more but turned his dragon mount back and upward, sounding his horn and summoning the other reptiles to him. And as he climbed, the exultation left him and was replaced by cold horror.

"I am still a Melnibonéan," he thought, "and cannot rid myself of that whatever else I do. And, in my strength I am still weak, ready to use this cursed blade in any small emergency." With a shout of loathing, he flung the sword away, flung it into space. It screamed like a woman and went plummeting downwards towards the distant earth.

"There," he said, "it is done at last." Then, in calmer mood, he returned to where he had left his friends and guided his reptilian mount to the ground.

Dyvim Slorm said: "Where is the sword of your forefathers, King Elric?" But the albino did not answer, just thanked his kinsman for the loan of the dragon leader. Then they all remounted the dragons and flew back towards Karlaak to tell them the news.

Zarozinia saw her lord riding the first dragon and knew that Karlaak and the Western World were saved, the Eastern World avenged. His stance was proud but his face was grave as he went to meet her outside the city. She saw in him a return of an earlier sorrow which he had thought forgotten. She ran to him and he caught her in his arms, holding her close but saying nothing.

He bade farewell to Dyvim Slorm and his fellow Imrryrians and, with Moonglum and the messenger following at a distance, went into the city and thence to his house, impatient of the congratulations which the citizens showered upon him.

"What is it, my lord?" Zarozinia said as, with a sigh, he sprawled wearily upon the great bed. "Can speaking help?"

"I'm tired of swords and sorcery, Zarozinia, that is all. But at last I have rid myself once and for all of that hell-blade which I had thought my destiny to carry always."

"*Stormbringer*, you mean?" she gasped.

"Of course, what else?"

She said nothing. She did not tell him of the sword which, apparently of its own volition, had come screaming into Karlaak and passed into the armoury to hang, in its old place, in darkness there.

He closed his eyes and drew a long, sighing breath.

"Sleep well, my lord," she said softly and, with tearful eyes and a sad mouth, lay herself down beside him.

She did not welcome the morning.

Michael Moorcock

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THE SUDDEN WINGS

BY THOMAS BURNETT SWANN

dragonfly

"Gaius and Phoebe!" Mark called, pointing toward the coast of Greece. Above their heads a scarlet sail groaned in the wind and hurried them south toward Rhodes, Cyprus, and Gaza on their way to Petra, the rock-built capital of the Nabataeans. The voyage was long, the coastline dull, and Mark had spent the morning asleep in the sun or playing a lyre to his sister Phoebe, while their uncle, Gaius, chatted with the sailors about the respective merits of Roman and Asiatic women. Toward noon Mark had laid aside the lyre and strolled to the side of the ship in time to see a remarkable sight.

"Look," he called, his red, wind-blown hair a riot of curls. A short blue tunic outlined the young manliness of his body.

Phoebe came at once, but Gaius took his time, and Mark heard him call to his companions, "But Etruscan women—they are the deep ones. Their slanted eyes hold secrets older than Babylon." Casually he walked to Mark's side.

"You look as if you had seen a god," he said, his lean tanned face seeming to say. "What you have to show me had better be good." Slender and straight as a battering ram, with eyes like onyx, he seemed more brother than uncle. Ten years ago, at the age of twenty, he had taken part with Titus (now emperor) in the sack of Jerusalem, and he always carried himself with martial erectness.

"In a sense I have," Mark said. On a rocky headland, where the waves beat a mist of spray, a curious creature had paused to watch the vessel.

"A centaur," cried Mark, an antiquarian at twenty. There was no race, he knew, more ancient than the centaurs, who had roamed the Greek mainland when the Cretans first waded ashore from their ships with purple sails. The centaur drummed a hoof on the rocks and his flanks glittered in the sun. His bearded face looked as old as the rocks, as mottled and brown, but somehow gentle.

"Hellooooo," Mark called, his voice almost lost in the forward plunge of the ship. Tentatively the centaur raised an arm and returned the greeting. Even as they watched, a woman, nude except for her riotous blue hair, emerged from the cliffs and joined him on the headland.

"His nymph," Mark whispered. "The centaurs have no women of their own. She may be an Oread." She placed her arm around his shoulder and stared after the ship. The whiteness of her body formed an eerie contrast to the blue of her hair. She looked as if she had spent her life in a stream or a tree, avoiding the sun. There was no friendliness in her eyes for the voyagers. Doubtless she remembered the centaurs slain by Greek and Roman warriors. At last she took her lord by the hand and led him away from the sea. They did not look back at the ship.

Mark felt a sharp loneliness as they disappeared; he hated the old cruelties which had made the nymph distrustful and wanted to shout to her: "Wait, I won't hurt you!" Once as a child he had caught sight of a satyr on the slopes of Vesuvius and felt the same loss when it eluded him. Before Romulus,

the entire Mediterranean world had abounded in satyrs and centaurs ; Tritons had played in the sea-pools, and even the air, it was said, had throbbed with sudden wings as boys and girls had tumbled through the clouds. But now, thanks to the depredations of man, such creatures were almost extinct. Mark's eyes misted.

"Tears for a centaur," Gaius reproached him, "but never for a maiden. Twenty years old and heartfree still. You have set a bad example for your sister. She thinks she must remain single to look after you. And so she follows you into the furthest corners of the world." Impulsively he hugged them against his chest ; his crisp linen tunic was fragrant with bitter almonds, an essence much prized by Roman gentlemen. "Children, children. You will find no mates among the rocks and scorpions."

Mark laughed. "There are always the Arabs."

"With camel urine in their hair," sniffed Phoebe.

Then they noticed that one of the sailors had joined them and was staring where the centaur and nymph had disappeared. The sailor looked perplexed and frightened. His calloused hands tightened on the gunwhales.

"The Old Ones," he muttered. "It is a bad sign."

"A bad sign?" asked Mark. "How could they harm us?"

"Not those. Others."

"You think we will meet others?"

"Aye, *you* will. At Petra. The Boy with Wings, the Dragonfly. His face is as young as your own, his heart, as old as evil. I have never seen him myself—never been beyond Gaza, nor want to go."

Mark's interest mounted. A boy with wings, a creature more fabulous than centaurs. "You make him sound dangerous."

"The natives think so. They have offered a hundred camels to anyone who captures him."

"Is he dangerous to Romans?"

"That I can't say. To your sister, I should think. She will draw him down like honey on idols. And you—your hair is the very colour of his wings. He may grow jealous." He reached out and gripped Mark by the shoulder. "Beware of him, boy. Beware of him ! They say—"

"Decimus," came an angry cry from the stern, "man the rudder oar !" The sailor broke off and hurried to his post.

Phoebe's eyes were round as honey cakes.

Mark took her hand. "Frightened?" At nineteen she made him think of kittens and lambs and baby dolphins, of eiderdown and pink rose buds, of all things soft, vulnerable, and delicious. But she was more than soft and girlish ; she was adolescence becoming womanhood. Even a voluminous stola could not conceal the delectable undulations of her body. A ripe fig, the young men of Rome had said, hoping in vain to pluck her.

She shivered and squeezed his hand. "Not with you."

Gaius laughed. "You are babies, both of you. As pink and smooth as children, and as inexperienced. Look at Mark. Not the shadow of a beard ! What does he know of Dragonflies or of cities in the desert, where the tribesmen sacrifice boys to the god Dusares ? You ought to have married Romans, both of you, and stayed at home."

"What is there left in Rome," Mark wanted to know, "with you away?" What was left in Italy, for that matter ? Two years ago there had been a villa in Pompeii, devoted parents and friends beloved since childhood. Then came the rain of fire, the shaken earth, the frantic flight to the sea with Phoebe and the cat he had rescued from the burning temple of Venus, and finally escape in a fishing bark. They had sailed to Rome to live with their uncle Gaius. When the new emperor Titus, his general in the attack on Jerusalem, had sent him as unofficial emissary to prepare for a possible Roman occupation of Petra, they had asked to go with him.

Gaius returned to his conversation with the sailors and Mark and Phoebe strolled together around the deck of the ship. Mark looked at her with adoration. Her jonquil-yellow hair, curled on top, was drawn into a fillet behind her head. The fullness of her lips in another woman would have seemed a pout ; in Phoebe it was girlhood grown voluptuous, and her blue enormous eyes were those of a maiden who, a little shocked by the licentiousness of Rome, had chosen to observe with wonder rather than participate.

Venus Cat, large, yellow, and, since Pompeii, almost tailless, trotted between them. Discriminating, he ignored most humans, but brother and sister he followed with a doglike constancy.

They paused beneath a bronze image of Portumnus, the harbour god for whom the ship was named.

"I should have married you to one of my friends in Rome," Mark said mischievously, knowing that the subject annoyed her. "That would have satisfied Gaius."

"To a dandy in a silken toga, with myrrh in his curls? Who divides his time between the games and the baths? You would have done better to marry my friend, Cornelia."

"A sweet thing, Cornelia. Her eyes reminded me of a ewe's. I always expected her to bleat."

"You see," she said, "we both think up reasons not to marry." It was not uncommon for maidens to wed at twelve and boys at fourteen; Mark and Phoebe, then, had long been marriageable.

Venus Cat mewed peremptorily, a signal for attention. He placed his shoulders on the deck and lifted his stub of a tail to indicate that he wished to be stroked where the tail joined the body.

