

Science Fantasy

No. 59
VOLUME 20
2/6



A Nova Publication



12th Year
of Publication

Dead God's Homecoming

MICHAEL MOORCOCK



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NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD.

7, Grape Street, Holborn, London, W.C.2.

Science Fantasy

Vol. 20 No. 59

1963

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Editor : JOHN CARNELL

Cover painting by GERARD QUINN

TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

Sole distributors in Australia : Gordon & Gotch (Australia) Ltd.

In New Zealand : Messrs. P. B. Fisher, 564 Colombo Street, Christchurch, N.Z.

Great Britain and the Commonwealth 6 issues 17/- post free

United States of America 6 issues \$3.00 post free

Published Bi-Monthly by
NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD.

7 Grape Street, Holborn, London, W.C.2.

Telephone : TEMple Bar 3373

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So far, the earlier Elric stories have dealt with his random and rather aimless wanderings in the ancient world, but, in fact, they were all part of a larger pattern which begins to become apparent in the following novelette. It is the beginning of the big battle between Order and Chaos.

DEAD GOD'S HOMECOMING

BY MICHAEL MOORCOCK

o n e

There came a time when there was great movement upon the Earth and above it, when the destiny of Men and Gods was hammered out upon the forge of Fate, when monstrous wars were brewed and mighty deeds were designed. And there rose up in this time, which was called the Age of the Young Kingdoms, heroes. Greatest of these heroes was a doom-driven adventurer who bore a crooning rune blade that he loathed.

His name was Elric of Melnibone, king of ruins, lord of a scattered race that had once ruled the ancient world. Elric, sorcerer and swordsman, slayer of kin, despoiler of his homeland, white-faced albino, last of his line.

Elric, who had come to Karlaak by the Weeping Waste and had married a wife in whom he found some peace, some surcease from the torment in him.

And Elric, who had within him a greater destiny than he knew, now dwelt in Karlaak with Zarozinia, his wife, and his sleep was troubled, his dream dark, one brooding night in the Month of the Anemone . . .

Above the rolling Earth, great clouds tumbled down and bolts of lightning charged groundwards to slash the midnight black, split oaks in twain and sear through roofs that cracked and broke.

An ominous storm that was not of natural origin. It groaned around the city of Karlaak by the Weeping Waste, and out of it crept unhuman figures that skulked with knowing ease through the low gates of the city and made their way through shadows towards the graceful palace where Elric slept.

The leader raised a clawed paw bearing an axe of black iron. The band came to a stealthy halt and regarded the sprawling palace which lay, surrounded by gardens, on a hill. The earth shook as lightning lashed it and thunder prowled low through the turbulent sky.

"We are the creatures of chaos," the leader muttered, "and chaos will aid us in this matter. See—already the guards fall at their posts. Our entrance is thus facilitated . . ."

He spoke the truth. The warriors guarding Elric's palace had dropped to the ground, snoring in a supernaturally induced slumber. They crept past them, through the main courtyard and into the palace. Unerringly they climbed twisting staircases to arrive at length, outside the room where Elric and his wife lay in uneasy sleep.

As the leader laid a paw upon the handle of the door, a voice cried out from within the room.

"What's this? What things of hell disrupt my chosen life?"

"He sees us!" sharply whispered one of the creatures.

"No," the leader said, "he sleeps—but such a sorcerer as this Elric is not so easily lulled into a sorcerous stupor. We had best make speed and do our work, for if he wakes it will be the harder!"

He twisted the door handle and eased the door open, his axe half raised. Beyond the bed, heaped with tumbled furs and silks, lightning gashed the night again, showing the white face of the albino close to that of his dark-haired wife.

Even as they entered, he rose stiffly in the bed and his red eyes opened, staring out at them. For a moment the eyes were glazed and then the albino forced himself awake, shouting:

“ Begone, creatures of my dreams !”

The leader cursed and leaped forward, but he had been instructed not to slay this man. He raised the axe threateningly.

“ Silence—your guards cannot aid you.”

Elric jumped from the bed and grasped the thing's wrist, his face close to the fanged muzzle. Because of his albinism he was not physically strong and required magic to give him strength. But, so quickly did he move, that he had wrested the axe from the creature's paw and smashed the shaft between its eyes. Snarling, it fell back, but its comrades jumped forward. There were seven of them, huge muscles moving beneath their furred skins.

Elric clove the skull of the first as others grappled with him. His body was spattered with the thing's blood and brains and he gasped in disgust at the fetid stuff. He managed to wrench his arm away and bring the axe up and down into the collar-bone of another. But then he felt his legs gripped and he fell, confused but still battling. Then there came a great blow on his head and pain blazed through him. He made an effort to rise, failed and fell back insensible.

Thunder and lightning still disturbed the night when, with throbbing head, he awoke and got slowly to his feet using a bed-post to support him. He stared dazedly around him.

Zarozinia was gone ! The only other figure in the room was the stiff corpse of the beast he had killed.

Shaking, he went to the door and flung it open, calling for his servants, but none answered him.

His runesword *Stormbringer* hung in the city's armoury and would take time to get. His throat tight with pain and anger he ran down the corridors and stairways, half-dizzy with anxiety for Zarozinia. Above the palace, thunder still crashed, eddying about in the noisy night. The palace seemed deserted as he ran out into the main courtyard and saw the prone guards. A quick glance at them told him that their slumber was not natural. He ran to the gates, through the gardens, down to the city, but there was no sign of his wife's abductors.

Where had they gone ?

He raised his eyes to the shouting sky, his white face stark and twisted with frustrated anger.

There was no sense to it. Why had they taken her ? He had enemies, he knew, but none who could summon such demoniac help.

To the house of Lord Voashoon, Chief Senator of Karlaak, father of Zarozinia, Elric ran, panting like a wolf. He banged with his fists upon the door, yelling at the astonished servants within.

“Open ! It is Elric—hurry !”

The doors gaped back and he was through them. Lord Voashoon came stumbling down the stair into the chamber, his face heavy with sleep.

“Elric—what is it, my son ?”

“Summon your warriors—Zarozinia has been abducted !”

Instantly, Lord Voashoon's face became alert and he shouted terse orders to his servants in between listening to Elric's explanation of what had happened.

“And I must have entrance into the armoury,” Elric said grimly. “I must have *Stormbringer* !”

“But you renounced the blade, even though it followed you back to Karlaak !”

“Aye—but I renounced the sword for Zarozinia. Without her, I need *Stormbringer* and I must have the sword if I am to bring her back. The logic is simple. Hurry, give me the key.”

Silently Lord Voashoon fetched the key and led Elric to the armoury where the weapons and armour of his ancestors was held, unused for centuries. Through the dusty place strode Elric to a dark alcove that seemed to contain something which lived.

He heard a soft moaning come from the great black battle blade as he reached out a slim-fingered white hand to take it.

“Again I must make use of you, *Stormbringer*,” he said gloomily as he buckled the sheath about his waist, “and I must conclude that we are too closely linked, now, for less than death to separate us.”

With that he was rushing out of the armoury and back to the courtyard where mounted guards were already sitting nervous steeds, awaiting his leadership.

A page presented the stirrup to him as he lifted himself into the saddle of the grey stallion. He drew *Stormbringer* and pointed it high ahead of him.

“Come—we go to chase demons this night !”

All through the raging night they searched but could find no trace of either the creatures or Elric's wife. He rode frantically over the countryside and when dawn came, a smear of blood in the morning sky, his men saw that, though they were weary, he

was still filled with supernatural vitality and they whispered that the moaning sword had filled him with unholy strength.

"Lord Elric—let us retrace our trail and see if the daylight yields a clue !" cried one.

"He does not hear you," another murmured as Elric gave no sign.

But then Elric turned his pain-racked head, hunched beneath his shoulders, and he said hollowly : "They were aided by magic in this work. Magic must have helped them escape."

He urged his horse around and galloped back in the direction they had come. There was still one way of learning something of where Zarozinia had been taken. It was a method which he ill-liked, but it would have to be done.

He must raise the dead corpse and force its knowledge from it.

Curtly, upon returning, Elric ordered everyone from his chamber, barred the door and stared down at the dead thing. Its congealed blood was still on him, but the axe with which he had slain it had been taken away by its comrades.

Elric prepared the body, stretching out its limbs on the floor. He drew the shutters of the windows so that no light filtered into the room, and lit a brazier in one corner of the room. It swayed on its chains as the oil-soaked rushes flared.

He went to a small chest by the window and took out a pouch. From this he took a bunch of dried herbs and with a hasty gesture flung them on the brazier so that it gave off a sickly odour and smoke began to fill the room.

Then he stood over the corpse, his body rigid, and began to chant in the old language of his forefathers, the sorcerer kings of Melnibone.

The chant seemed scarcely akin to human speech, rising and falling from a deep groan to a high-pitched shriek.

The corpse began to stir, its ruined head moving from side to side.

"Arise soulless thing of Hell !" Elric commanded.

The creature came stiffly upright and pointed a finger at Elric, staring through glazed eyes.

"All this," it groaned, "was pre-ordained. Think not you can escape your fate, Elric of Melnibone. You have tampered with my corpse and I am a creature of chaos. My lord will avenge me."

"How ?"

"Your destiny is already planned."

"Tell me, dead one, why did you come to abduct my wife, who sent you hither and where have they gone?"

"Three questions, Lord Elric. Requiring three answers. You know I am dead and can answer nothing directly."

"Aye—that I know. So answer as you can."

"Then listen well for I may recite only once my reed and then must return to the nether-regions where my being may peacefully rot to nothing. Listen :

"Beyond the ocean brews a battle ;
Beyond the battle blood shall fall.
If Elric's kinsman ventures with him
(Bearing a twin of that *he* bears)
To the place where, man-forsaken,
Dwells the one who should not live,
Then a bargain shall be entered,
Elric's wife shall be reclaimed."

With this, the thing fell to the floor and did not stir thereafter.

Elric frowned. Used as he was to verse-omens, this one was difficult. The rushes were spluttering and their smoky light was dimming. Beyond the ocean . . . There were many oceans.

But then he remembered something he had heard from a traveller who had come to Karlaak from Tarkesh, on the Western Continent, beyond the Pale Sea.

He had said that there had been trouble brewing between the land of Dharijor and the other nations of the west. Dharijor had contravened treaties she had signed with her neighbouring kingdoms and had signed a new one with the Theocrat of Pan Tang, that unholy island which lay beyond the Straits of Chaos. The traveller had said that war was sure to break out at any moment since there was evidence that Dharijor and Pan Tang had entered a war alliance.

Now that he had to, he related this information with news he had that Queen Yishana of Jharkor had recruited the aid of Dyvim Slorm and his Imrryrian mercenaries. And Dyvim Slorm was Elric's kinsman ! That also meant something—for Jharkor must be preparing for battle with Dharijor, her neighbour.

Even as he thought upon it, he was acting, gathering his clothes together and preparing for a journey. He must go to Jharkor and speedily, for there, in all likelihood, he would meet his kinsman. And there, also, there would soon be a battle if all the evidence were true.

But the journey to the west was going to take many days and the prospect of it caused a cold ache to grow in his heart as he thought of the weeks in which he would not know how his beloved wife fared.

"No time for that," he told himself as he got into sturdier riding clothes than those he wore. "Action is all that's required of me now—and speedy action."

He held the sheathed rune-blade before him, staring beyond it into space. "I swear by Ariocho that those who have done this, whether they be man or immortal shall suffer from their deed! Hear me, Ariocho! That is my oath!"

And then he was striding from the death-heavy chamber, yelling for his horse.

t w o

Where the Sighing Desert gives way to the borders of Ilmiora, between the coasts of the Eastern continent and the lands of Tarkesh, Dharijor and Shazar, lies the Pale Sea.

It is a cold sea—a morose and chilling sea—but ships prefer to cross from Ilmiora to Dharijor by means of it, rather than chance the weirder dangers of the Straits of Chaos.

On the deck of the Ilmiora schooner *Windrunner*, Elric of Melniboné stood shivering, staring through red and gloomy eyes at the cloud-covered ocean.