"But are we enough, the three of us and Venus Cat? We have shut out so much since Pompeii."

"The more we admit, the more we can lose," Phoebe said with finality. He knew that she was remembering their villa ignited by lava and their parents trapped in the flames. They had both suffered nightmares for two years. "We are admitting Petra. Surely that is enough."

"It is Petrans we need, not Petra." But he was no more eager than Phoebe to make room in his heart for the hurtful ties of friendship and love.

"There is always the Dragonfly," she said lightly.

"He sounds unsociable, but I want to see him." He yawned. "But we still have a long journey and I am feeling drowsy."

The wind sighed in the tall square sail and the painted emblem, a she-wolf suckling the twins, trembled as if to spring from the canvas. The little ship surged forward at five or more knots. Phoebe remained on deck while Mark retreated to the wicker cabin under the curving neck of the stern. Ensconcing Venus Cat beside him on the couch, he tried to sleep. Usually sleep came soon and, except for nightmares, he slept long and soundly whatever the hour. But a winged boy danced in his brain. He rose, opened a chest of citrus wood, and took a small bronze image in his hand—Vaticanus, god of the Vatican Hill where Gaius owned his villa and where Mark and Phoebe had

lived with him for two years ; Mark's household god. In the immemorial attitude of prayer, he raised his arms and prayed :

" God of the hill, be with us on our journey, if you can. And the dragonfly boy—may we find him friendly."

At the entrance to the Sik or ravine leading to Petra stood the Grand Portal, a fifty foot decorative arch with statues and niches. Beyond the portal precipitous walls overtowered the Romans and their guides with brown and yellow sandstone and made a twilight of morning. A paved road ran beside a dry river bed. Glens broke away to the side, brimming with olive and fig trees. His mouth was dry and dusty, and Mark would have paused to pick some figs, but the Arab guides, reeking with sweat and the camel urine with which they oiled their hair, hurried him forward and furtively peered at the sky. Even Venus Cat was shooed from the alluring byways which plunged among the vegetation. The Arabs seemed little acquainted with cats and avoided him as if he were a scorpion, but they did not hesitate, when he turned aside, to drive him into the path.

" They expect the Dragonfly," Gaius whispered. " They are speaking Aramaic, which I learned at the siege of Jerusalem. One of them said they must sacrifice to Dusares, because the Dragonfly has been seen in the area lately."

" What will they sacrifice ?" Phoebe whispered.

" A boy, most likely. With unblemished skin and the rosy innocence of youth."

Phoebe looked horrified and tugged at Mark's tunic. " Gaius, you are describing Mark."

Gaius laughed. " A Roman citizen should be safe enough. The Nabataean king, Rabel II, is said to be eager to conciliate the Romans—even to consolidate with them. That, of course, is why I am here. He is still very young—younger than Mark—and thought to be weary of his mother's domination."

A shadow broke the ribbon of sunlight at their feet. They looked up. A bird-like creature wheeled above their heads.

The Arabs stopped and peered at the sky. They spoke rapidly. Diaphanous wings glinted in the sunlight. Mark stood very still ; his heart-beat quickened. The Dragonfly sank into the gorge. His features materialized in the fitful light : firm but slender limbs, hair as red as Mark's but wild with a hundred winds, and—half again as tall as the body—pointed wings which opened and closed with the slow, deliberate strokes

of anemones under the sea. He descended in lilting curves, like milkweed settling in a breeze. The Arabs had fled to the empty river bed, where they crouched among the boulders and hurled stones at the invader. He began to laugh, a deep laugh, musical yet chilling, that echoed down the gorge and set bulbuls springing from olive trees. Now he was almost within reach of the stones. He poised just above them, beating his wings to hold his position.

Mark waved his arms in a frantic warning. "Go back," he shouted. "They will hurt you!" He imagined the delicate wings broken by rocks, the creature falling into the hands of the natives, who would sacrifice him in their ghastly rituals. "Go back!"

The Dragonfly laughed. He caught a rising stone and dropped it on his attackers. The Arabs who were bombarding him scrambled for cover. He looked at Mark and Phoebe and waved his hand.

"Red Hair and Yellow Hair," he called. "You with your golden cat. Welcome—and be my friends." He fanned them with the rush of wings, and Mark looked directly into his face—high slender cheekbones, eyes as green and unfathomable as the sea beyond the Pillars of Hercules. A young face, a boy's face, but with eyes as old as—what had the sailor said?—evil. They stared after him as he beat his way up the gorge and vanished over the edge.

The Arabs emerged from the watercourse and resumed their journey. With every few steps they peered anxiously at the sky, muttered to each other, and glared at Mark as if he had summoned the creature with Roman magic.

Mark, Phoebe, and Gaius walked in silence, peering hopefully at the top of the gorge, now three hundred feet above their path. Even Gaius, the practical warrior, seemed shaken by the encounter. It was Phoebe who finally spoke.

"He was beautiful," she said. "Like a king. Like a—"

"God whose image we saw in Rome," interrupted Mark. "I am trying to think which one. But he looks so lonely. The Arabs hate him. Who can he find for a friend?"

"The birds," said Phoebe. "Would you be lonely with wings?"

"I would want my sister and uncle to have them too. Vultures make poor company. I should think the extent of

their conversation would be directions for finding the latest carcass."

"I suppose you are right. *We* shall have to become his friends."

"You will do nothing of the kind," snapped Gaius. "For all we know he is deadly—not a boy at all, but a demon with a boy's face. Like the sirens who sang to Ulysses."

They looked at him in surprise.

"Listen to me, my innocents. We will learn more about him in Petra. The Arabs may have good reason for fearing him."

The gorge flared suddenly into a glen where, directly in their path, a temple loomed from the living rock, its red facade rising in columns, pediments, and, on the second level a rounded tower. The side walls were the unhewn rock itself. It was like a great poppy, flowering from the desert by some divine horticulture, a poppy on the scale of the giant hero Moses who, in local legend, was said to have channeled the Sik with a blow of his magic rod.

"It must be the Khazneh," Gaius said. "The Arabs call it the Treasury of Pharaoh, but it is really a temple to Isis."

An image of the goddess stood in the open tower and smiled benignantly down on the petty humans who sought entrance to her valley. The Arabs greeted her with salaams and cries of praise. But Mark suspected that it was not Isis who controlled the valley.

"It might be called the temple of the Dragonfly," he whispered to Phoebe.

She squeezed his hand. "We will find him again?"

"Tomorrow," said Mark. But a vague uneasiness gripped him. Her enthusiasm seemed excessive. What was she feeling? He had often encouraged her to fall in love. But a boy with wings—

He chided himself. Phoebe in love? Ridiculous. She was only curious like himself. Tomorrow they would satisfy their curiosity and the matter would end. Suddenly he remembered the god who had looked like the Dragonfly. His image stood in the Forum—Mors, the lord of death.

moon-girl

Mark and Gaius had gone to a banquet in the palace, but Phoebe, a woman and therefore uninvited, remained in the house reserved for them by the king—an extraordinary house cut into the side of a mountain. Room after room plunged into the dark rock, the walls hung with tapestries which smouldered in the light of tall candelabra. But the rock-hewn walls were cold and damp in spite of the hangings, and Phoebe, bathed and scented by an Arab slave girl, had stretched on a couch and drawn a coverlet around her shoulders. A lamp was left burning, a crouching lion which seemed to spit fire from its jaws. She had hated the dark since Pompeii; besides, there were scorpions in Petra.

She fell asleep at once, with Venus Cat beside her. The old dream returned. It was autumn, and a great fire had broken from the mouth of Vesuvius. Giant shapes seemed to dance in the fire and fling it in streamers down the slopes. A heat wave gripped the city and the parched inhabitants gasped in the shade while stones and ashes possessed the sky. The sun vanished as if eclipsed, the ground shuddered and split—

Phoebe cried out and opened her eyes. The dream was gone but another had taken its place. The Dragonfly leaned above her, his wings as tall as the roof, and said, "Yellow Hair."

She sat up.

"I am glad you are finally awake," he continued. "I thought I was going to have to shake you. I have been here for a long time."

It was not a dream; he sat beside her on the couch. She uttered a little cry and he looked at her with wide, serious eyes.

"Have you been on my couch all the time?" she asked.

He pointed to a chair with a curving back. "The cathedra was hard. There was no room for my wings. Besides, I have been watching you sleep."

The coverlet had fallen to the floor. She was wearing a lavender tunic, less than knee length, with a silken sash. A highly indecorous garment for any pursuit except sleeping. She drew a pillow over her knees.

"I have been watching the rise and fall of your bosom," he continued without a smile. "It is a pretty thing to watch—up and down, up and down, like a little swelling sea. It has made me want to kiss you."

Phoebe stiffened and took Venus Cat in her arms. "I must call my brother. He wanted to see you again."

"He has not returned. I have already looked for him." He reached up and touched her hair which, free of its fillet, had spilled in a saffron chaos over the couch.

"Yellow Hair," he said. "A pretty name. But you must have another."

"Phoebe." I am alone with the Dragonfly, she thought. I am dressed for sleeping, not company, and he has said that he wishes to kiss me. If I cry out, a slave will come at once. But wonder wrestled with fear, and she did not call. It was like those assignations her friends had told her about in Rome, when a young man came to their bedchambers, evading the watchful eye of parents and slaves, and made indelicate advances, which might or might not be encouraged. I will talk to him and learn his intentions, she told herself. Then perhaps I shall scream for a slave.

"Phoebe, the Moon," he said. "Not silver nor white, but a harvest moon, round and warm and golden. My name is Eros."

"Eros. Love?"

"For you. And Red Hair. Tell me about him."

She spoke quickly. It was always a pleasure to speak of Mark. "He pretends not to care about things. He sleeps a great deal and laughs easily. He jokes and teases. He will tell you that he possesses no real ability. But he is a fine poet, and a brave and honourable man. When Pompeii was burning he carried me safely to a boat and went back into the city to rescue some children who were trapped in a temple."

"His hair is red like mine. I want him to be my friend. Will he love me?"

"He wanted to see you again."

"Will you love me too?"

She hesitated, uncertain how he meant the word. "I am very fond of you."

"Will you come with me?"

"Where?"

"To my home in the mountain."

"Tomorrow, with Mark."

His eyes darkened. "You don't love me then."

"It is too soon."

"Soon? Is love the sum of minutes or days? No, it is a pine torch kindled in a second. I saw you in my valley and I loved you instantly." His face was even younger than Mark's, and his artless, literal speech was that of a child. But his eyes were old. To look into them was to tumble down stairways of malachite with fireflies whirling around her.

He leaned forward and kissed her. She felt the brush of his wings, like butterflies, and wondered how anything so soft and tenuous could lift him from the ground. His breath was as sweet as nard, and she thought of the herbs and flowers he must gather from the mountaintops to season his delicate foods.

"Do you know now if you love me?"

"I am not sure."

"Have you had many lovers?"

"No," she said sharply.

"Not even one? A slave perhaps who caught your eye in the marketplace, or a young friend of your brother?"

"Not even one."

"I have heard that Roman women take husbands at twelve and lovers not later than fifteen. Sometimes I eavesdrop on caravans, and the great Roman ladies, the wives of consuls and governors—bound to join their husbands—do not always sleep alone."

"I have neither a husband nor a lover, and I am a mature woman of nineteen."

"Ah," he said. "That is why you are not sure if you love me. You have had no practice. I am glad. I will teach you how to love. But first we will talk."

"Why do you never smile?" she asked him. She too could talk with the directness of a child. She felt as if he were a new playmate and she must get to know him as quickly as possible, without the polite evasions of adult society.

"Because there is nothing to smile about. I guess I have forgotten how."

"Yet I heard you laugh this morning."

"With scorn, not joy. Scorn for those dirty Nabataeans who were throwing rocks at me. It is joy I have forgotten."

"You are lonely," she said, "and no wonder. How long have you been in Petra?"

"Before the Edomites, before the Kenites and Horites even, the valley belonged to my people. There were hundreds of us,

and we slept in the caves and beat the air with our wings. But the Kenites were thousands, and they drove us to the cliffs and one by one the others died or were killed."

She touched his wing in a gesture of sympathy and felt it shudder. "All those centuries you have had no friends?"

"There have been a few," he said. "Once there was a Nabataean boy. I taught him to chisel animals out of the rocks—gazelle and jackal and coney with the face of a pig and the hands of a child. But they sacrificed him to Dusares. I found him at the Place of Sacrifice with a knife in his heart. That was a hundred years ago. He was the last."

"A hundred years without a friend!" She would befriend him, she would love him. Too long she had held herself aloof in her brother's love. But Mark would be the last to begrudge her the Dragonfly. "I will come to your mountain now, if you like. You must show it to Mark tomorrow."

"Of course. You have said he will be my friend." He handed her a cloak. "Wrap yourself in your palla. The sky is cold."

Her sandals made no sound on the carpeted floors, and Eros, barefoot, walked as quietly as a lizard. Venus Cat padded after them, puzzled by this tall winged boy who had come in the hush of night. In the vestibule at the entrance, the guard was sleeping, his head on his knees.

"He was easy to put to sleep," said Eros. "You ought to be better guarded. Someone might carry you away."

She did not ask him what power he had used on the guard. It was a night of spells.

White broom flowers, so thick around their feet that neither stems nor leaves were visible, carpeted the roadside and a honied fragrance permeated the air. Phoebe stared at the rock-cut front of the house, a dusky purple in the light of torches which burned between the four entrances and cast the columns into a fitful dancing. Briefly she regretted the loss of this solid mansion, with its slaves and friendly torches and Venus Cat, and fought down an urge to wake the guard. Eros saw her shiver and drew the palla closely around her shoulders.

He lifted her in his arms and sprang into the air. The valley wheeled below them, the tall hills jutting toward the sky, their faces pitted with caves whose entrances were broken with columns and whose accesses were flights of stairs chiselled in the rock. He breathed heavily with his burden. Phoebe dared

not question him ; she lay like a cast off cloak in his arms and scarcely dared to open her eyes.

But fear yielded to amazement. His slender, powerful arms assured her that he would not falter. His breath came regularly now. He pointed out hills and buildings. In the heart of the valley, a palace, a temple, a market place with stalls and a covered walkway crouched by a river like animals beside a water course. The temple and palace were elephants, the stalls, zebras, and the walkway, the curving length of a serpent. They crossed the Wady Moussa, the river which divided the town, and circled the rock Al Habi, where a thousand pigeons slept in the honeycombed façade of the Columbarium.

The torchlights of the city dwindled, the fragrance of white broom became the freshness of nearby rains, of closeness to the clouds, and Phoebe's heart expanded with the wonder of her flight. The stars burned as brightly as the torches they had left in the city. Were they going to the moon, that fretted amber palace ? A fitting home for the Dragonfly. What were his wings but starlight materialized, his hair, a tangle of moonbeams ?

Behind them the fires of the city blinked into darkness. Night is a raven, she thought, and his black hushed wings have seized us. But the Dragonfly will defend me—what darkness can shake his flight ?

They approached the face of a great cliff, whose craggy expanse seemed to offer no entrance. But soon a small cavern loomed in their path. He settled on a ledge and led her into the blackness which, as they advanced, lessened and opened into a large chamber with lamps like swans. Carpets woven of rushes were strewn on the floor, while the walls held frescoes where the birds of the land frolicked in poppies and oleanders—fantail ravens, orange-spotted grackles, and crested bulbuls with white breasts and red patches on their tails. A couch stood at the rear, beside it a marble table like a truncated Doric column.

“My house,” he said proudly.

“You painted the walls yourself ?”

“Yes, and gathered the furnishings from caravans. Some of them are very old—older than the Romans even.” He showed her a gaming board whose squares of shell were inlaid with lapis-lazuli and red limestone. “That is from Ur. Once a Chaldean princess passed through this land. I came to her

caravan at night and played with her. She would not come back with me, as you have, but she gave me the board. In return I gave her an Egyptian emerald as large as a pigeon's egg."

She felt the desolation of a life in which his only friends were the travellers of the desert, shadows who paused and passed, leaving him all the lonelier for their momentary presence. She wanted to take him in her arms and be to him more than the Chaldean princess who had left behind her the hard, inadequate comfort of a gaming board.

She shivered. "The flight has made me ill."

"It is not the flight," he said. "You are afraid of me. Why? Surely I am not a monster. I have looked at myself in the mountain streams and seen a boy like your brother."

She stared at his skin in the lamplight, reddish like the cliffs of Petra, and wondered if the wind had beaten the red of the rocks into his pores until he became the desert, as beautiful and unknowable. "Your beauty troubles me," she said at last.

He helped her to the couch. From a glass flagon he filled an amber goblet and placed it in her hand. "Drink," he said. "It will make you at ease with me."

She drank the liquid, part wine, part honey, with a curious tartness she did not recognize.

"You understand that I am going to kiss you," he said. "But I will wait until you have rested."

She said nothing. Nausea pressed at her throat. His hair burned with rose and amber, and the light in its tangles made her dizzy.

"I—I am rested," she said.

He kissed her and cupped her face between his hands. Still he did not smile. "Phoebe, the moon," he said. "But the moon is pale tonight. What shall I do to kindle its yellow fires?"

"You are the moon, not I".

"No, I am Eros, who calls to the moon. Do you love me, moon-girl, Phoebe?"

"Yes." She did not hedge her words; she did not debate the multiple meanings of love. "Yes."

"Come." He rose and held out his hand to her.

"Eros, must we fly again so soon?"

"The moon must learn how to fly," he said. "Was there ever a moon who looked up instead of down? The heavens should be your home."

Again they stood on the ledge, with the cliff falling sheer below them, black and terrible. Her sandals dislodged a stone; its scraping descent faded into silence.

He let go of her.

"Take my hand," she cried. "I am afraid by myself."

"I am here to give you strength," he said, and he was smiling for the first time. "You must do what I say. Do you trust me, moon-girl?"

"Yes."

He touched her cheek and his strength sustained her. Yes, she could face the night again in his arms. But he did not take her in his arms.

He stepped back and said: "Jump."

eros and mors

The banquet was small, intimate, and very Roman. Nine guests—the king, two Nabataean advisors, and six Romans including Gaius and Mark—reclined on couches in a semi-circle around a table with feet like a camel's. A suckling pig revolved on a portable spit, and young Arab slaves, as noiseless as jackals, served the dates, cucumbers, melons, cheeses, kids boiled in milk, and locusts on skewers from the kitchen. Conversation soon turned to the benefits of union with Rome. The king and his ministers listened with enthusiasm as Gaius, august in his white toga, enumerated the advantages of the Pax Romana. Petra, said Gaius, harassed by an endless succession of wars, could secure her borders through alliance with Rome, and further, share in the benefits of Latin civilization—the roads, the aquaducts, the arts and games.