In the ports he had heard more news. War had already broken out between the Young Kingdoms of the west and Dharijor and Pan Tang.

He wondered what he might find there as the ship neared the coasts of Tarkesh.

Disembarking in the port of Banarva, on the Tarkesh peninsula, Elric soon saw evidence that war darkened the lands of the Young Kingdoms. There were rumours rife, talk of nothing but battles and warriors. From the confused gossip, Elric could gain no clear impression save that the decisive battle was yet to be fought.

All over the Western continent, men were marching. From Myyrrhn, he heard, the winged men were flying. From Jharkor, the White Leopards, Queen Yishana's personal guard, ran towards Dharijor while Dyvim Storm and his mercenaries pressed northwards to meet them.

Dharijor was the strongest nation of the west and Pan Tang was a formidable ally. Next to Dharijor came Jharkor, who, with her allies Tarkesh, Myyrrhn and Shazar, was still not as strong as those who threatened the security of the Young Kingdoms.

For some time had Dharijor sought an opportunity for conquest and the hasty alliance against her had been made in an effort to stop her before she had fully prepared for conquest.

Whether they would succeed, Elric did not know. Reports were confusing.

Everywhere, men strapped metal about them, bestrode heavy chargers, sharpened their arms, and rode beneath bright silken banners to slay and to despoil.

Here, he reflected, was the battle of the prophecy, but which one it was, whether it had been fought or was yet to be decided he did not know. He tried to forget Zarozenia and turned his moody eyes towards the west. *Stormbringer* hung like a millstone at his side. But he fingered it constantly, drawing his vitality from it.

He spent the night in Banarva and by morning had hired a good horse and was riding across the sparse grassland towards Jharkor.

Across a war-torn world rode Elric, made angry and impatient by the sights of wanton destruction which he witnessed. Although he had lived by his sword and wits for many years and had committed acts of murder, robbery and uricide, he disliked the senselessness of war, of men who killed one another with only the vaguest of reasons why they did so.

Bitter smoke stung his throat and sometimes he would pass straggling groups of townspeople who were fleeing, without knowledge of their direction, from the latest depredation of the roving Dharijorian troops who had struck far into this part of Tarkesh and had met little resistance from the armies of the Tarkesh king Hilran, for they were concentrated further North, readying themselves for the major battle.

Now Elric rode close to the Western Marches, near the Jharkorian border. Here lived sturdy foresters and harvesters

in better times. But now the forests were blackened and burnt and the crops of the field were ruined.

His journey, which was speedy for he wasted no time, took him through one of the stark forests where remnants of trees cast cold silhouettes against the grey, seething sky.

He raised the hood of his heavy black cloak over his head and rode on as rain rushed suddenly down from the sky, and beat through the skeleton trees, sweeping across the distant plains beyond so that all the world seemed grey and black with the swish of the rain a constant and depressing sound.

Then, as he passed a ruined hovel which was half cottage, half hole in the earth, a cawing voice called out.

“Master Elric !”

Astonished that he should be recognised, he turned his bleak face in the direction of the voice.

A ragged figure appeared in the hole that was the hovel's entrance. It beckoned him closer. He walked his horse towards the figure and saw that it was an old man—or perhaps a woman, he couldn't tell.

“You know my name,” he said hollowly. “How?”

“Thou art a legend throughout the Young Kingdoms. Who could not recognise the face and the blade thou art carrying?”

“True, perhaps. But I have a notion that there is more to this than chance recognition. Who are you?”

While the old wretch used, stumbingly, the High Speech of Melnibone, Elric deliberately used the coarse, Common Speech which was the *lingua franca* of the time.

“Would you guest with me a while?”

Elric looked at the hovel and shook his head, he was fastidious at the best of times.

The wretch smiled and made a mock bow. “So the mighty lord disdains to grace my poor home. But does he not perhaps wonder why the fire which raged through this forest a while ago did not, in fact, harm me?”

“Aye,” said Elric thoughtfully, “that is an interesting riddle.”

“Soldiers came not a month gone—from Pan Tang they were. Devil Riders with their hunting tigers running with them. They despoiled the harvest and burnt even the forests that those who fled them might not eat game or berries here. I lived in this forest all my life, doing a little simple magic and prophesy for my needs. But when I saw the walls of flame soon to

engulf me, I cried the name of a demon I knew—a thing from Chaos which, latterly, I had dared not summon. It came. ‘Save me,’ cried I. ‘And what would ye do in return?’ said the demon. ‘Anything,’ I quoth. ‘Then bear this message for my master,’ it said. ‘When the kinslayer known as Elric of Melnibone shall pass this way, tell him that there is one kinsman he shall not slay and he will be found in Sequaloris. If Elric loves his wife, he will play his role. If he plays it well, his wife shall be returned.’ So I fixed the message in my mind, and now give it thee as I swore.”

“Thanks,” said Elric, “and what did you give in return?”

“Why, my soul, of course. But it was an old one and not of much worth. Hell could be no worse than this existence.”

“Then why did you not let yourself burn, your soul unbartered?”

“I wish to live,” said the wretch, smiling again. “Oh, life is good—my life, perhaps, is squalid—but the life around me, that is what I love. But let me not keep you, my lord, for you have weightier matters on your mind.” Once more the wretch gave a mock bow as Elric rode off, puzzled, but encouraged. His wife still lived and was safe. But what bargain must he strike before he could get her back?

Savagely he goaded his horse into a gallop, bound for Sequaloris in Jharkor!

Behind him, faintly through the beating rain, he heard a cackling chuckle at once mocking and miserable.

Now his direction was not so vague, and he rode at great speed, but cautiously, avoiding the roving bands of invaders, until at length the arid plains gave way to the lush wheatlands of the Sequa province of Jharkor. Another day’s ride and Elric entered the small walled city of Sequaloris which had so far not suffered attack.

Here, he discovered preparations for war and learnt news that was of greater interest to him.

The Imrryrian mercenaries, led by Dyvim Slorm, Elric’s cousin and son of Dyvim Tvar, Elric’s old friend, were due to arrive next day, in Sequaloris.

There had been a certain enmity between Elric and the Imrryrians, since the albino had been the cause of their need to live as mercenaries when he had taken part in a raid on the Dreaming City of Melnibone years before and had razed it. But those times were past, long since, and on two previous

occasions he and the Imrryrians had fought on the same side. He was their rightful leader and the ties of tradition were strong in the elder race who had been superceded by the new folk of the Young Kingdoms.

Elric prayed to Arioch, demon-god of his people, that Dyvim Storm would have some clue to his wife's whereabouts.

At noon of the next day, the mercenary army rode swaggering into the city. Elric met them close to the city gate. The warriors were obviously weary from a long ride and were loaded with booty since, before Yishana sent for them, they had been raiding in Shazar close to the Marshes of the Mist.

They were different from any other race, these Imrryrians, with their tapering, pale faces, slanting eyes and high cheekbones. The finery they wore was not stolen, but definitely Melnibonean in design—shimmering cloths of gold, blue and green, metals of delicate workmanship and intricately patterned. They carried lances with long, sweeping heads and there were slim swords at their sides. They sat arrogantly in their saddles, convinced of their superiority over other mortals, and seemed to be, as Elric, not quite human in their unearthly beauty.

As Elric rode up to meet Dyvim Storm, their leader, his own sombre clothes contrasted with theirs. He wore a tall-collared jacket of quilted leather, black and buckled in by a broad, plain belt at which hung a poignard and *Stormbringer*. His dead white hair was held from his eyes by a fillet of black bronze and his breeks and boots were also black. All this black contrasted sharply with his white skin and red, glowing eyes.

Dyvim Storm bowed in his saddle, showing only slight surprise.

“Cousin Elric—so the omen was true !”

“What omen, Dyvim Storm ?”

“A falcon's—your name bird if I remember.”

It was customary for Melniboneans to identify new-born children with birds of their choice, thus Elric's was a falcon, hunting bird of prey.

“What did it tell you, cousin ?” Elric asked eagerly.

“It gave a puzzling message while we had barely gone from the Marshes of the Mist. It came and perched on my shoulder and spoke in human speech. It told me to come to Sequaloris and there I would meet my king. From Sequaloris we were to journey together to join Yishana's army and the battle,

whether won or lost, would resolve the direction of our linked destinies thereafter. Do you make sense of that, cousin?"

"Some," Elric said, frowning. "But come—I have a place reserved for you at the inn. I will tell you all I know over wine. I need help in this business, cousin—as much help as I can obtain, for my wife has been abducted by supernatural elements and I have a feeling that this and the wars are but two incidents in a greater play."

"Then quickly, to the inn. My curiosity is further piqued. This matter increases in interest for me—first falcons and omens, now abduction and strife! What else, I wonder?"

With the Imrryrians straggling after them through the cobbled streets, scarcely a hundred warriors but hardened by their outlawed life, Elric and Dyvim Storm made their way to the inn and there, in haste, Elric outlined all he had learned.

Before replying, his cousin quaffed his wine and banged the cup upon the board, pursing his lips and frowning.

"I have a feeling in my bones," he said, "that we are puppets in some struggle between the gods. We, for all our blood and flesh and will, can see none of the greater conflict save a few scarcely-related details."

"That may be so," said Elric, "but I'm angry at being involved and require my wife's release. I have no notion why we, together, must make the bargain for her return, neither can I guess what it is we have that those who captured her want. But, if the omens are sent by the same agents, then we had best do as we are told, for the meantime, until we can see matters more clearly. Then, perhaps, we can act upon our *own* volition."

"That's wise," Dyvim Storm nodded, "and I'm with you in it." He smiled slightly: "Whether I like it or not, I fancy."

Elric said: "Where lies the army of Dharijor and Pan Tang? I heard it was gathering."

"It has gathered—and marches closer. The impending battle will decide who rules the western lands. I'm committed to Yishana's side not only because she has employed us to aid her, but because I fancy that if the warped lords of Pan Tang dominate these nations, then tyranny will come upon them and they will threaten the security of the whole world. I like them not, these sorcerous upstarts—they seek to emulate the Bright Empire."

"Aye," Elric said. "They are an island culture, as ours was. They are sorcerers and warriors as our ancestors were. But their sorcery is darker and less healthy than ever ours was. Our ancestors were cruel, it is true ; they committed frightful crimes—yet it was natural to them. These newcomers more human than we, have perverted *their* humanity whereas we never possessed it in the same degree. There will never be another Bright Empire, nor can their power last more than ten thousand years as did the power of Melnibone. This is a fresh age, Dyvim Slorm, in more than one way. The time of sorcery is on the wane. Men are finding new ways to harness natural power."

"Our knowledge is so ancient," Dyvim Slorm agreed, "yet, so old is it, that it has little relation to present events, I fancy. Our logic and learning are suited to the past . . ."

"I think you are right," Elric said wearily. "Aye—it is fitting that we should be wanderers, for we have no place in this world."

They drank in silence, moodily, their minds on matters of philosophy and theology. Yet, for all this, Elric's thoughts were forever turning to Zarozenia and the fear of what might have befallen her.

The strange reed of the dead creature lingered in his memory. Undoubtably the reed had mentioned a battle—and the falcon which Dyvim Slorm had seen had mentioned one also—the forthcoming conflict between Yishana's forces and those of Sarosto of Dharijor and Jagreen Lern of Pan Tang.

At length, he had made up his mind. He would go with Dyvim Slorm and there take part in the battle. Though he might perish, he reasoned, he had best do as the omens ordered—otherwise he would lose even the slight chance of ever seeing his wife again. He turned to his cousin.

"I'll make my way with you tomorrow, cousin, and use my sword in the impending battle. Whatever else, I have the feeling that Yishana will need every warrior against the Theocrat and his allies."

"Aye," agreed Dyvim Slorm. "Not only our doom, but the doom of nations will be at stake in this . . ."

t h r e e

Ten terrible men drove their yellow chariots down a black mountain which vomited blue and scarlet fire and shook in a spasm of destruction.

In such a manner, all over the globe, the forces of nature were disrupted and rebellious and, though few realised it, the Earth was changing. The Ten knew why. And they knew of Elric and how their knowledge linked with him.

The night was pale purple and the sun hung a bloody globe over the mountains, for it was late summer. In the valleys, cottages were burning as smoking lava smacked against the straw roofs.

Sepiriz, in the leading chariot, saw the villagers running, a confused rabble—like ants whose hills had been scattered. He turned to the blue-armoured man behind him and he smiled almost gaily.

“See them run,” he said. “See them run, brother. Oh, the joy of it—such forces there are at work !”

“’Tis good to have woken at this time,” his brother agreed, shouting over the rumbling noise of the volcano.

Then the smile left Sepiriz and his eyes narrowed. He lashed at his twin horses with a bull-hide whip, so that blood lanced the flanks of the great black steeds and they galloped even faster down the steep mountain.

In the village, one man saw the Ten in the distance. He shrieked, voicing his fear in a warning :

“The fire has driven them out of the mountain. Hide—escape ! The men from the volcano have awakened—they are coming !” Then the mountain gushed a fresh spewing of hot rock and flaming lava and the man was struck down, screamed as he burned, and died. He died needlessly, for the Ten had no interest in him or his fellows.

Sepiriz and his brothers rode straight through the village, their chariot wheels rattling on the coarse street, the hooves of their horses pounding.

Behind them, the mountain bellowed.

“To Nihrain !” cried Sepiriz. “Speedily, brethren, for there is much work to do. A blade must be brought from Limbo and a pair of men must be found to carry it to Xanyaw !”

Joy filled him as he saw the earth shuddering about him and heard the gushing of fire and rock behind him.

His black body glistened, reflecting the flames of the burning houses. The horses leaned in their harness, dragging the bucking chariot at wild speed, their hooves blurred movement over the ground so that it often seemed they flew.

Perhaps they did, for the steeds of Nihrain were known to be different from ordinary beasts.

Now they flung themselves along a gorge, now up a mountain path, making their speedy way towards the Chasm of Nihrain, the ancient home of the Ten who had not returned there for two thousand years.

Again, Sepiriz laughed. He and his brothers bore a terrible responsibility, for though they had no loyalty to men or gods, they were Fate's spokesmen and thus bore an awful knowledge within their immortal skulls.

For centuries they had slept in their mountain chamber, dwelling close to the dormant heart of the volcano since extremes of heat and cold bothered them little. Now the spewing rock had awakened them and they knew that their time had come—the time for which they had been waiting for thousands of years.

This was why Sepiriz sang in joy. At last he and his brothers were to be allowed to perform their ultimate function.

And this involved two Melniboneans, the two surviving members of the Royal Line of the Bright Empire.

Sepiriz knew they lived—they had to be alive, for without them Fate's scheme was impossible.

But there were those upon the Earth, Sepiriz knew, who were capable of cheating Fate, so powerful were they. Their minions lay everywhere, particularly among the new race of Men, but ghouls and demons were also their tools.

This made his chosen task the harder.

But now—to Nihrain ! To the hewn city and there to draw the threads of destiny into a finer net.

There was still a little time, but it was running short.

And Time the Unknown, was master of All . . .

The pavilions of Queen Yishana and her allies were grouped thickly about a series of small, wooded hills. The trees afforded cover from a distance and no campfires burned to give away their position. Also the sounds of the great army were as muted as possible. Outriders went to and fro, reporting the enemy's positions and keeping wary eyes open for spies.

But Elric and his Imrryrians were unchallenged as they rode in, for the albino and his men were easily recognisable and it was well-known that the feared Melnibonean mercenaries had elected to aid Yishana.

Elric said to Dyvim Slorm : " I had best pay my respects to Queen Yishana, on account of our old bond, but I do not want her to know that I am here on account of my wife's disappearance—otherwise she may try to hinder me. We shall just say that I have come to aid her, out of friendship."

Dyvim Slorm nodded and Elric left his cousin to tend to making camp, while he went at once to Yishana's tent where the tall queen awaited him impatiently.

The look in her eyes was shielded as he entered. She was sitting in a padded chair and the table before her was scattered with battle-maps and writing materials, parchment, ink and the like.

" Good morning, wolf," said she with a half-smile that was at once ironical and provocative. " My outriders reported that you were riding with your countrymen. This is pleasant. Have you forsaken your new wife to return to the subtler pleasures I can offer you ?"

" No," he said. He stripped off his heavy riding cloak and flung it on a bench. " Good morning, Yishana. You do not change. I've half a suspicion that Theleb K'aarna, that sorcerer-lover of yours from Pan Tang, gave you a draught of the waters of Eternal Life before I killed him."

" Perhaps he did," she said. " How goes your marriage, then ?"

" Well," he said.

" And now I'm disappointed," she smiled ironically. She shrugged.

They had been lovers on two different occasions, in spite of the fact that Elric had been partially responsible for her brother's death during the raid on Iyrryr, years before. Darmit of Jharkor's death had put her on the throne and, being an ambitious woman, she had not taken the news with too much sadness. But Elric, keeping true to Zarozinia though he might never see her again, had no wish to resume the relationship.

He turned immediately to the matter of the forthcoming battle.

" I see you are preparing for more than a skirmish," he said. " What forces have you and what are your chances of winning?"

"There are my own White Leopards," she told him, "five hundred picked warriors who run as swiftly as horses, are as strong as mountain cats and as ferocious as blood-mad sharks—they are trained to kill and killing is all they know."

"Then there are my other troops—infantry and cavalry, some eighty Lords in command. The best cavalry are from Shazar, wild riders but clever fighters and well-disciplined. Tarkesh has sent fewer men, but I understand King Hilran needed to defend his southern borders. However, there are almost a thousand and fifty foot-soldiers and some two hundred mounted men from Tarkesh. In all we can put perhaps six thousand trained warriors on the field. Serfs, slaves and the like are also fighting but they will, of course, serve only to meet the initial onslaught and will die in the early part of the battle."

Elric nodded. These were standard military tactics of the time.

"And what of the enemy?"

"We have more numbers—but they have Devil Riders and hunting tigers. There are also some beasts they keep in cages—but we cannot guess what they are since the cages are kept covered."

"I heard that the men of Myyrrhn are flying hither. The import must be great for them to leave their eyries."

"If we lose this battle," she said gravely, "Chaos will engulf the Earth and rule over it. The Theocrat Jagreen Lern of Pan Tang is but the tool of a less natural master, did you not know?"

"I had heard rumours, but discounted them as propaganda."

"We have every evidence that he is aided by supernatural powers—probably the Lords of Chaos. We are not only fighting for our lands—we are fighting for the human race, Elric!"

"Then let us hope we win," he said.

Elric stood among the captains as they surveyed the mobilising army.

Tall Dyvim Storm was by his side, his golden shirt loose on his slim body and his manner confident, arrogant. Also there were hardened soldiers of many smaller campaigns. Short, dark-faced men from Tarkesh with thick armour and black, oiled hair and beards. The half-naked winged men from Myyrrhn had arrived, with their brooding eyes, hawk-like

faces, their great wings folded on their backs, quiet, dignified, seldom speaking. The Shazarian commanders were there also, in jackets of grey, brown and black, in rust-coloured bronze armour. With them stood the captain of Yishana's White Leopards, a long-legged, thick-bodied man with blond hair tied in a knot at the back of his bull-necked head, silver armour bearing the emblazon of a leopard, albino, like Elric, rampant and snarling.

The time of the battle was drawing close . . .

Now, in a grey dawn, the two armies advanced upon each other, coming from opposite ends of a wide valley, flanked by low, wooded hills.

The army of King Sarosto of Dharijor moved, a tide of dark metal, up the shallow valley to meet them.

Elric, still unarmoured, watched as they approached, his horse stamping the turf. Dyvim Slorm, beside him, pointed and said : " Look—there are the plotters—Sarosto on the left and Jagreen Lern on the right !"

The leaders headed their army, banners of dark silk rustling above their helms. King Sarosto and his thin ally, aquiline Jagreen Lern in glowing scarlet armour that seemed to be red hot and may have been. On his helm was the Merman Crest of Pan Tang, for they claimed kinship with the sea-people. Sarosto's armour was dull, murky yellow, emblazoned with the Star of Dharijor upon which was the Cleft Sword which history said was borne by Sarosto's ancestor, Atarn, the City-Builder.

Behind them, instantly observable, came the Devil Riders of Pan Tang on their six-legged reptilian mounts. Swarthy and detached, they carried long curved sabres, naked at their belts. Prowling among them came over a hundred hunting tigers, trained like dogs, with tusk-like teeth and claws that could rend a man to the bone with a single sweep.

Beyond the rolling army as it moved towards them, Elric could just see the tops of the mysterious cage-waggons. What weird beasts did *they* contain, he wondered.

Then Yishana shouted a command.

The archers' arrows spread a rattling black cloud above them as Elric led the first wave of infantry down the hill to meet the van of the enemy army.

That he should be forced to risk his life, embittered him. But if he was ever to discover Zarozenia's whereabouts, he had to play out his ordered part and pray that he lived.

The main force of cavalry followed the infantry, flanking it with orders to encircle the enemy if possible.

Brightly clad Imrryrians and bronze-armoured Shazarians to one side.

Blue-armoured Tarkeshites with brilliant plumes of red, purple and white, long lances levelled, and gold-armoured Jharkorians, longswords already unscabbarded, galloped on the other side.

In the centre of Elric's advance phalanx loped Yishana's White Leopards and the queen herself rode beneath her banner, behind the first phalanx, leading a battalion of knights.

Down they rushed toward the enemy whose own arrows rushed upwards and then swept groundwards to clash against helmets or thud into flesh.

Now the sound of war-shouts smashed through the still dawn as they streaked down the slopes and clashed.

Elric found himself confronting lean Jagreen Lern, and the snarling theocrat met *Stormbringer's* swing with a flame-red buckler which successfully protected him—proving the shield to be treated against sorcerous weapons.

Jagreen Lern's features wrinkled into a malicious smile as he recognised Elric.

"So—I was told you'd be here, Whiteface. I know thee, Elric and I know thy doom!"

"Too many men, save me, appear to know my destiny better than I," said the albino. "But perhaps if I slay thee, Theocrat, I may force the secret from you before you die?"

"Oh, no! That is not my master's plan at all."

"Well, mayhap 'tis mine!"

He struck again at Jagreen Lern, but again the blade was turned, screaming its anger. He felt it move in his hand, for *Stormbringer* was half sentient, felt it throb with chagrin, for normally the hell-forged blade could slice through metal however finely tempered.

In Jagreen Lern's gauntleted right hand was a huge war-axe which he now swung at Elric's unprotected head.

The albino leaned to one side, avoided the blow and drove again point first at Jagreen Lern's midriff.

The runeblade shrieked as it failed to pierce the armour. The war-axe swung again and Elric brought up his sword as protection but, in astonishment, was driven back in his saddle

by the force of the blow, barely able to control his horse, one foot slipping from the stirrup.

Jagreen Lern struck again and clove the skull of Elric's horse which crumpled to its knees, blood and brains gushing, great eyes rolling as it died.

Flung from the beast, Elric rose painfully and readied himself for Jagreen Lern's next blow. But to his surprise, the sorcerer-king turned away and moved into the thick of the battle.

"Sadly your life is not mine to take, Whiteface ! That is the prerogative of other powers. If you live and we are the victors—I will seek you out, perhaps."

Unable, in his dazed condition, to make sense of this, Elric looked desperately around for another horse and saw a Dharijorian mount, its head and foreparts well protected by dented black armour, running loose and away from the fight.

Swiftly, he leapt for its harness and caught a dangling rein, steadied the beast, got a foot into a stirrup and swung himself up in the saddle which was uncomfortable for an unarmoured man. Standing in the stirrups, Elric rode it back into the battle.

He hewed his way through the enemy knights, slaying now a Devil Rider, now a hunting tiger that lashed at him with bared fangs, now a gorgeously armoured Dharijorian commander, now two foot-soldiers who struck at him with halberds. His horse reared like a monster and, desperately, he forced it closer to the standard of Yishana until he could see one of the heralds.