"A personable young man, the king," Gaius said to Mark later in the evening, as they left the palace and headed for their villa. "If he has his way, Petra will be the next Roman colony."

"But his mother, Shaquilath, opposes annexation?"

"Bitterly. Till a year ago she ruled as regent, and her power is still formidable. She wishes to preserve the independence of her people at any price. I have not met the woman, but she is said to believe that the only good Roman is one whose bones have been picked by the vultures."

The square, flat-roofed palace, with its facade of obelisks in half-relief, faded behind them and they entered a garden of scattered paths and summer houses roofed with the boughs of palm trees. A river barred their way, and oleanders rioted along its banks, their deep green leaves black in the moonlight. A frightened coney vanished on soundless hooves. They paused beside a bridge, talking of the banquet, the king, the implacable Shaquilath. Mark grew thirsty.

"Is the river water good?" he asked.

"All the water in Petra is good," Gaius said. "That is why so many armies have fought for the place."

Mark stooped and filled his hands with water. He tasted it gingerly. Yes, it was clear and cold. He began to drink. He heard a footstep but, anticipating Gaius, did not turn his head. An object struck his temple and pain exploded into blackness.

He awoke shivering. He was nude; his feet and hands were bound and the rough thongs cut into his flesh. He seemed to be lying on a stone platform a little longer than himself and approached by shallow steps. The stone was jagged beneath his back. Cymbals clashed and tambourines jangled. Torches lurched in the darkness, as if their bearers were drunk. Figures leaped through the air, and he saw that they were nude like himself, their brown limbs glittering in the light of a moon so bright that it made him blink. They whistled and clapped their hands, but paid him little attention. He remembered the young men sacrificed to Dusares and hoped that he would continue to be ignored.

"You are awake," said a woman's voice in uncertain Latin. "It is well. I would talk with you." She was the tallest woman he had ever seen, a giantess with arms that bulged like a Spartan's beneath her thin silk robe. Everything about her was massive and masculine except her voice, which was strangely soft.

Mark was frightened but he was also angry. "I am a citizen of Rome," he cried. "This very night I have dined with the king. Release me at once."

A tinkle of laughter greeted his command. "I know you have dined with my son. My men had you under surveillance the entire evening."

This, then, was Shaquilath. Surely the queen would not be a party to human sacrifice, however she hated the Romans. "What do you intend to do with me?"

"Send you to Dusares, what else?"

"The Romans will send *you* an army."

"Better an army than smooth-tongued ambassadors. The entrance to this valley is almost impregnable. But Roman ambassadors speak with silver tongues and my son listens. Why do you think I chose you for the sacrifice? To end this traitorous talk of annexation by Rome. The Romans will hardly negotiate with a country which has murdered—as they see it—one of their citizens. They will either ignore us or attack us. For either we shall be ready." She looked at him appraisingly; nude and bound, he felt like a side of beef in the marketplace. "You are beautiful enough for any god. When beauty is joined to political expediency—" She leaned very close to him. Her breath smelled of wine and olive oil.

"You are little older than my son. A boy like him, stubborn and foolish, but I could have loved you." She touched his cheek with her fingertips; her bony fingers were surprisingly gentle. "You are almost too beautiful to give to the god. I wish I could afford the luxury of saving you."

The dance had become a bacchanalia; indeed, Mark recalled, the Arabs identified Dusares with the Greek Bacchus. Clouds had covered the moon, and the whirling figures, vivid by moonlight, looked now as shadowy and terrible as shades of the Underworld, dancing beside the Styx. He remembered a line which Gaius had read to him from a holy book of the Jews: how King David had "danced before the Lord with all his might." But the lord of the Arabs was not the lord of the Jews; this dance held a sinister difference. He breathed a prayer to his household god, Vaticanus:

"God of the Roman hill, be with me on this alien hill!"

The queen bent and kissed him on the cheek. "Understand it is not that I wish you ill." She turned and addressed the crowd in Aramaic. The dancing ceased, the dancers watched her with rapt attention, or rather they watched the knife in her upraised hand. Mark shuddered, no longer with cold, and thought of Phoebe. Beloved sister, I must die and leave you in a strange land, with Gaius and Venus Cat your only friends. I will come to you, if I can, as a shade, and watch over your sleep and your journeys, but when were the dead a comfort to the living?

He closed his eyes and whispered her name.

The arms which lifted him were quick and firm. He opened his eyes.

"Lie still," said the Dragonfly, as he sprang from the altar. He dipped toward the ground and struggled above the heads of the astonished watchers before they could gather their wits. With the moon behind clouds, they had missed his approach, but now they cried out in rage and hurled insults in Aramaic whose meaning even Mark could guess.

With his heavy burden, the Dragonfly laboured like a galley in the Straits of Messina. He must surely sink, Mark thought. To increase their danger, the crowd had begun to throw stones, and the Dragonfly must dodge the sharp-edged missiles as well as keep to the air. At last they glided over the rim of the cliff and sank into darkness and safety.

They found shelter on a ledge midway down the side of the cliff and obscured from the Arabs by an overhanging rock ; the sounds of their outraged pursuers came to them muffled as if by fathoms of water. The Dragonfly gasped ; his strength was gone. But he lost no time in unbinding Mark and massaging his wrists and ankles.

It was hard for Mark to speak. What could he say ? The Dragonfly's risk had been enormous. "They would have killed you if they could."

"Yes, the god would have gorged himself," said the Dragonfly. "Two victims instead of one. Now they will seize some poor Arab boy who came to watch the sacrifice."

"There was every chance you would be caught. Yet you ran the risk for a stranger."

"Stranger ? We met in the Sik, did we not ? I welcomed you. Could I let you die ? My name, by the way, is Eros."

"And mine is Mark."

"I know."

"But how did you learn of my danger ?"

"I came to look for you in your house, and you had not returned. I had come earlier, and your sister had told me of the banquet. I flew to the palace, which was now dark. I retraced your route and found Gaius unconscious in the garden. When he revived and told me what had happened, I guessed where you were and came to the Place of Sacrifice. He was going to bring soldiers from the king, but I knew it would be too late by the time they had climbed the cliff. I crouched out of sight on this very ledge until the moon went behind a cloud

and the people had hypnotized themselves with dancing and words."

"You say you talked to Phoebe in the villa?"

"And took her to my mountain. She is waiting for you."

"Can you take me there now?"

"I am not able to lift you so high. Phoebe was lighter."

"To the villa then?"

"Perhaps. But rest now. It is too soon. We have things to talk about."

"You have done me a great service," said Mark, with a depth of feeling rare for him since Pompeii. His heart went out to this bold, miraculous being who had saved his life. He grasped his hand and Eros returned the pressure.

"Yes, I have helped you," said Eros. "Therefore I love you the more. But what have you done for me?"

Startled, Mark asked, "What could I have done?"

"Nothing—yet."

"Will there be something?"

"Soon. First we must talk. Phoebe loves me. She had hidden her heart in a little silver casket, but I found the key. There are hearts like agate in sunken galleys, and brave is the man who dives to recover them. There are hearts like an eagle's nest, on the tallest windy cliff. Where is your heart, Mark?"

"It is yours in friendship."

"You do not know what I am going to ask of you."

"Ask it then."

"First you must serve me in little ways. See, I am hurt." He held out his arm and disclosed a wound below the elbow. A flying stone had struck him. He tore a strip from his tunic. "Bind my wound and thus draw close to me. A man loves where he lessens pain."

Mark bound the wound, tenderly as if he were binding a child, and loved him. I have found a friend, he thought. In this wild land of rocks and tombs, the heart I lost in Pompeii has stirred, a little, and let me love. Phoebe will love him as I do. We will make him one with us; he will bring us his hurts and his loneliness.

"Have you other wounds?" he asked.

"Yes. They are not of the body."

"Of the heart then. Loneliness perhaps?"

"Till tonight I was utterly alone. Like an ibex on a dark hill, with wolves in the valley. Half of me hungers still. For the love of a brother for brother, the clasp of hands ; the field where comrades battle a common foe. Man's love for a woman has moods like the moon-drawn tide. It ebbs and flows, colours with the hour and the shape of the clouds. Man's love for his brother is constant. The clear hard burning of a diamond. Will you call me brother ?"

"Yes, my brother."

"And trust me ?"

"You have saved my life."

From a pouch hung at his side he drew a small vial. "Drink," he said. "It will make you strong."

Mark drank. The liquid was sweet with honey and bitter with a herb he did not recognize. It burned his throat and pulsed in his veins like lava.

"Now," Eros said, "you must jump from the ledge."

"Jump ?" he cried. "I would die on the rocks ! I have no wings like you."

"I will give you wings. First you must trust me. Phoebe jumped."

He looked at the Dragonfly with growing horror. "From this cliff ?"

"A taller one."

"And—?"

"She fell on the rocks. I came to her and held out my hand and drew her beside me. Her body was whole, because she had trusted me. From her shoulders sprouted wings like my own. She said : 'You must find Mark and give him wings.'"