Yishana's army was fighting well, but its discipline was lost. It must regroup if it was to be most effective.

"*Recall the cavalry !*" Elric yelled. "*Recall the cavalry !*"

The young herald looked up. He was badly pressed by two Devil Riders. His attention distracted, he was skewered on a Devil Rider's blade and shrieked as the two men butchered him.

Cursing, Elric rode closer and struck one of the attackers in the side of the head. The man toppled and fell into the churned mud of the field. The other Rider turned, only to meet howling *Stormbringer's* point, and he died yelling, as the runeblade drank his soul.

The herald, still mounted, was dead in the saddle, his body a mass of cuts. Elric leaned forward, tearing the horn from around the corpse's neck.

Placing it to his lips, he sounded the Cavalry Recall and caught a glimpse of horsemen turning.

Now he saw the standard itself begin to fall and realised that the standard-bearer was slain. He rose in the saddle and grasped the pole which bore the bright flag of Jharkor and, with this in one hand, the horn at his lips, attempted to rally his forces.

At length, the remnants of the battered army gathered around him. Then Elric, taking control of the battle, did the only thing he could—took the only course of action which might save the day.

He sounded a long, wailing note on the horn. In response to this he heard the beating of heavy wings as the men of Myyrrhn took the air.

Observing this, the enemy released the traps of the mysterious cages.

Elric's spirits sank.

A weird hooting preceded the sight of giant owls circling skywards.

The enemy had anticipated a threat from the air !

Only slightly daunted by this unexpected sight, the men of Myyrrhn, armed with long spears, attacked the great birds, until the embattled warriors on the ground were showered with blood and feathers. Corpses of birds and men began to flop downwards, crushing infantry and cavalry beneath them.

Through this confusion, Elric and the White Leopards of Yishana cut their way into the enemy to join up with Dyvim Slorm and his Imrryrians, the remnants of the Tarkeshite cavalry, and about a hundred Shazarians who had survived.

Looking upward, Elric saw that most of the great owls were destroyed, but only a handful of the men of Myyrrhn had survived the fight in the air. These, having done what they could against the owls, were themselves circling about preparatory to leaving the battle. Obviously they realised the hopelessness of it all.

Elric cried to Dyvim Slorm as their forces joined :

"The battle's lost—Sarosto and Jagreen Lern rule here now !"

Dyvim hefted his longsword in his hand and gave Elric a look of assent.

"If we're to live to keep our destiny, we'd best make speed away from here !" he cried.

There was little more they could do.

"Zarozinia's life is more important to me than anything else!" Elric yelled. "Let's look to our own predicament!"

But the weight of the enemy forces was like a vice, crushing Elric and his men. Blood covered Elric's face from a blow he had received across the forehead. It clogged his eyes so that he had to keep raising his left hand to his face to get rid of the stuff.

His right arm ached as he lifted *Stormbringer* again and again, hacking and stabbing about him, desperate now, for although the dreadful blade had a life, almost an intelligence, of its own, even it could not supply the vitality which Elric needed to remain entirely fresh. In a way he was glad, for he hated the runesword, though he half-depended on the force which flowed from it to him—as an albino he would normally be apathetic and without much energy.

Stormbringer radiated an evil poison which more than slew Elric's attackers—it drank their souls, and some of that life force was passed on to the Melnibonean monarch . . .

Now the ranks of the enemy fell back and seemed to open. Through this self-made breach, animals came running. Animals with gleaming eyes and red, teeth-filled jaws. Animals with claws.

The hunting tigers of Pan Tang.

Horses screamed as the tigers leapt and rended them, tearing down mount and man and slashing at the throats of their victims.

The tigers raised bloody snouts and stared around for a new prey. Terrified, many of Elric's small force fell back shouting. Most of the Tarkeshite knights broke and fled the field, precipitating the flight of the Jharkorians who were followed by the few remaining Shazarrians still mounted. Soon only Elric, his Imrryrians and about forty White Leopards stood against the might of Dharijor and Pan Tang.

Elric raised the horn and sounded the Retreat, wheeled his black steed about and raced up the valley, Imrryrians behind him.

Behind him, the White Leopards fought on to the last. As Yishana had said—they knew nothing but how to kill. Obviously they also knew how to die.

Elric and Dyvim Storm led the Imrryrians up the valley, half-thankful that the White Leopards covered their retreat.

The Melnibonean had seen nothing of Yishana since he had clashed with Jagreen Lern. He did not know what had become of her.

As they turned a bend in the valley, Elric understood the full battle-plan of Sarosto and his ally—for a strong, fresh force of foot-soldiers and cavalry had assembled at the other end of the valley, obviously with the intention of cutting off any retreat made by his forces.

Scarcely thinking, Elric urged his horse up the slopes of the hills, his men following, as the Dharijorians rushed towards them, spreading out to cut off their escape.

Elric turned his horse about and saw that the White Leopards were still fighting around the standard of Jharkor and he headed back in that direction, keeping to the hills. Over the crest of the hills he rode, Dyvim Slorm and a handful of Imrryrians beside him, and then they were galloping for open countryside while behind the knights of Dharijor and Pan Tang gave chase. They had obviously recognised Elric and wished either to kill or capture him.

Ahead Elric could see that the Tarkeshites, Shazarians and Jharkorians who had earlier fled had taken the same route out as he had. But they no longer rode together, were scattering away.

Elric and Dyvim Slorm rode westwards across unknown country while the other Imrryrians, to take attention off their leaders, rode to the North East toward Tarkesh and perhaps a few days of safety.

The battle was won. The minions of evil were the victors and an age of terror had settled on the lands of the Young Kingdoms in the west.

By evening, Elric, Dyvim Slorm and two Imrryrians, a Tarkeshite commander called Yedn-pad-Juizev, badly wounded in the side, and a Shazarian foot-soldier, Orozn, who had taken a horse away from the battle, were temporarily safe from pursuit and were trudging their horses wearily towards a range of slim-peaked mountains which loomed black against the red evening sky.

They had not spoken for some hours. Yedn-pad-Juizev was obviously dying and they could do nothing for him. He knew this also and expected nothing, merely rode with them for company.

He was very tall for a Tarkeshite, his scarlet plume still bobbing on his dented blue-metal helmet, his breastplate scarred and smeared with his own blood and other's. His beard was black and shiny with oil, his nose a jutting crag on the rock of his soldier's face. He was bearing the pain well, his eyes half-glazed. Though they were impatient to reach the comparative safety of the mountain range, the others matched their pace to his, half in fascination that a man could cling to life for so long, half in respect.

Night came and a great yellow moon hung in the sky over the mountains. The sky was completely clear of cloud and stars shone brightly.

The warriors wished that the night had been dark, storm-covered for they could have then sought more security in the shadows. As it was the night was lighted and they could only hope that they reached the mountains soon—before the hunting tigers of Pan Tang were put on their track and they died before the rending claws of those dreadful beasts.

Elric was in a grim and thoughtful mood. For a while the Dharijorian and Pan Tang conquerors would be busy consolidating their new-won Empire. Perhaps there would be quarrels between them when this was done, perhaps not. But soon, anyway, they would be very powerful and threatening the security of other nations on the Southern and Eastern continents.

But all this, however much it overshadowed the fate of the whole known world, meant little to Elric for he could still not clearly see his way to Zarozinia.

He remembered the dead creature's prophecy, part of which had now come about. But still it meant little.

He felt as if he was being driven constantly westwards, as if he must go further and further into the sparsely-settled lands beyond Jharkor.

Was it here that his destiny lay?

Was it here that Zarozinia's captors had come?

Beyond the ocean brew a battle;

Beyond the battle blood shall fall . . .

Well, had the blood fallen, or was it yet to fall? What was the 'twin' that Elric's kinsman, Dyvim Slorm, bore? Who was the one who should not live?

Perhaps the secret lay in the mountains, ahead of them?

Beneath the moon, they rode, and at last came to a gorge which they entered. Half-way along it they located a cave and lay down to rest.

In the morning, Elric was awakened by a sound outside the cave. Instantly he drew *Stormbringer* and crept to the mouth of the cave. What he saw caused him to sheath the blade and call in a soft voice to the battered man who was riding up the gorge towards the cave.

"Here, herald ! We are friends."

The man was one of Yishana's heralds. His surcoat was in ribbons, his armour crumpled on his body. He was swordless and without a helmet, a young man with his face made gaunt by weariness and despair. He looked up and relief came when he recognised Elric.

"My lord Elric—they said you were slain on the field."

"I'm glad they did, since that makes pursuit less likely. Come inside."

The others were awake now—all but one. Yedn-pad-Juizev had died, sleeping, in the night.

Orozn yawned and jerked a thumb at the corpse. "If we do not find food soon, I'll be tempted to eat our dead friend."

The man looked at Elric for response to this jest, but seeing the albino's expression he became abashed and retreated to the depths of the cave grumbling and kicking at loose stones.

"What news have you ?" asked Elric of the herald.

"Dark news, my lord. From Shazar to Tarkesh black misery prevails and iron and fire beat across nations like an unholy storm. We are fully conquered and only small bands of men carry on a hopeless struggle against the enemy War Lords. Some of these are already talking of turning bandit and preying on each other, so desperate have times become."

Elric nodded. "Such is what happens when foreign allies are beaten on friendly soil. What of Queen Yishana ?"

"She fared ill, my lord. Clad in metal, she battled against a score of men before expiring—her body torn asunder by the force of their attack. Sarosto took her head for a keepsake and added it to other trophies—the hands of Karnarl, his half-brother, who earlier opposed him over the Pan Tang alliance, Penik of Nargesser's eyes, who raised an army against him in that province to do likewise. Theocrat Jagreen Lern ordered all other prisoners tortured to death and hung in chains

throughout the land as an example. They are an unholy pair, my lord."

Elric's mouth grew tight when he heard this. Already it was becoming clear to him that his only route was westwards, for the conquerors would soon search him out if he returned.

He turned to Dyvim Slorm. The Imrryrian's shirt was in rags and his left arm covered in dried blood.

"Our destiny appears to lie in the west," he said quietly.

"Then let us make speed," said his cousin, "for I am impatient to get it over and at least learn whether we live or perish in this enterprise. We gained nothing by our encounter with the enemy, but wasted time."

"I gained something," Elric said, remembering his fight with Jagreen Lern. "I gained the knowledge that Jagreen Lern *is* connected in some way with the kidnapping of my wife—and if he had ought to do with it, I'll claim my vengeance no matter what."

"Now," said Dyvim Slorm. "Let us make haste to the west."

f o u r

They drove deeper into the mountains, that day, avoiding the few hunting parties sent out by the conquerors, but the two Imrryrians, recognising that their leaders were on a special journey left to go in another direction. The herald had gone southward to spread his gloomy news so that only Elric, Dyvim Slorm and Orozn were left. They did not welcome Orozn's company but bore it for the meanwhile.

Then, after a day, Orozn disappeared and Elric and Dyvim Slorm ranged deeper into the black crags, riding through towering, oppressive canyons or along narrow paths.

Snow lay on the mountains, bright white against sharp black, filling gorges, making paths slippery and dangerous. Then one evening they came to a place where the mountains opened out into a wide valley and they rode, with difficulty down the foothills of the mountains, their tracks making great black scars in the snow and their horses steaming, their breath billowing white in the cold air.

They observed a rider coming across the valley floor towards them. One rider they did not fear, so they waited for him to approach.

To their surprise it was Orozn, clad in fresh garments of wolfskin and deer hide.

He greeted them in a friendly manner.

"I had come seeking you both. You must have taken a more difficult route than mine."

"From where have you come?" Elric asked. His face was drawn, his cheek-bones emphasised by the sunken skin. He looked more like a wolf than ever with his red eyes gleaming. Zarozinia's fate weighed heavy on his mind.

"There is a settlement nearby—come, I will take you to it."

They followed Orozn for some way and it was getting near night-fall, the setting sun staining the mountain scarlet, when they reached the opposite side of the valley, dotted with a few birch-trees and, further up, a cluster of firs.

Orozn led them into this grove.

They came screaming out of the dark. A dozen men, possessed by hatred—and something else. Weapons were raised in their mailed hands. By their armour, these men were from Pan Tang. Orozn must have been captured and led Elric and his cousin into ambush in return for his own liberty.

Elric turned his horse rearing.

"Orozn! You betrayed us!"

But Orozn was riding. He looked back once, his pale face, tortured with guilt. Then his eyes darted away from Elric and Dyvim Storm and he frowned, rode down the moss-wet hill back into the howling darkness of the night.

Elric lifted *Stormbringer* from his belt, gripped the hilt, blocked a blow from a brass-studded mace, slid his sword down the handle and sheared off his attacker's fingers. They were all around him and Dyvim Storm now.

He smote about him, *Stormbringer* shrilling a wild, lawless song of death.

But Elric and Dyvim Storm were still weak from the rigours of their past adventures.

Not even *Stormbringer's* evil strength was sufficient to fully revitalise Elric's deficient veins.

Yet Elric was filled with fear—not of the attackers, but of the fact that he was doomed to die or be captured. And he had the feeling that these warriors had no knowledge of their master's part in the matter of the prophecy, did not realise that, perhaps, he was not meant to die at that moment.

In fact, he realised, as he battled, a great mistake was about to be perpetrated . . .

“Arioch !” He cried in his fear to the demon-god of Melnibone. “Arioch ! Aid me ! Blood and souls for thine aid !”

But that tractable entity sent no aid.

Dyvim Slorm's long blade caught a man just below his gorget and pierced him through the throat. The other Pan Tang horsemen threw themselves at him but were driven back by his sweeping sword.

Dyvim Slorm shouted : “Why do we worship such a god when whim decides him so often ?”

“Perhaps he thinks our time has come !” shouted Elric as his runeblade screamed and drank another foe's life-force.

Tiring fast, they fought on. And then a new sound broke above the clash of arms—the sound of chariots and low, moaning cries.

Then they were sweeping into the melee—black men with handsome features and thin, proud mouths, their magnificent bodies half-naked as their cloaks of white fox fur streamed behind them and their javelins were flung with terrible accuracy at the bewildered men of Pan Tang.

Elric sheathed his sword and remained ready to fight or flee.

“This is the one—the white-faced one !” cried a black charioteer as he saw Elric.

The chariots rolled to a halt, tall horses stamping and snorting. Elric rode up to the leader.

“I am grateful,” he said, half falling from his saddle in weariness. He turned the droop of his shoulders into a courtly bow. “You appear to know me—you are the third I've met while on this quest who recognises me without my being able to return the compliment.”

The leader tugged the fox cape about his naked chest and smiled with his thin lips. “I'm named Sepiriz,” he said. “And as for you—we have known of you for thousands of years. Elric are you not—last king of Melnibone ?”

“That is true.”

“And you,” Sepiriz addressed Dyvim Slorm, “are Elric's cousin. Together, you represent the last of the pure line of Melnibone ?”

“Aye,” Dyvim Slorm agreed, curiosity in his eyes.

"Then we have been waiting for you to pass this way. There was a prophecy . . .

"You are the captors of Zarozinia!" Elric shouted, reaching for his sword.

Sepiriz shook his head. "No—but we can tell you where she is. Calm yourself. Though I realise the agony of mind you must be suffering, I will be better able to explain all I know back in our own domain."

"First tell us who you are," Elric demanded.

Sepiriz smiled slightly. "You know us, I think—or at least you know of us. There was a certain friendship between your ancestors and our folk in the early years of the Bright Empire." He paused a moment before continuing :

"Have you ever heard legends, in Imrryr perhaps, of the Ten from the mountain? The Ten who sleep in the mountain of fire?"

"Many times." Elric drew in his breath. "Now I recognise you by description. But it is said that you sleep for centuries in the mountain of fire. Why are you roaming abroad in this manner?"

"We were driven from our volcano home, which has been dormant for two thousand years, by an eruption. Such movements of nature have been taking place all over the Earth of late. Our time, we knew, had come to awaken again. We are servants and spokesmen of Fate—and our mission is strongly bound up with your destiny. We bear a message for you from Zarozinia's captor—and another from a different source. Would you return now, with us to the Chasm of Nihrain and learn all we can tell you?"

Elric pondered for a moment, then he lifted his white face and said :

"I am in haste to claim vengeance, Sepiriz. But if what you can tell me will lead me closer to claiming it, I'll come."

"Then come!" The black giant jerked the reins of his horse and turned the chariot about.

Then they were off—to the Chasm of Nihrain.

It was a journey of a day and a night to Nihrain, a gaping chasm high in the mountains—a place avoided by all ; it had supernatural significance for those who dwelt near the mountains.

The lordly Nihrain conversed little on the journey and at last they were above the Chasm, driving their chariots down the steep path which wound into its dark depths.

About half a mile down no light penetrated, but they saw ahead of them flickering torches that illuminated part of the carved outline of an unearthly mural or betrayed a gaping opening in the solid rock.

Then, as they guided their horses down further they saw, in detail, the awe-inspiring city of Nihrain which outsiders had not glimpsed for many centuries. The last of the Nihrain now lived here—ten immortal men of a race older even than that of Melnibone which had a history of twenty thousand years.

Huge columns rose above them, hewn ages before from the living rock, giant statues and wide balconies, many-tiered. Windows a hundred feet high and sweeping steps cut into the face of the chasm.

The Ten drove their yellow chariots through a mighty gate and into the caverns of Nihrain, decorated to their entire extent with symbolic scenes and strange beings. Here slaves, wakened from a sleep of centuries to tend their masters, ran forward. Even these did not fully bear resemblance to the men that Elric knew.

Sepiriz gave the reins to a slave as Elric and Dyvim Slorm dismounted, staring about them in awe.

He said : “ Now—to my own chambers and there I’ll inform you of what you wish to know—and what you must do.”

Led by Sepiriz, the kinsmen stalked impatiently through galleries and into a large chamber, full of dark sculpture. A number of fires burned around this hall, in big grates.

Sepiriz folded his great body into a chair and bid them do likewise.

When they were all seated before one of the fires, Sepiriz took a long breath, staring around the hall, perhaps remembering its former greatness.

Somewhat angered by this show of casualness, Elric said impatiently :

“ Forgive me, Sepiriz—but you promised to impart your message to us.”

“ Yes,” Sepiriz said, “ but so much do I have to tell you that I must pause one moment to collect my thoughts.” He settled himself in the chair before continuing.

"We know where your wife is," he said at last, "and know also that she is safe. She will not be harmed since she is to be bargained for something which you possess."

"Then tell me the whole story."

"We were friendly with your ancestors, Elric. And we were friendly with those they superceded—the ones who forged that blade you bear."

Elric was interested in spite of his anxiety. For years he had attempted to rid himself of the runesword, but had never succeeded. All his efforts had failed and he still needed to carry it, although drugs now gave him most of his strength.

"Would you be rid of your sword, Elric?" Sepiriz said.

"Aye—it's well known."

"Then listen to this tale."

"We know for whom and for what the blade—and its twin—were forged. They were made for a special purpose and for special men. Only Melniboneans may carry them—and of those only the blood of the Royal line."

"There is no hint of any special purpose for the swords in Melnibonean history or legend," Elric said leaning forward.

"Some secrets are best kept fully guarded," Sepiriz said calmly. "Those blades were forged to destroy a certain group of very powerful beings. You know them as the Dead Gods."

"The Dead Gods—but, by their very name, you must know that they perished long ages ago."

"They 'perished' as you say—in human terms they are dead. But they *chose* to die—chose to rid themselves of material shape and hurled their life-stuff into the blackness of space, for in those days they were full of fear!"

Elric had no real concept of outer space, but the word meant for him something of supernatural meaning—the outside—beyond the world—so he accepted what Sepiriz said and listened on.

"One of them has returned," Sepiriz said.

"Why?"

"To get, at any cost, two earthly things which endanger him and his fellow gods—wherever they may be they can still be harmed by these things I mention."

"Those two things are . . .?"

"They have the earthly appearance of two swords, rune-carved and sorcerous—*Mournblade* and *Stormbringer*!"

"This !" Elric touched his blade. "Why should the gods fear this ? And the other went to Limbo with my cousin Yrkoon whom I killed many years ago. It is lost."

"That is not true. We recovered it—that was part of Fate's purpose for us. We have it here, in Nihrain. The blades were forged for your ancestors who drove the Dead Gods away by means of them. They were made by other unhuman smiths who were also enemies of the Dead Gods. These smiths were impelled to combat evil *with* evil—although they, themselves, were not pledged to Chaos, but to Law. They forged the swords for several reasons—ridding the world of the Dead Gods was but one !"

"The other reasons ?"

"Those you shall learn in times to come—for our relationship will not be ended until the whole destiny has been worked out. We are obliged not to reveal the other reasons until the proper time. You have a dangerous destiny, Elric, and I do not envy it."

"But what is the message you have ?" Elric said loudly.

"One of the Dead Gods has returned to Earth, as I told you. He has gathered acolytes about him. They kidnapped your wife, Zarozinia !"

Elric felt suddenly dizzy. Must he defy such power as this ?

"Why . . . ?" he managed eventually.

"Darnizhaan is aware that Zarozinia is important to you. He wishes to barter her for the two swords. We, in this matter, are merely messengers. We must give up the sword we keep, at the request of you or Dyvim Slorm here, for they rightfully belong to any of the royal line. Darnizhaan's terms are simple. Give him the blades which threaten his existence—or he will dispatch Zarozinia to limbo. Her death—it would not be death as we know it—would be unpleasant and eternal."

"And if I agreed to do that—what would happen ?"

"All the Dead Gods would return—only the power of the swords keeps them from doing so now !"

"And what would happen if the Dead Gods came back ?"

"Evil would sweep the world. Chaos would plunge this Earth into a stinking inferno of terror and destruction. You have already had a taste of what is happening—and Darnizhaan has only been back for a short time."

"You mean the defeat of Yishana's armies and the conquest by Sarosto and Jagreen Lern ?"

"Exactly. They are tools of Darnizhaan. They will be his agents in conquering the world for Chaos."

"I have an impossible choice, Sepiriz. Without the blade, I can probably survive on herbs and the like. But if I give it up for Zarozinia then Chaos will be unleashed to its full extent and I will have a monstrous crime upon my conscience."

"The choice is yours alone to make."

Elric deliberated but could think of no way around the problem at that moment.

"Bring the other blade," he said.

Sepiriz rejoined them a while later, with a scabbarded sword that seemed little different from *Stormbringer*.

"So, Elric—is the prophecy explained?" he asked, still keeping hold of *Mournblade*.

"Aye—here is the twin of that I bear. But the last part—where are we to go?"

"I will tell you in a moment. You can see now that the object of the prophecy was, in a sense, deliberately to confuse you—to puzzle you to such an extent that, by the time you realised what it meant, you would be virtually incapable of coherent action."

He smiled. "Though the Dead Gods, and the powers of Chaos, are aware that we possess the sister blade—they do not know whom we serve. Fate, as I told you, is our master—and Fate has wrought a fabric for this Earth which would be hard to alter. But it *could* be altered and we are entrusted to see that Fate is not cheated. You are about to undergo a test. How you fare in it—what your decision is—will decide what we must tell you upon your return to Nihrain."

"You wish me to return here?"

"Yes."

"Give me *Mournblade*," Elric said quickly.

Sepiriz handed him the sword and Elric stood there with one twin blade in each hand, as if weighing something between them.

Both blades seemed to moan in recognition and their power swam through his body so that he seemed to be built of steel-hard fire.

"I remember, now that I hold them both, that their powers are greater than I realise. There is *one* quality they possess when paired—a quality we may be able to use against this Dead God." He frowned. "But more of that in a moment."

He stared sharply at Sepiriz.

"Now tell me, where is Darnizhaan now?"

"The Vale of Xanyaw in Myyrrhn!"

He handed *Mournblade* to Dyvim Slorm who accepted it gingerly.