"I must see her at once !"

"After you have jumped. You should trust me without proof, as she did."

Mark shook his head vehemently. "I want to see her now."

"I have spoken to you as a friend and brother. Your answer is no ?"

"Until I have seen my sister."

"Mark, Mark, what is love without trust ? You have disappointed me. Come, I will take you back to your villa. Then I will send Phoebe to you. But you have lost her. She has chosen to remain with me."

The Dragonfly rose to his feet and drew Mark beside him on the narrow ledge. "I have loved you," he said.

And Mark loved him. Dark, sweet currents flooded the tide pools of his body, those sun-parched pits of broken shell; a swift renewing tide freighted with sea grapes and the purple murex. Did he tell the truth, after all, this creature who seemed too beautiful to lie? This boy with amber in his hair and moonlight in his wings?

But the sirens, beautiful and sweet-tongued, had lured Ulysses. No, Mark dared not trust him.

A shadow sank from the moon. "Mark, I have found you!"

"Phoebe," he cried, "it is true then. He has given you wings."

"And you," she said. "You shall have them too. Trust him."

"It is too late," said the Dragonfly sadly.

"It is *not* too late," Mark cried, and jumped.

He opened his eyes and found them standing above him, their faces anguished. They expected to find me dead, he thought, and truly I am dying. The pain is like a crucifixion, with a hundred nails piercing my body.

Eros knelt. "Can you take my hand?" he asked doubtfully. Mark strained toward him, wrenching his body into a fury of pain. But the fingers of the Dragonfly eased him and somehow he struggled to his feet.

"Mark," cried Phoebe. "Your shoulders—they are sprouting wings!"

Eros examined them, marvelling. "It will be a long time," he said, "before they are grown. You were not yet ready. But you were less unready than I feared."

"You told me that love was a pine torch," said Phoebe to Eros, "kindled in a second. There is another kind, I think. A field set fire by the slow accumulating rays of a summer sun. Sudden wings or slow—either is love."

—Thomas Burnett Swann

The Midnight Club first met last month (in "Beginner's Luck"). This month's raconteur, an artist, describes an unusual encounter he experienced while on a field trip in Wales.

WEEK-END TRIP

BY STEVE HALL

The members of the Midnight Club had turned out in force ; the quarterly letter from their president had not only reminded them of the date for the current meeting of the fantasy writers' group, but had promised something unusual in the subject for the speaker's address.

In spite of the fact that they were creators of the supernatural, or maybe because of that very reason, everybody present felt the anticipatory, electric tingle of standing on the threshold of the unknown.

The dinner had, as usual, been of a high standard ; the candle flames were burning steadily at the ends of their tall, waxen sticks in the silver holders ; waiters moved smoothly around dispensing the last few liqueurs. A chair scraped here and there as its occupant turned to secure himself a better angle for observing the speaker seated on the president's right. Blue cigarette smoke rose in writhing curlicues to feed the undulating blanket held down by the high, ornately-corniced ceiling. Once again the stage had been set, and required only the arrival of the principals.

The minute hand on the gilded clock-face edged its way over the last fraction of an inch and eclipsed its shorter partner, so

that both stood pointing at the witching hour. A soft, but insistent chime quelled the last vestiges of low conversation, and President Vance Seaton rose to his feet. When the last note had faded away, the distinguished looking man spoke.

"Fellow weavers of words, our guest tonight has not told his story to many people. When you have heard it, I think you will understand the reasons why. However he and his charming wife Mary, feel that tonight they will have a sympathetic and understanding audience. Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce an artist friend of mine, Spencer Harrison."

The artist took over as the centre of interest when the president resumed his seat, and stood quietly while a patter of applause rippled around the company. Harrison had none of the textbook attributes of his class. His dress-suit and white tie were immaculate, he was clean-shaven, and his thinning, dark hair was prosaically arranged. Altogether, he exuded an atmosphere of common sense and cheerfulness. He seemed quite at home in front of an audience, and commenced his story in an easy, conversational style: "You know, I've read many stories of science-fiction and fantasy concerning aliens. The theme is a fascinating one and must offer you endless variations of plot for exploitation. One of my personal favourites of this type is the 'first encounter' story. These can take place anywhere, and I must say that I had never imagined that such a meeting would involve my wife and myself."

The assembled listeners nodded and smiled appreciatively.

Harrison continued: "Contacts with aliens have been variously portrayed as terrifying, erudite, mystifying, amusing, and so on. No doubt you are wondering into which class my narrative will fall. Well, possibly the best way that I can describe our experience, is to treat it in the classical tradition by beginning at the beginning and letting you see everything happening as we did."

The authors, who were on the receiving end for once, signified their approval with, "Hear-hears" and a gentle pounding on their tables; they were well and truly hooked.

Mary and I (Harrison said) were married in the late spring ten years ago, and spent our honeymoon in North Wales before the busy, summer season opened.

We were the proud owners of a thirteen-year-old car, and decided to make Llandudno our base. It was a convenient spot, having plenty of coast on either side, while only an hour or so's

driving inland, would take you into the rugged fastnesses of Snowdonia.

After we had enjoyed the coastal scenery for a week, we made up our minds to combine business with pleasure, and explore the hinterland. One Saturday morning, we loaded the old car with easels, canvasses, paints and brushes, and sufficient packaged food to last us comfortably through the day. Then we set off, driving almost due south through Dolgarrog and Llanrwst to Bettws-y-coed, where we turned westwards to skirt Capel-Curig and pass through Dolwyddelen.

The area has many a beautiful lake or llyn as they are more properly called, and we drove up as near as we could to one of them. It was a deep-blue expanse, set in a valley whose surface was covered with the fresh green of spring grass. On one side of the water's edge, a small wood brooded dreamily. In the background, towered the white-capped peak of Snowdon. Fairyland itself could offer no more entrancing a scene.

We left the car on the grass verge fringing the road, picked up our equipment and picnic basket, and headed for the vision that I wanted to get on to canvas.

The air was warm and had the crystal clarity of limpid water. Hastily, I selected my position—I did not want to miss a moment of the perfect conditions for seeing.

Mary helped me to set up my easel and canvas, and I got to work. She was already used to my ways and said, "I know you'll want some peace to get your picture composition started, so I'll go for a walk around the llyn. But," she added, "I'll be back in an hour for some food and drink, so make hay while the sun shines."

"All right dear—see you soon," I replied absently, as she blew me a kiss and strolled away in the general direction of the little wood about five hundred yards distant.

I sketched quickly, outlining the basic features of the scene before me. I had barely finished, when Mary returned, looking flushed and excited.

"That hour passed much more rapidly than I had expected," I remarked.

Mary looked at her watch. "It wasn't an hour—only thirty-five minutes," she said. "I've come back a lot sooner because of something I heard and then saw."

"What was it?"

"Come with me and I'll show you—I'd like you to judge for yourself."

She removed from my hand the brush that I had just picked up, and dragged me after her. About a hundred yards from the edge of the wood, she paused before a low ridge, and held a finger to her lips. "Listen," she said urgently.

It was at least a minute before any sound came, then I heard something.

"Coochie—coochie—coochie," said a peculiar, quavering voice.

"Is that what you've taken me from my painting for?" I said, rather heatedly. "To listen to some obscure bird giving its mating call?"

Mary shook her head. "It isn't a bird. Crawl up to the top of the ridge and peep over."

Feeling like an overgrown schoolboy playing Cowboys and Indians, I obeyed, but only because Mary's face was as serious as a judge, and I knew that she didn't look too favourably upon practical jokes.

We lay there, side by side, and I looked in the direction of my wife's pointing finger. I don't know which thing impinged first—the circular area of shadowy ground where none should have been, or the creature which stood in the centre of it. On balance, though, I suppose it was the animal. As near as I could judge, it was about two feet six high at the shoulder and stood on four thickish legs. The best description I can give, is that it resembled nothing more closely than a lightly-built elephant with no trunk. It was covered with a golden fuzzy fur, and as it turned towards us, I could see that it had two large blue eyes with a cluster of four tentacles hanging limply from the deep chest immediately below the thick neck. It stared at us gravely for a few seconds and said, "Gitch malarly mich?" The tone was definitely interrogatory, and somehow, we automatically assumed intelligence.

I looked at Mary blankly. "What on Earth d'you think that thing is?" I asked.

"I'm glad you put the question that way," she replied, "because it presents me with the opportunity to give you the perfect answer—I *don't think it is an earthly animal.*"

A thought crossed my mind. "Maybe the thing is dangerous—perhaps we should get back and report what we've found to the authorities."

She seemed unnaturally calm at my remark.

"Don't worry, it can't get at us. For some reason, it can't move out of that circular area of shadow."

I peered over the ridge again. The thing in the circle lumbered clumsily towards us until it reached the curving edge of the shadowy area and suddenly fell over on its side, its legs waving in the air for a moment, before it regained its feet and stood looking in our direction. Abruptly, the head was lowered like a bull about to charge, and it strained against an invisible something. The blunt, round feet dug into ground still relatively soft from winter rain, until it slipped and dropped down into a kneeling position. Whatever was confining it seemed pretty effective.

Reassured, I said, "Let's have a closer look."