"What will your choice be?" Sepiriz asked.

"Who knows, who knows?" Elric said with bitter gaiety.

"Perhaps there is a way to beat this Dead God . . .

"But I tell you this, Sepiriz—given the chance I shall make that God rue his homecoming, for he has done the one thing that can move me to real anger. And the anger of Elric of Melnibone can destroy the world!"

Sepiriz rose from his chair, his eyebrows lifting.

"And gods, Elric—can it destroy gods?"

five

Elric rode like a giant straw-man, gaunt on the massive back of the Nihrain steed. His grim face was set fast in a mask that hid emotion and his red eyes burned like coals in his sunken skull. The wind whipped his hair this way and that, but he sat straight, staring ahead, one long-fingered hand gripping *Stormbringer's* hilt to him.

Occasionally Dyvim Slorm, who bore *Mournblade* proudly and warily, heard the blade moan to its sister and felt it shudder at his side. Only later did he begin to ask himself what the blade might make him—what it would give him and demand of him. After that, he kept his hand away from it as much as possible.

Then one day, close to the borders of Myyrrhn, a pack of Dharijorian hirelings—native Jharkorians in the livery of their conquerors—came upon them. Unsavoury louts they were, who should have known better than to ride across Elric's path.

They steered their horses, grinning, black plumes of helmets nodding, armour straps creaking, metal clanking. The leader, a patch-eyed bully with an axe at his belt, pulled his mount short in front of Elric.

The albino's horse came to a stop at a direction from its master. His expression unchanged, Elric drew *Stormbringer* in an economic and catlike gesture, delicately. Dyvim Slorm copied him, eyeing the silently laughing men. He was surprised at how easily the blade sprang from its scabbard.

Then, with no challenges, Elric began to fight.

He fought like an automaton, quickly, efficiently, expressionlessly, cleaving the leader's shoulder plate in a stroke that cut through the man from shoulder to stomach in one raking movement which peeled back armour and flesh, rupturing the body so that a great scarlet gash appeared in the black metal and the leader wept as he slowly died, falling back to sprawl for a moment over his horse before slumping from the mount, one leg high, caught in a stirrup strap.

Stormbringer let out a great metallic purr of pleasure and Elric directed arm and blade about him, emotionlessly slaying the horsemen as if they were unarmed and chained, so little chance did they have.

Dyvim Storm, unused to the semi-sentient *Mournblade*, tried to wield her like an ordinary sword but she moved in his hand making cleverer strokes than he. A peculiar sense of power, at once sensual and abstracted, poured into him and he heard his voice yelling in exultation, realised what his ancestors must have been like in war.

The fight was quickly done with and leaving the soul-drained corpses on the frosty ground behind them, they were soon in the land of Myyrrhn.

Both blades had now been commonly blooded.

Elric had long-since pulled his thoughts together and was capable of thinking and acting coherently, but he could spare none of this for Dyvim Storm while intratemporally asking nothing of his cousin who rode at his side, frustrated in that he was not called upon to give help.

Elric let his mind drift about in time, encompassing past, present and future and forming it into a whole—a pattern. He was suspicious of pattern, disliking of shape, for he did not trust it. To him, life was chaotic, chance-dominated, unpredictable. It was a trick, an illusion of the mind, to be able to see a pattern to it.

He knew a few things, judged nothing.

He knew he bore a sword which physically and psychologically he needed to bear. It was an unalterable admission of a weakness in him, a lack of confidence in either himself or the philosophy of cause and effect. He believed himself a realist.

He knew that he loved, obscurely at times, his wife Zarozinia and would die if it meant she would not be harmed.

He knew that, if he were to survive and keep the freedom he had won and fought to hold, he must journey to the Dead God's lair and do what he saw fit to do when he had managed to assess the situation. He knew that for all his admission of chaos, he would be better able to do what he wished in a world ordered by some degree of law.

The wind had been warm but now, nearing dusk, it grew colder. A low, cloudy sky with the heavy banks of grey picked out against the lighter shades of grey like islands in a cold sea. And there was a smell of smoke in Elric's nostrils, the frantic chirruping of birds in his ears and the sound of a whistling boy heard over the droning wind.

Dyvim Slorm turned his horse in the direction of the whistling, rode into scrub, leaned down in the saddle and hauled himself up with a wriggling youngster gripped by the slack of his shirt.

"Where are you from, lad?" Dyvim Slorm asked.

"From a village a mile or two away, sir," the boy replied out of breath and scared.

He looked with wide eyes at Elric, fascinated by the tall albino's stern and pitiless mien.

He turned his head sharply to stare up at Dyvim Slorm. "Is that not Elric Friendslayer?" he said.

Dyvim Slorm released the boy and said, "Where lies the Vale of Xanyaw?"

"North-west of here—it is no place for mortals. Is that not Elric Friendslayer, sir, tell me?"

Dyvim Slorm glanced miserably at his cousin and did not reply to the boy. Together they urged their horses North-west and Elric's pace was even more urgent.

Even through the bleak night they rode, wracked by a groaning wind.

And as they came closer to the Vale of Xanyaw, the whole sky, the earth, the air became filled with heavy, throbbing music. Melodious, sensual, great chords of sound, on and on it droned, and following it came the white-faced ones.

Each had a black cowl and a sword which split at the end into three curved barbs. Each grinned a fixed grin. The music followed them as they came running like mad-things at the two men who stopped their horses, stopped themselves from turning and fleeing. Elric had seen horrors in his life, had seen much that would make others insane. But for some reason

these shocked him more deeply than any. They were men, ordinary men by the look of them—but men possessed by an unholy spirit.

Prepared to defend themselves, Elric and Dyvim Storm waited for the encounter, but none came. The music and the men rushed past them and away beyond them in the direction from which they had come.

Overhead, suddenly, they heard the beat of wings, a shriek from out of the sky and a ghastly wail.

Fleeing, two women rushed by and Elric was forced to stop himself from shaking. The women were from the winged race of Myyrrhn, but were wingless. These, unlike a woman Elric remembered, had had their wings deliberately clipped. They paid no attention to the two riders but disappeared, running, into the night.

Such disturbances made them nervous and their horses more so.

“What is it, Elric?” Dyvim Storm cried, his runeblade in his hand, his other hand striving to control the prancing horse. “What is happening?”

“I know not. What *does* happen in a place where the Dead God’s rule has come back?”

All was rushing noise and confusion and the night was full of movement and terror.

“Come!” Elric slashed his blade against his mount’s rump and sent the beast into a jerking gallop, forcing himself and the steed forward into the terrible night.

Then mighty laughter greeted them as they rode between hills into the Vale of Xanyaw.

Then there arose, seemingly from the very earth, a huge figure which barred their way. Hands on hips, wreathed in golden light, a face of an ape, somehow blended with another shape to give it dignity and wild grandeur, its body alive and dancing with colour and light, its lips grinning with delight and knowledge—Darnizhaan, the Dead God.

“*ELRIC!*”

“Darnizhaan!” cried Elric fiercely and without fear now, “I have come for my wife!”

Around the Dead God’s heels were grouped acolytes with wide lips and pale, triangular faces, conical caps on their heads and madness in their eyes. They giggled and shrilled and shivered in the light of Darnizhaan’s weird body.

Elric sneered. "Pitiful minions," he said.

"Not so pitiful as you, Elric of Melnibone," laughed the Dead God. "Have you come to bargain or to give your wife's soul into my custody so that she may spend eternity dying?"

Elric controlled his hate.

"I would destroy you—it is instinctive for me to do so. But—"

The giant smiled, almost with pity. "*You* must be destroyed, Elric—you are an anachronism. Your Time is gone."

"Speak for yourself, Darnizhaan!"

"I could destroy you."

Much as he passionately hated the being, Elric felt, suddenly, a bizarre sense of comradeship for the Dead God. Both represented an age that was dead, neither were really part of the new Earth.

"But you will not," said Elric.

"Then I will destroy her."

"Zarozinia! Where is she?"

Darnizhaan laughed. "Oh, what have the old folk come to? There was a time when no man of Melnibone, particularly of the royal line, would admit to caring for another mortal soul—particularly if they belonged to the beast-race, the new race of the age you call that of the Young Kingdoms. What? Are you mating with animals, King of Melnibone? Where is your blood, your cruel and brilliant blood? Where the glorious malice? Where the evil, Elric?"

Strange passions stirred in both Elric and Dyvim Storm then as they remembered their ancestors—the sorcerer kings of the Dragon Isle.

"That is past—a new time has come upon the Earth, Dead God. Our time will soon be gone—and yours is over!"

"No, Elric. Mark my words, whatever happens. The dawn is over and will soon be swept away like dead leaves before the wind of morning. The earth's history has not even begun. You, your ancestors, these men of the new races even, you are nothing but a prelude to history. You will all be forgotten when the real history of the world begins."

"I fail to understand you," Elric said, his lips thin and his teeth tight in his skull. "I am here to bargain or do battle for my wife."

"You do not understand, Elric," the Dead God guffawed. "Because we are all of us, gods and men, but shadows playing

puppet parts before the true play begins. You would best not fight me—rather side with me, for I know the truth. We share a common destiny. We do not, any of us, exist. The old folk are doomed, you, myself and my brothers. We must not fight one another. Share our frightful knowledge—the knowledge that turned us insane. There is nothing, Elric—not past, present, or future. *We do not exist, any of us !*”

Elric shook his head quickly.

“I do not understand you. I would not understand you if I could. I desire only the return of my wife—not baffling conundrums !”

Darnizhaan laughed again. “No ! You shall not have the woman unless we are given control of the swords. You do not understand their properties. They were not only designed to destroy us or exile us—their destiny is to destroy the world as we know it. If you retain them, Elric, you will be responsible for wiping out your own memory for those who come after you.”

“I’d welcome that,” Elric said.

Dyvim Storm was silent, fearful and disturbed.

“Keep the swords and all of us will be as if we had *never* existed,” Darnizhaan spoke urgently, almost in terror.

“So be it,” Elric said stubbornly, “do you think I wish the memory to live on—the memory of evil, ruin and destruction. The memory of a man with deficient blood in his veins—a man called Friendslayer, Womanslayer and many other such names.”

“Elric—you have been duped. Somewhere you have been given a conscience. Our time is nearing its end.”

“*Good !*”

“Limbo, Elric—*limbo*. Do you understand what that means ?”

“I do not care. Where is my wife ?”

Elric blocked his mind to the truth, to the terror of the meaning in the Dead God’s words. He could not afford to listen or to fully comprehend. He must save Zarozinia—at all costs . . .

“I have brought the swords,” said he, “and wish my wife to be returned to me.”

“Very well,” the Dead God smiled hugely, almost with relief. “At least if we keep the blades, in their true shape, beyond the Earth, we may be able to retain things as they are

now. In your hands they could destroy not only us but you, your world, all that you represent—beasts would rule the Earth for millions of years before the age of intelligence began again. And it would be a duller age than this. We do not wish it to occur. But if you had *kept* the swords—it would come about almost inevitably.”

“Silence !” Elric shouted. “Take the swords—and give me back my wife !”

Some of the acolytes scampered away at the Dead God's command. Soon they had returned, bringing a frightened, shocked Zarozinia with them. “Here she is, master,” one of them chirruped.

Darnizhaan stretched forward two glowing hands.

“The swords first.”

Elric and Dyvim Storm put them into his great hands reluctantly and Zarozinia ran forward to embrace her husband. Elric gripped her to him, too disturbed by the Dead God's words to say anything. He held her thus for a long time.

Then he turned to Dyvim Storm, shouting : “Let us see if our plan will work, cousin !”

Elric stared at *Stormbringer* which Darnizhaan now clutched.

“*Stormbringer ! Kerana soliem, o'glara . . .*”

Dyvim Storm called to *Mournblade* in the Ancient Tongue of Melnibone, the mystic, sorcerous tongue which had been used for rune-casting and demon-raising all through Melnibone's twenty thousand years of history.

Together they commanded the blades, as if they were actually wielding them in their hands.

Merely by shouted orders, Dyvim Storm and Elric began their work.

This was the remembered quality of both blades when paired in a common fight.

The blades twisted in Darnizhaan's glowing hands. He started backwards, his shape faltering, sometimes manlike, sometimes beastlike, sometimes totally alien. But he was evidently horrified, this god.

Now the swords detached themselves from his clutching hands and turned on him. He fought against them, fending them off as they wove about in the air, whining malevolently, triumphantly, attacking him with vicious power.

At the commands of Elric and his cousin, *Stormbringer* and *Mournblade* slashed at the supernatural being who, because they also were supernatural blades, was harmed dreadfully whenever they struck his form.

"Elric," he begged at last, "Elric —you do not know what you are doing. Stop them ! Stop them ! You should have listened more carefully to what I told you. Stop them !"

But Elric in his hate and malice urged on the blades, made them plunge into the Dead God's being time after time so that his shape sometimes faltered, faded, the colours of its bright beauty dulling. The acolytes fled upwards into the vale, convinced that their lord was doomed.

Their lord, also, was so convinced. The fabric of his being began to shred before the blades' attack ; wisps of his body-stuff seemed to break away and drift into the air to be swallowed by the black night.

Viciously and ferociously Elric goaded the blades while Dyvim Storm's voice blended with his in a cruel joy to see the bright being destroyed.

At last there was nothing left and the swords crept back to lie contentedly in their masters' hands.

Quickly, with a sudden shudder, Elric scabbarded *Storm-bringer*.

It was very quiet in the Vale of Xanyaw.

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Three figures, bent in their saddles with weariness, reached the Gorge of Nihrain days later.

They rode down the twisting paths into the black depths of the mountain city and were there welcomed by Sepiriz whose face was grave though his words were cheerful and encouraging.

"So you were successful, Elric," he said with a small smile.

Elric paused before he dismounted and aided Zarozinia down.

He turned again to Sepiriz.

"I am not altogether satisfied with this venture," he said hollowly, "though I did what I had to in order to save my wife. I would speak with you privately, Sepiriz."

The black Nihrain nodded gravely. "When we have eaten," he said, "we will talk alone."

The fire from the great hearth blazed.

Elric and Sepiriz now sat together, unspeaking, hunched in their chairs.

At last, without preamble, Elric told Sepiriz the story of what had happened. What he remembered of the Dead God's

words. How they had disturbed him—even struck him as being true.

When he had finished, Sepiriz nodded.

“It is so,” he said, “Darnizhaan spoke the truth. Or at least—he spoke most of the truth, as he understood it.”

“You mean—we will all soon cease to exist? That it will be as if we had never breathed or thought or fought?”

“That is likely.”

“But why? It seems unjust.”

“Who told you that the world was just?”

Elric nodded slowly: “Aye—as I suspected. There is no justice.”

“But there *is*,” Sepiriz said, “justice of a kind—justice which must be carved from the chaos of existence. Man was not born to a world of justice. But he can *create* such a world.”

“I’d agree to that,” Elric said, “but what are all our strivings for if we are doomed to die and our actions with us?”

“That is not absolutely the case. Something will continue. Those who come after us will inherit something from us.”

“What is that?”

“An earth free of the major forces of chaos.”

“You mean a world free of sorcery, I presume . . .?”

“Not entirely free of sorcery—but chaos and sorcery will not dominate the world of the future as it does this world.”

“Then that *is* worth striving for, Sepiriz,” Elric said almost with relief. “But what part do the runeblades play in the scheme of things?”

“They have two functions—one, to rid this world of the great dominating sources of evil—”

“But they *are* evil, themselves!”

“Just so—it takes a strong evil to battle a strong evil. The days that will come will be when the forces of good can combat those of evil. They are not yet strong enough. That, as I told you, is what we must strive for.”

“And what is the other purpose of the blades?”

“That is their final purpose—your destiny. I can tell you now. I *must* tell you now, or let you live out your destiny unknowing.”

“Then tell me,” Elric said impatiently.

“Their ultimate purpose is to destroy this world.”

Elric was aghast. “Shall I have such a crime on my conscience?”

"It is not a crime—it is natural. The era of the Bright Empire, even that of the Young Kingdoms, is drawing to a close. Chaos formed this earth and, for aeons, Chaos ruled. Men were created to put an end to that rule."

"But my ancestors worshipped the powers of Chaos!"

"Just so—you, and your ancestors, were not true men at all, but an intermediary type created for a purpose. You understand Chaos as no true men ever could understand it. You can control the forces of Chaos as no true men ever could. You can weaken the forces of Chaos—for you know the qualities of Chaos. Weaken them is what you *have* done. Though worshipping the Lords of Chance and Evil, your race were the first to bring some kind of order to the earth. The people of the Young Kingdoms have inherited this from you—and have consolidated it. But, as yet, Chaos is still that much stronger. The runeblades, *Stormbringer* and *Mournblade*, this more orderly age, the wisdom your race and mine have gained, all will go towards creating the basis for the true beginnings of Mankind's history. That history will not begin for many thousands of years, the type may take on a lowlier form, become more beast-like before it re-evolves—but when it dies, it will re-evolve into a world bereft of the stronger forces of Chaos—it will have a fighting chance. We are doomed, all of us, but *they* need not be."

"So that is what Darnizhaan meant when he said that we were just puppets acting out our parts before the true play began . . ."

Elric shook his head wearily, the weight of responsibility heavy on him. He did not welcome it—but he accepted it.

Sepiriz said gently: "It is your purpose, Elric of Melnibone. Hitherto your life has appeared comparatively meaningless. All through it you have been searching for some purpose for living, is that not true?"

"Aye," Elric agreed with a slight smile, "I've been restless for many a year since my birth. Restless the more since I lost Zarozinia."

"It is fitting that you should have been," Sepiriz said, "for there *is* a purpose for you—Fate's purpose. It is this destiny that you have sensed all your mortal days. You, the last of the royal line of Melnibone must complete your destiny in the times which are to follow closely upon these. The world is darkening—nature revolts and rebels against the abuses which

the Lords of Evil put it to. Oceans seethe and forests sway, hot lava spills from a thousand mountains, winds shriek their angry souging and the skies are full of movement. Upon the face of the earth, warriors are embattled in a struggle which, eventually, will decide the fate of the world, linked as the struggle is, with greater conflicts among Gods. Women and little children die in a million funeral pyres upon this continent alone. And soon the conflict will spread to the next continent and the next. Soon all the men of the earth will have chosen sides and Chaos, with its supernatural support, might easily win. It would win but for one thing—you—and the swords.

“And if Law should win—then that, too, will mean the decline and death of this world—we shall all be forgotten. But if Chaos should win—then torment will cloud the very air, agony will sound in the wind and foul misery will dominate a plunging, unsettled world of sorcery and evil hatred. But you, Elric, with your sword and our aid, could stop this. It must be done !”

“Then let it be done,” Elric said rising, “and if it must be done—then let it be done well !”

“Go home now, friend,” Sepiriz said, “and marshall armies to drive against Pan Tang’s might. This must be our first defence. Thereafter we shall call upon you to fulfil the rest of your destiny.”

“I’ll marshall such armies, willingly,” said Elric, “for, whatever else, I have a mind to pay the theocrat back for his insults.”

“Go then—speedily, now, for each moment wasted allows the conquerors to further consolidate their new-won Empire.”

“Farewell,” said Elric. “I know we’ll meet anon, Sepiriz, but I pray it be in calmer times than these.”

Now the three of them rode eastwards again, towards the coast of Tarkesh where they hoped to find a secret ship to take them across the Pale Sea to Ilmiora and thence to Karlaak by the Weeping Waste.

They rode careless of danger through a war-wasted world, now strife-ruined and miserable under the heel of two evil monarchs whose alliance, aided by the powers of Chaos, had made it thus.

“I see we’ll not have much time together after our return,” Zarozinia smiled faintly at her husband. “But such love as

you've proved we possess, will not, perhaps, need us close at all times."

"It is best that it should not," Elric said with a slight trace of misery in his voice.

"One thing, cousin!" Dyvim Slorm shouted from behind Elric and his bride as they topped a hill and saw smoke drifting, black and thick across the plains of Toraunz, once beautiful, now ruined. "One thing—whatever happens, we must have vengeance on that pair."

Elric pursed his lips.

"Aye," he said and glanced again at Zarozinia whose eyes were downcast. She had said little on their journey back.

Now the Western lands from Tarkesh to Myyrrhn were sundered by the servitors of Chaos. Was this truly to be the final conflict that would decide whether Law or Chaos would dominate the future? The forces of Law were weak and scattered. Could this possibly be the final paroxysm on earth of the great Lords of Evil? Now, between armies, one part of the world's fate was being decided. The lands groaned in the torment of bloody conflict.

What other forces must Elric fight before he accomplished his final destiny and destroyed the world he knew. What else before the horn of fate was blown—to herald in the night?

Sepiriz, no doubt, would tell him when the time came.

But meanwhile more material scores had to be settled. The lands to the east must be made ready for war. The sealords of the Purple Ports must be approached for aid, the kings of the south marshalled for attack on the western continent. It would take time to do all this.

Part of Elric's mind welcomed the time it would take.

Part of him was reluctant to continue his heavy destiny, for it would mean the end of the Age of the Young Kingdoms, the death of the memory of the Age of the Bright Empire which his ancestors had dominated for ten thousand years.

The sea was at last in sight, rolling its troubled way towards the horizon to meet a seething sky. He heard the cry of gulls and smelled the tang of the salt air in his nostrils.

With a wild shout he clapped his steed's flanks and raced down towards the sea . . .

—Michael Moorcock

When the impossible happens, or when things go wrong which should not do so—is there a set of special circumstances governing these strange happenings?

WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW

BY JOHN RACKHAM

The talk was ended, the lady chairman had made her formal speech of thanks to the visiting lecturer, and the rustle of departing women rose like the beat of a retreating tide. Peter Renfold, on the platform, realised that he was tired, glad to have come to the tail-end of his lecture tour, glad to be able to look forward to a whole week of leisure and freedom to just wander around. England, home, and the University seemed very remote, the smooth urbane speed of life there as unlikely as a dream, after the endless pressure of talking, answering idiotic questions, being entertained, with more questions, and then whirling to the next lecture. Another day, another town, but the same relentlessly bright, culture-hungry faces, the inevitable questions about the Royal Family, and the titled aristocracy. A limitless sea of Ladies' Guilds, made up of unbelievable numbers of carbon copies of the same basic pattern. Un-old un-wrinkled, undefeated — and determinedly arch — he

dismissed the tedious thoughts from his brain and stooped to gather papers, shuffling them into his brief-case.

With a slight start he realised that someone stood by his elbow, waiting to speak to him. He looked up, warily, a protest ready at his lips. No personal interviews—he had specified that, very strongly. But the words died as he saw that this was no matron battling the passing years. Her hair was yellow flame, her green eyes steady and watchful, her face carefully empty of purpose. She pushed a slip of card at him. He took it, and read. *Glenda Kane. The Colville Examiner.* A reporter ! He looked at her again, and revised his first opinion. She was not as young as he had assumed. The repose of her face made guess-work difficult, but he decided on twenty-five as a lower limit. Not much younger than himself. And very attractive. For a fractional moment, he wavered. Then he set his mind, recalling his longing for a week of freedom.

“ Miss Kane,” he said, slowly, studying her now with deliberate intent. “ Of the *Colville Examiner*—but not, I fancy, a reporter in the usual sense of the word. Special correspondent ? And you are either a local somebody, which is unlikely, or the close relative of a somebody ?”

“ You’re leaving me nothing but Dr. Watson’s lines,” her voice was cool, faintly amused, somehow friendly.

“ I suppose you want me to play Holmes and tell you how I guess ?”

“ Then I can say how simple it all is, once you’ve explained. Please !”

The wavering sensation came again, and with it the breath of panic. Never before had he been so immediately ‘ touched ’ by anyone, felt so in step, and certainly never with such an attractive girl. By habit and training he had made himself aloof from personal involvements, yet now, in a matter of seconds, his defences were crumbling like sand. He caught at his calm, went on packing his case, averting his eyes.