We could get to within a foot or so of the weird, but amiable-looking creature. When I tried to get closer, my hands encountered something that yielded spongily at first, then became as firm as steel. It seemed like metal covered by a thick layer of foamed plastic or rubber, and was apparently impenetrable and completely invisible. I edged my way around the transparent barrier, sliding my hands over the yielding surface. It was about ten yards in diameter and apparently curved into the air to form a hemisphere. To establish this quite definitely, I plucked up grass by the handful, and threw it up and over the invisible dome. For the most part, it slid back again, tracing out in mid-air a part of the curving periphery.

"Well," said Mary, "are you satisfied that it's alien?"

"I'm satisfied, but baffled. What can the creature be doing here imprisoned in this bubble?"

"Maybe it's a criminal, and has been marooned here as a punishment," she suggested.

"No, that won't do," I replied. "Presumably the dome is airtight, so that the creature can't have been here long, and can't survive much longer as it is obviously breathing. There wouldn't be much point in bringing a wrong-doer across space to asphyxiate it—you could do that anywhere."

"How do you know the dome is airtight?" she queried exasperatingly.

I thought it over. "You're right, I've only proved that living matter won't go through it," I looked around for something inanimate to experiment with. There was nothing.

I thrust my hands into my trouser pockets. Loose change jingled under my fingers. I took out a few coins and prudently selected two pennies. I tossed them at the barrier—they sailed through unopposed.

The golden-furred alien followed the flight of the coins and pounced on them, picking them up with two of its tentacles. It examined the coins closely on both sides before thrusting them into a pouch that hung from a strap around its neck.

"That settles it," I said. "The dome is impervious to organic matter, but not to anything else, therefore the creature is in no danger of suffocation. Another thing too; the barrier that surrounds it must be some sort of force screen—matter doesn't behave so selectively."

The alien had watched us silently for a while, fidgeting from one foot to another. Abruptly it spoke. "Gitch malarly mich?" There was no doubting the questioning note in its voice—but what was it asking? It seemed to come to a decision, fumbled in its pouch, and took out what looked like a diamond about the size of a tennis ball.

Mary and I gasped involuntarily. Even in the somewhat dimmer light inside the dome, the object glittered with a thousand points of coruscating fire.

The alien held up the crystal before us and waved it from side to side, covering it up for a split-second with a coiled tentacle. The faceted gem was no longer fire-tipped ice, but a scintillating sapphire! Again the tentacle moved and hid the ball. This time, it was a giant ruby that winked and sparkled at us! Several more colour changes were demonstrated before the object reverted to its original faceted clearness. Again the alien repeated its question, "Gitch malarly mich?" This time, it sounded almost as if it was pleading.

"It's either asking us for something or to do something," stated Mary slowly.

"Yes, but what?" I retorted helplessly. "If we knew what it was doing here, we might have some clue as to what it wants, but failing that . . ." I spread my hands expressively.

"I think it's hungry," she said, and fumbled in her handbag. Before I could stop her, she brought out a bar of chocolate and threw it into the circle.

The alien creature picked it up, and started carefully removing the wrapping paper with a retractable claw at the end of one tentacle.

"That was a bright thing to do." I said.

"Why?" she said. "We can afford one, I've a couple more left here."

"I don't mean that. For all we know, chocolate may be poisonous to it."

"Oh Lord, I never thought of that."

We watched helplessly, as the creature finished picking off the inner silver foil, and popped the bar wholesale into its mouth. It chewed with what seemed enjoyment, then lay down in the centre of the circle, a pale-blue tongue licking tenderly over its lips.

"There," crowed Mary triumphantly. "It *was* hungry, and tired."

"It's not the only one," I replied. "Let's go back to our stuff, and have something to eat and drink."

After we had had our meal, we returned to where the alien still lay, apparently sleeping. It must have heard us coming, because it opened both eyes and stood up. Immediately, it brought out the faceted ball and flourished it at us and repeated the inane question: "Gitch malarly mich?"

"What d'you think that thing is?" asked Mary.

"It's obviously an artifact of some kind, but what its use is beats me—it can hardly be a communication device—not over this range, and anyway, Dumbo communicates via sound as we do."

"That's a good name for it," said Mary tangentially. "He does look rather like Dumbo with those flappy ears."

It was then that I had the creepy feeling that *we* were being watched, and I don't mean by Dumbo. Very slowly, I turned my head and looked behind us.

Coming out of the woods were two larger versions of the creature in the hemisphere. One stood six feet high, while the other was slightly shorter.

"Mary," I said, from a suddenly dry throat, "take a look, but don't move."

They ambled sedately in our direction, and for no reason at all my fear left me. I could see that Mary was okay too, because she had a pleased smile on her face.

When the two large aliens had advanced to within about ten feet of us, I could see that they had rather darker fur than Dumbo. One of them took out something that looked vaguely like a gun and pointed it at little Dumbo, who was hopping up and down. I didn't know whether it was with excitement or fear.

Mary must have decided that it was fear, because without warning, her expression changed, and she dashed across and stood protectingly in front of the little one.

The two large creatures stopped and conferred for a spell.

"Mary," I shouted, "come away from there."

"I won't let them harm him," she replied quite fiercely.

"I don't think they're going to," I said, hurrying over to her. "If that thing is a gun, they could easily have used it on us by now, but they haven't."

The largest alien gestured to us to move to one side, and reluctantly Mary moved away with me.

Again the strange-looking device came up to point at Dumbo. It spat out a green spark, which floated across to the force-screen. The spark hit the invisible barrier, and there was a loud pop like an oversized balloon bursting. Dumbo pricked up his ears and dashed forward to the smaller of the two dark-furred aliens, who fondled him tenderly.

Dumbo babbled something, and pointed to Mary with a rigid tentacle.

The largest of the aliens nodded his massive head understandingly, and paced slowly towards her, holding out a bunch of wild flowers which he had taken out of his pouch.

Mary took them wonderingly and said, "Thank you," in a quiet voice.

The big alien repeated, "Tank *ewe*," and returned to his companions. He picked up Dumbo and hoisted him gently on to his own broad back. Then the three of them ambled off towards the woods. Dumbo kept turning around and waving to us with all four of his tentacles.

I looked at Mary. She was quite dewy-eyed.

"What are you crying about?" I asked.

She looked at me regretfully. "That's the last we'll ever see of them."

The alien trio reached the edge of the woods. Again the strange projector spat green fire, and something popped. Quite suddenly, as if a blind had been raised, a silver ship appeared

on the springy turf. The Dumbos paused for a moment before an open port, waved for the last time, then entered. The door slid shut behind them.

In a few seconds afterwards, the space-ship took off in complete silence, floating upwards like a thistledown. It dwindled to a speck, and vanished as if it had never been.

"Mary," I said, "why d'you suppose Dumbo's father and mother left him behind in the force dome while they went off for a walk?"

"Oh, that's easy," she replied. "They wanted to do a bit of sightseeing on their day out and knew that it would probably be too strenuous for him. They didn't like to leave him shut up in the camouflaged space-ship, so they left him in their version of a playpen. He'd be quite safe there, as he couldn't get out and no living thing could get in. I do think though," she concluded critically, "that they should have left him something to eat."

We wandered towards the spot where, shortly before, the energy bubble had stood. On the grass lay a piece of crumpled silver foil, and a glittering spheroid. Slowly, I bent and picked it up. "I've just realised what Dumbo was asking us."

"What?" queried Mary.

"He wanted us to play ball with him—we could have thrown it to and fro through the energy screen—but we were too dim to realise what he meant, and now he's forgotten to take it with him."

"I don't suppose he'll worry very much about it," said Mary. "You know how children are, he'll just worry his parents until they buy him another one from their version of Woolworths, and anyway, I'd like to have it as a keepsake."

Harrison stopped speaking and turned to his wife. She nodded at something he said, and opened her handbag. The artist reached in and drew out a glittering ball for all the members of the Midnight Club to see.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "you see before you, the first known alien artifact to be discovered on Earth. Scientists who have examined it without knowing its history, have been baffled by its properties."

Wonderingly, his audience passed the gem-like object from hand to hand, watching with fascinated eyes as it changed colour faster than a chameleon. None of them had ever seen anything like the child's toy before.

—Steve Hall

This month we welcome yet another new Australian writer to our pages—with a simple but explosive story about the plain and ugly people in life, hoping only to be loved by someone.

LOVE IS A RELATIVE THING

BY STEPHEN COOK

It is the end of the second act. To the sound of half-hearted clapping, the curtain slowly falls.

In a seat near the centre of the theatre, a young man comes to his feet. He edges his way slowly along the row to the aisle, and moves with the crowd back towards the lobby.

His eyes wander aimlessly across the blank faces of those who have stayed in their seats. They happen to rest upon a face near the aisle; then they come suddenly into focus, as he realizes that his gaze is being squarely met by what must be the bluest and the prettiest pair of eyes in the theatre.

He looks again, and sees a short pert nose over smiling lips; high cheekbones, and flushed cheeks; a complexion which is both smooth and natural; all encircled with shining black hair falling almost to the shoulders—a host of small perfections which merge together to form a flawless whole. She is for me, he thinks, I must meet that girl. He finds himself comparing her to a diamond, shining alluringly out of a mass of undistinguished pebbles. She could even be the oval face of Beauty itself...

He returns with a start from his daydreams, as he notices the flush again, and realizes that he has been staring. Lowering his eyes, he continues to move slowly up the aisle with the crowd. Yet now he is closer, and he has to look once more.

She is standing, ready to leave her seat. He sees his chance, and says, "Excuse me, could I get you something?" The flush returns to her face. He explains hurriedly, "There's no need for both of us to be caught in the crush. I'll take care of it..."

Before she can reply, the pressure of the people behind him carries him past. Looking back, he sees her smile and sit down.

In the lobby, he threads his way through the crowd to the counter. When he emerges, he is holding two drinks and a small box of chocolates. The aisle is now clear, and he walks quickly down it.

"Here we are," he says. "I hope you like orange."

Smiling again, she nods, "Thank you, I do."

He indicates the seat beside her. "Is anybody sitting here?"

"No," she replies simply.

"Then you don't mind...?" He sits down, just as the warning bell rings for the next act, and the audience begins to file back into the theatre.

Several rows behind them, a moderately pretty girl turns to her companion.

"Good heavens, David, did you see that?" she exclaims in a low voice. "Did you see what Margie caught? How did she do it?"

David has not seen. He raises his head and searches the rows in front. "Oh yes, I see." At that moment the fair-haired, handsome young man before him turns to say something, and his head is shown in profile. "Yes, he does seem too good for her, doesn't he?"

"Too good? That is an understatement if ever I heard one. Look at him—you don't see many men like that? What can he see in that skinny little Margie?"

David grunts non-committally. "Oh, Margie isn't exactly ugly, you know," he says.

"Perhaps not, but don't try to call her pretty, either. You know what Margie is? She's just plain. A nobody, that's what she is—a nobody."

"Well, he must have seen something in her," says David; then he guffaws, and adds, "Luckily for me, Gwen, eh? It sounds as if I almost had a rival, eh?"

Gwen smiles weakly, and licks her lips.

The stars are shining, even through the screen of light thrown out by the street lamps. There is almost no traffic in this side-street. The only sounds are those of the night insects in the gardens of the sleeping homes, the chirping and throbbing of myriads of tiny fragments of life; and the slow, echoing footsteps of the young couple walking along the pavement.

The girl laughs.

"Oh, Harry, you shouldn't criticise her like that. I suppose she was only doing her best."

"Any actress who can't die without fluttering like an epileptic chicken should take a nice quiet position in a bank. After all, it *was* supposed to be a powerful scene, and the audience *did* laugh."

"And very unmannerly of them it was. I could almost feel the heat from her ears, they were flushing so brightly."

"Then there was the character who stuttered every time he forgot his lines. He must have been hard of hearing not to have heard that prompter."

"Well, the play had at least one merit," says Margaret, with mock charity, "the butler wasn't the villain."

"No, but the real villain masqueraded as a butler for most of the second act."

"But nobody was fooled by him, so that doesn't count."

"You're right," Harry exclaims. "Of course, the only reason nobody was fooled was that the chap was such a poor actor. If I had been the playwright, I should have put a bomb under the whole cast at the final curtain."

"Oh, surely not the maid as well?"

"Very well, the maid shall be spared. She played quite well, really, but then so she should—she has taken the same part in every play since she left dramatic school."

They laugh together. It is fresh, carefree laughter, arising from all the happiness of newly growing friendship. They pass on beneath the few street lamps, and the thousands of stars.

In the park, a lamp has burnt out. Trees mask its neighbours; shadow is everywhere, and even the ugly dead lamp-post merges into invisibility with the darkness. Here is a bench, and two voices in the night.

"... Then, in about a year's time," Harry is saying, "when I've stored up a little more experience, I think I'll go overseas. Eventually I might work my way around the world, stopping a few months, perhaps even a few years, in different cities and towns. I might even give private tuition, though I'd prefer teaching in schools—you meet more people, pick up more experience."

Margaret nods agreement, and asks, "But supposing you can't find anywhere to work?"

"Oh, there isn't really much fear of that. From what I hear, good language teachers are usually in some demand, and without meaning to blow my own trumpet, I do think that I can teach language better than most. It's a matter of helping the students to enjoy their lessons, so that they become hungry for more. And, of course, I'll become better as I go.

"Someday, I expect to come across a place where I can be really happy. I don't know where or when it will be, but when I find it I'll settle down there. Why, I might even find it before I start," he laughs, glancing at Margaret. "But now it's your turn. You were telling me about your year at boarding school...?"

Margaret lowers her eyes in a moment of silence. She is almost surprised to realize that she is talking to this handsome young man as if he were her brother, instead of almost a stranger. She is still more surprised, but happy, to realize that he is speaking just as frankly to her.

The silence passes. She begins to remember, and as the night moves on, their two voices mingle softly, full of the pleasure of mutual sentiments, the discovery of common acquaintances. Wisps of breeze brush lightly past them, and return to the whispering shadows.

"You can't miss, put the dart in a square, every throw a prize!" shouts the barker. His hoarse voice is cast out into the crowd, to be lost amidst the tangled cries of his competitors, and the scratched music from the merry-go-round. Girls scream in mock terror as they hurtle down the

slopes of the scenic railway. Children dart eagerly through a forest of legs, clutching huge pink clouds of fairy floss. And above it all, shining red and yellow and blue under the brilliant rays of the sun, the ferris wheel slowly turns.

Harry and Margaret come sliding down the chute of the fun house into the sunlight, laughing breathlessly. Arm in arm, they move back into the crowd, turning as they go to watch the expressions of the couple emerging behind them.

Nearby is a hamburger stand. Their laughter subsiding, Harry and Margaret move towards it. The smell of candy and electricity, ice cream and sunlight becomes subdued by the rich fumes of the frying meat. They breathe the scent deeply in anticipation.

In the newsreel theatre, an uninterested audience watches an advertisement for the latest brand of cigarette. Near the back, Harry finds himself gazing at Margaret instead of the screen. He gently squeezes her hand as it lies in his on the arm-rest between them. She turns to him with a smile, the same smile which has in his eyes grown more and more perfect every day. He is about to say something when the picture changes on the screen, and a newsreel begins.

"Mystery Deaths Continue," he reads. "Reward Increased."

There follows a series of shots of police moving through thick shrubbery on a river bank, ambulance men carrying a covered body on a stretcher, and curious spectators wandering aimlessly about. In an appropriately solemn tone of voice, the commentator tells of the discovery of the body of a young man. The police suspect murder, since the circumstances of the death are remarkably similar to those which have surrounded the deaths of other men in the past few months. In all these cases, the victims have been found lying in secluded places, with no ascertainable cause of death and no sign of a struggle—in fact, they seem to have died not merely peacefully, but happily.

Harry feels Margaret's hand begin to tremble in his. He turns to her in surprise. She is staring at the screen in obvious agitation. Puzzled, he turns back.

The police have been able to find no reasonable motive for the killings, the commentator is saying. There is really no concrete reason for suspecting that the deaths have not

simply been from unknown, but nevertheless natural, causes. Some of the victims are known to have been going to meet women, two of them even to propose; and evidence has been found near almost every body that a woman has been present. Yet neither police enquiries nor constant appeals to the public have resulted in any of these women appearing. Three rewards are currently being offered.

"Harry, let's go now," whispers Margaret in Harry's ear, grasping his hand nervously. Harry sees that she is very disturbed. He says nothing, but stands and leads the way along the row to the aisle.

As they leave the theatre, he looks back, and sees that photographs of previous victims are being shown. He is familiar with them—they have all appeared many times in the newspapers. An odd collection of thirteen—no, now fourteen—men, of all ages, from all levels of society. And, of course, though it has never been openly stated in the newscasts, everybody knows that almost none of them were good-looking, and that two were even deformed...

His face shows distaste as he thinks of the standard public reaction to the deaths. It begins with well-oiled expressions of sorrow and pity, and then, still under this guise, begins to include tasteless jokes about the type of woman who would fall for such unattractive specimens of manhood. Hypocrisy in itself does not offend him, but these people are practising it for no reason other than habit. The name in a newspaper of a dead man means nothing to them, unless he leaves behind him a large and destitute family, or happens to take a handsome photograph; yet they cannot bring themselves simply to confess it, and so to destroy this habit of casual sympathy.

They have such ugly souls...

Outside the theatre, it is early evening. The street lights have only just come on; they are pale in the lingering half-light of the day.

Margaret's eyes are moist and shining with tears. She takes a small handkerchief from her purse and dabs them lightly. As she is putting it back, she happens to glance at Harry. What she sees astonishes her—it is unabashed adoration, an expression of such enchantment that his face seems almost unable to contain it.

Harry does not know what has caused her tears, but whatever it is, he is thankful for it. Margaret grows more and more beautiful in his eyes each moment. It must be tonight, he decides, I must ask her tonight!

"Harry," Margaret asks softly, "let's go to the park. I'm sorry for being so silly, but I'm all right now."

"Tell me what it's all about..." begins Harry, but Margaret will not let him finish.

"In the park," she says firmly.

It is quite dark by the time they reach the park. They go to the bench which they have come to regard as their own, beneath the burnt-out lamp. They have often joked about what they will do when the light is repaired.

Tonight, for the first time since they have begun to come here, the seat is occupied.

"Never mind," Margaret says, "we can sit on the grass beneath the shrubs over there, on our own."

Harry agrees gladly. Nothing but complete privacy will suffice for the moment when he brings this courtship to its proper conclusion, and finally elicits from Margaret the promise for which he has been hoping almost since he first saw her, in the theatre.

He spreads his coat upon the grass, and they sit side by side upon it. They are shielded on all sides by arms of the shrubbery.

"Well," he asks, "now can you tell me what was the matter back there?"

Margaret nods. She is her normal self once more, and her voice is calm as she explains.

"It was really nothing at all," she says. "It was simply that I know a woman, a widow, whose son was killed—murdered—in this horrible series of murders. I was there when the police came to tell her that her son had been found. You remember, he was the one who was killed along a lonely country road, and they didn't find the body until it had started to—to decay. And then she had to go to the morgue to identify him, and I went to keep her company. When she came out again, she was crying. She was crying softly, but she went on for such a long time..."

The memory, stirred into vivid recall for the second time this evening, brings the moistness back into her eyes, as her voice trails off into silence. Harry has been gazing at her almost avidly. Now, he knows, is the time to begin.

"Margaret," he says slowly, "I have to tell you something, something I've wanted to say for a long time. You've probably realized it already—heaven knows, I couldn't hope to keep it a secret, but—Margaret, I love you."

He pauses, and knows that he has won her. He watches her eyes; it is there that the light of her beauty first appears, wave upon wave. Then the tremble of pleasure upon her lips. Then...

"That is the plain fact," he continues. "I need you, Margaret, and I want to be with you for the rest of your life."

Her words of agreement cannot come quickly enough to express her happiness. "Oh, Harry, it's what I've been wanting too. Yes, of course I love you, Harry."

Harry's lips are at her ear, whispering insistently. "But Margaret, do you know what it means? It isn't all happiness. You lose your freedom, for instance, your ability to do as you like whenever you feel like it. New responsibilities tie you down. I don't want to dissuade you, but we must be sure. And do you love me enough to be able to place your life completely in my hands, to give me control of your whole future? Do you love me enough for all that, Margaret—because that is what it means?"

"Yes, of course, Harry," she exclaims.

"Thank you," breathes Harry, "thank you for that, Margaret."

His face aglow with happiness, he leans slowly across to Margaret. The only light comes from the stars, and from the palest of glows upon the horizon where the moon will soon rise. Margaret's eyes are closed in expectation.

Gently, he passes his left hand behind her head, pressing up beneath her hair against the base of her skull. His right hand moves up under her jaw to grip the soft skin below each ear. The fingers move strangely. Margaret's eyes open wide. She tries to speak, but the words, even the thoughts behind the words, are suddenly swamped in a sudden surge of pleasure which grows and grows until her smile is forced

into a grimace, and something cracks under the pressure. She falls back motionless upon the dark grass.

Harry, too, has been unable to sustain himself against the waves of sensation. For a moment he has lost control and allowed his features to dissolve into a group of glistening nodules. Now he relaxes. His hand, still cradling Margaret's head, eases into a loose doughy mass.

He feels peaceful, and a little self-indulgent. It has been a long hard day—it is by no means easy for him to maintain this ungainly human shape for so many continuous hours. There should be no harm in letting himself go for a minute or two, he decides. His clothes lose their shape and collapse slowly as he sinks into a gently undulating pool within them.

How delightful it has been—not simply this last little affair, but all these months of his stay upon this world. Certainly, he never expected to come across such a place when he first set out—six? seven phases ago?—with his team of three highly trained scientists to investigate the faint signs of advanced civilization which had been detected here. All four of them were suddenly infected by some unforeseen disease, and only he survived; but by this time he had seen enough of Earth not to send for a rescue party.

And what had he found? A people who had the ability to discover this amazing science of radio and television, yet who had no real concept of the simple transmission of messages and persons through hyperspace; who had developed the powers of reasoning to a level quite as high as his own, yet who—happily for himself—still inherited the primitive connection between love and sex. It was little wonder that they were on the verge of breeding themselves into the horror of full-scale overpopulation.

Such a bizarre little world he found. Even now, it fills him with wonder to think of the thousands, the millions, of beautiful souls walking this planet unseen—the millions of lonely people who, because of an ugly face, or social misbehaviour, or simply shyness, are shunned by, or themselves avoid real contact with, their neighbours. They all have one thing in common; they are unhappy, they have nobody to whom they can release their cares and dreams, and as a result their withheld emotions build into patterns so complex and beautifully intricate that Harry is continually overwhelmed by them.

There is no such beauty as this on his own world. There, it is easily seen and released. Here, time has somehow denied mankind the privilege of other civilized races.

Yet, it was almost denied to him. It means death, he knows, for anybody who cannot see this beauty to be led to the powerful experience of sharing it with another; and Harry does not dare commit what would amount to murder. But it is quite legal, under interplanetary law, for him to take the life of anybody who first gives his clear and free permission . . .

How lucky he was to discover so early the careless way in which these people would sign away their lives. "I put my life in your hands," "I'd willingly die just to make you happy," "If you didn't want to marry me, I'd ask you to kill me now, and be done with it all"—how can they really mean such things? They say it so easily, forgetting simple logic and caution in a moment of foolishness, or perhaps of insincerity.

Harry's mind jumps back to the present in alarm. He listens intently to the mixed sounds of the park, then relaxes again. It is only the moon, its light coming through a hole in the shrub at his side to fall at last upon his eyes at the very moment that a noisy drunk passes across a nearby lawn.

He is no danger, but it is definitely time to leave. He flows sluggishly back into his clothes, and re-shapes himself into the golden-haired young man. His suit, he notices, has become somewhat crumpled and disorderly. It will not matter; he can return to his flat through the lower side of town. Nobody will care about his clothes there, least of all the police.

The police . . . How convenient matters would be without the police and the law. As soon as the Interplanetary Police discover that here is a race of creatures ready to sign away their lives upon impulse, the law will be amended and the flaw in it which he has been using will be thoroughly sealed.

How long will it be before that happens? If he returns he will be questioned, and the truth will surely come out. He can only carry on here as he has been doing, sending back reports which are truthful but unrevealing, until they realize that something is wrong and send someone to investigate. That will be the end of it all. In the meantime, he has no

more than eighty or ninety of these short Earth years to go. So little time, so little time . . .

Automatically, he begins to remove all the traces of his presence which he can discover, paying particular attention to any which are liable to reveal his true nature. These people must not know whom they are really looking for.

Margaret's body is rapidly growing cold by the time he comes to investigate it, too, for traces of his identity. Casually, he glances at her face.

The light of her soul is gone. He now sees her as others have done, solely in externals—a plain ungainly girl, with long coarse hair, dull blue eyes, a stubby nose, a thin little mouth, and a pointed chin which Harry, to his amusement, finds himself comparing to an ice cream cone. These people are so ugly, he thinks, when they are seen as bodies and not souls. This one, for example—a rigid, almost inflexible frame, sheathed in stiff lumps of flesh and fat. How happy Margaret would have been if she could have taken upon herself the freedom of his fluidity as easily as he took upon himself the appearance of her own ossified shape.

A sudden thought occurs to him. What was it Margaret said, about the mother of one of—he almost used the popular word, victims, but caught himself in time—loves? A widow, who had lost her son, and now, since Margaret's death, a young friend.

Yes, she should be an ideal prospect for him to meet. Such a store of concealed sorrow she must carry about with her! It will be easy to trace her. In a day or two, she will meet a stranger in the street, or possibly even at Margaret's funeral . . . He will know the best approach when he sees her. And it will give him another chance to act the part of the male. This first masculine role, with Margaret, has proven longer and more difficult to sustain than have his feminine roles; but it has been far more enjoyable, in a subtle way, to be the hunter rather than the hunted . . .

For the moment, however, he darkens his hair and adds the lines of about ten years to his face. Then he strolls casually away from the shrubbery into the open park, humming pleasantly to himself.

—Stephen Cook



BOOK REVIEWS

The House On The Borderland by William Hope Hodgson
(Ace Books, NY, 35¢). Congratulations to editor Donald Wollheim for introducing the Classic Series and bringing to so many new readers the opportunity of obtaining some of the rare out-of-print early masterpieces. This current title, written originally in 1907 and only reprinted once in 1948 by Arkham House, is a great weirdy linking space and time which prompted H. P. Lovecraft to call it "something almost unique in standard literature." Apart from Wells and Verne, this series also contains Ray Cummings' *Brigands Of The Moon* and John Taine's *The Greatest Adventure*.

The Survivor And Others by H. P. Lovecraft and August Derleth (Ballantine Books, 35¢). It is only fitting that this volume should appear at the same time as the Hodgson. When Lovecraft passed away in 1937 he left various notes to scheduled stories, which August Derleth later wrote into the seven stories comprising this selection, in a style very close to that of H.P.—a fitting tribute to the work of one who can well be called the last of the real masters of the macabre.

Twisted, edited by Groff Conklin (Belmont Books, NY, 50¢).

Sub-titled "an unholy bible of weird tales" this 15-story collection contains a fine varied selection of first-rate chillers, including a Lovecraft ("The Shunned House") and assorted horror ranging from Ambrose Bierce through the 'moderns' including Bradbury and Sturgeon to Walter Miller.

The Walker Through Walls by Marcel Ayme (Berkley Books, 50¢). 12 delightful fantasy stories translated from the French by Norman Denny and well worth reading, for these stories are comparable to any that the western world have produced in recent years.

John Carnell.

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