“ Very well. Card—newspaper—reporter. But there is something about the mental habit of seeing life as a series of paragraphs and headlines which shows in the face and bearing. Not you. So it must be special correspondent. Local celebrity ? Again, you look too fresh-faced, too much yourself to be that. Ergo, you have pull, influence. You are related to a celebrity. Q.E.D. !”

“ That doesn’t add up ?”

"It does when you know that I made it absolutely clear that I was not to be interviewed. A personal point. Newspaper reporters inevitably get things not quite right, and I have a thing about being misquoted. But you must have been able to over-ride that."

"Oh!" she was distressed now, and looked younger than ever. "I'm sorry. I guess I have been using Uncle Walter's name a bit, to get away with things. But I had no idea you felt that way. About being quoted, I mean. I wasn't going to ask about your lectures, in any case. Essential differences in character-traits between English and American people is hardly the kind of thing you can compress into a snappy paragraph, anyway."

"What were you seeking then?" he asked, unguardedly, and wished it unsaid as soon as it had left his mouth.

"Your hobby. I've read about it somewhere. That is, if you are the same Dr. Peter Renfold who wrote that piece in *Speculation* about the natural left-handedness of things."

"Guilty," he admitted, smiling, "but that was a long time ago. How on earth did it fall into your hands?"

"Uncle Walter, again," she confessed, and things began to click in Renfold's mind.

"A moment," he said, turning from his now fastened briefcase. "Uncle Walter wouldn't be Walter Kane, by any chance?" As she nodded, he felt the last shreds of his guard dissolve away. "I have been rude, and unforgivably thick-headed," he said, frankly. "I had planned to end my speaking tour here, leaving a free week, especially so that I could just wander around and see Walter Kane country with my own eyes. I have read and seen every one of his naturalist studies. His insight into the ways of birds and animals is really wonderful. I had hoped, vaguely, that I might meet and talk with him . . ."

"Nothing simpler," she said, suddenly brisk. "Grab your bag and come. I'm parked only five minutes walk away. You can come home with me, right now."

"Oh, but . . ." he hesitated. "I wouldn't want to presume . . ."

"Forget it. Uncle Walt will be tickled to have somebody to talk to. You will be very welcome." She led him out, and along the hot and dusty main-street to her car.

"You're quite sure?" he asked, as the spinning wheels spurned the dust of Colville, and she laughed.

"Let me worry about that. Now—I want to hear more about your hobby, about things which can't happen, but do."

"It's not quite that," he denied, cautiously, "and it's a big field, much bigger than I realised when I first started. There are categories and subdivisions and complications, all very difficult to explain. Things which can't happen, but do, are usually found in a technology background, among engineers and people of that kind. It is their business to know what can and what can't happen. But there is another division—those things which never happen, as by experience, yet they do. Then there are those kind of things a person particularly does not want to happen, and they do. And there is the kind of thing you couldn't do in a million years, by trying, which you do by accident, and can't do again."

"It sounds like double talk," she confessed. "I heard you say all that, and I feel it ought to mean something—but I just don't get it."

"I warned you it was difficult. That's because you're trying to understand it. I just collect the instances, and try to fit them into a pattern of some kind. I don't claim to understand them at all. In fact, I don't think that is the right way to go about it."

She gave her attention to pulling the car round a sharp bend in the track, then, "I'm sorry—but I didn't get that, either. How can you study a thing, if you don't at least try to understand it?"

"Very easily. Millions of people do it every day. People who don't understand how a car engine works, or a TV. The ancient mariners didn't know how the lodestone worked. Thousands of generations of people used a bow as a weapon, and didn't know why it worked. We had good, reliable, accurate thermometers, long before we had any workable theory of heat . . ."

"Slow down a bit," she begged. "You're going too fast for me. I know that one about the bow. It stores up energy slowly and releases it fast, that's all."

"That's all," he echoed. "But what have you said? Have you ever seen any 'energy'? Do you realise just how long it took to construct that kind of abstraction, just to explain something that people had been using for hundred of years? And here's another. If your physical mechanism is upset to the point where it is in danger of permanent damage, the correct action to relieve it is for you to lie down flat. You don't need

to know it, consciously, or to understand why. Your body takes care of it. You faint. That's wisdom of the body and it doesn't need understanding at all. It works.

"The point I am trying to get at is this. If you can get enough data on a series of events to be able to establish that such-and-such does happen, then you have enough to go ahead and use it. Explanations and theories come later."

She frowned over that as the car climbed to the top of a little rise. Watching her, he decided that Glenda Kane had a most attractive frown, and quite a lot of solid character in her shapely form.

"You're making me think," she said. "It's like using muscles you never knew you had . . ." his attention was caught by a spear of sunlight reflected from far up in the valley. He saw a glare of white concrete, a glitter of many glass panes. Even from this distance, the structure looked huge. It also looked hideously out of place against the warm purples and greens of the wildness.

"What on earth is that?" he demanded, and her instant grin was a joy of dimples and glee.

"That is Uncle Walter's cross. A brand-new research centre, to make a long-term study of the ecological effects of all these new pesticides and chemical sprays and such like. Uncle Walter hates every prefabricated inch of it, and so does most of Colville, but he can't say a word. You see, he has been making an issue of this for years—that the senseless and widespread use of chemicals to kill pests and diseases is doing more harm than good by threatening the harmless wild life. Now they have accepted the charge and set up that station to investigate the matter. It is exactly what he has been asking for—but now that he's got it he loathes the sight of it. Ruins the look of the valley."

The road shook itself free of bends and became a long slow sweep, down and across a hump-backed bridge and up to the white-painted picket-fence of a gracious, weather-beaten old house. "There's Uncle Walt, now," she said, easing to a stop.

Renfold recognised the original at once, from the many pictures he had seen, but no picture had ever caught the true gleam of those grey eyes as they peered from that leathery old face, with its halo of defiant white hair. Those eyes twinkled, but missed very little. The handshake was firm, the voice slow, gentle and sincere.

"Glad to have you, Dr. Renfold. Glen, here, sort of shields me against the pesterers. Means well, but it cuts down the chances of a gossip for a man. You must be something pretty special for her to drag you all the way out here."

"You can save the act, Uncle Walt," she said, irreverently. "You won't fool Dr. Renfold any. And who's going to look after you, if I don't? Besides, he wanted to come. You make yourself at home," she grinned at Renfold, "while I go and see what I can find in the way of food."

"Women," Kane said, "just naturally take charge, whatever their age. It's the hen in 'em, I reckon. Old Chaucer knew it . . ."

"Wife of Bath . . ." Renfold nodded, settling in a basket-chair. "The one thing a woman wants is sovereignty. He was a shrewd observer."

"Mothering instinct," Kane chuckled. "What's your line of country, Renfold?"

"Social science. Particularly and officially, I'm with the British National Opinion Institute, in one of the back rooms, where we wrestle with the statistics. Half the time there, the other half resident at University, trying to pass on what I've learned."

"Keeps you pretty busy, I imagine. Not much time for hobbies or any private life."

"That's true, but I make a hobby out of a side-issue of my work. And I've your books and pictures to make my leisure moments pleasant."

"Kind of you. You're interested in natural life, then?"

"To a degree, yes. But the main attraction is in the way it ties up with my other interests. I study and collect instances of the irrational. You, when you are observing wild-life, are dealing with the irrational all the time."

"If you mean that birds and squirrels and such don't have intelligence, you're all wrong," Kane eyed his visitor, shrewdly. "But I don't reckon you'd make a mistake like that."

"I hope not," Renfold leaned back. "You wrote an article, once, in a journal, about the 'natural cussedness of things.' That's what I mean by irrational."

"Lord, everybody knows about that!" Kane snorted. "I only wrote it down. You ever read J. K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*? Funniest part of that book is that it's all gospel true. And natural, too. Those three never wanted to go on that boat trip at all. It was just something they wanted to be able

to brag about, afterwards. So, naturally, everything went against them."

"That's your theory . . ."

"Theory nothing. It happens all the time. Trouble with us humans is we have lost the knack of doing things by 'feel.' We have to figure everything out in words and explanations and so forth. Except for a few, like artists and musicians. They go by 'feel'." He broke off as Glenda called them in to eat, and the subject was dropped while they did justice to the food.

Later, when the dishes had been cleared away, Renfold brought the subject back by another route. "I'm with you all the way on doing things by 'feel,' where it applies," he said. "But that isn't quite the same thing as when events turn out deliberately awkward. You wrote up, in your article, about woodpeckers . . .?"

"Ah, yes, I recollect that. A special case. But it happens generally, too. I've noticed it. As a rule, I set up my hides and cameras to get a broad record of activity, and that's usually all right. But, every once in a while, I get curious about some little special item, and I go for it. And I get everything else *but* that. It always happens. The one thing I'm aiming for, I miss!"

"Every time? You can prove it?"

"I certainly can. I keep a work-book. I missed so many special items one time and another, that I got curious and checked back—and it's always the same. If I set my sights on one particular item, that's the one I miss." Kane sat forward, suddenly. "Say, just what are you getting at, anyway?"

"I think I know," Glenda said. "We were talking about it, in the car on the way here. But I'd like to hear Dr. Renfold explain it again." She laughed, gently. "It didn't make sense, to me."

"Exactly!" Renfold nodded. "That's the whole point. It doesn't make sense, so we can't see it as such. Let me try again. You, sir, have proof that when you concentrate on something important, that's the item which goes wrong. Now, lots of people believe the same applies to them. So—it is logical to suppose that there is something behind all this. Of course, we have to cut out a lot of stuff that is merely selective memory. People remember the right ones, and forget the others. Fortune-tellers make a living on that. But there is still a hard core of fact here. And you are one more for my collection."

"And you don't try to explain any of it?" she demanded.

"I don't try. I'll tell you why. To understand is to explain. To explain is to make reasonable. Reasonable is what we will admit into our theories. But anything which happens, outside our theories, and our ideas of reasonableness, is uncomfortable, and we try to make 'it' fit our ideas. If it won't fit, then it is just not true. A few samples. Bees can talk to each other, involving description, distance and direction. They have been seen to do it. Yet such behaviour is incompatible with what we 'know' about the insect mind, and instinct—so the people involved are hard at work, trying to find some 'other' explanation."

"But just what are you collecting, anyway?" Kane demanded.

"People," Renfold explained, briefly. "The people who generate these odd things. That much I am sure of, at least, that there are people who generate, concentrate or focus in some way, nonsense-series of events. That is just about the only hard fact I have, out of all my collected observations. The trouble is, so far as I can see, that these activities are non-conscious. Once you try to do them deliberately, they neutralise, because you believe them." He stared at the two blank faces which looked back at him, and sighed.

"I'll try again. It always rains on wash-day, doesn't it? Only a joke, of course, but it must have had some foundation, to get started. The day you have a breakdown is always the day you forget to bring your tools. Carry your umbrella, and you can be certain it won't rain . . ."

"But that's not true," Glenda objected. "That's what you said earlier—it's just selective memory."

"Of course. And you are making sense out of it, too. By ignoring the few instances, lost in the many, where these things do, in fact, happen. There *are* people who can bias the laws of averages, in fact. That's one point. The next point is—why is this sort of belief so common all over the world? And it is, you know. In every culture and throughout all history. Lucky people. Unlucky people. Mascots. Jinxes. But, and this is the key-point, these things are never consciously noticed until after they happen. Try to apply it deliberately, and it won't work. It's easy to believe, because it is just across the barrier in the non-conscious, anyway. But once you do believe it and think it, you kill it."

"This is reminding me of something," Glenda frowned, then snapped her fingers. "Something Tim was saying. Finagle's Laws!"

"This Tim is an engineer?" Renfold asked and she giggled. Old Walter grinned in sympathy.

"Her young brother, my nephew Timothy Kane, will never be an engineer. That is for certain. Since he was so high, Tim has been mad on gadgets of all kinds. Trouble is, nothing he touches ever works the way it should."

"He's clumsy, you mean?" Renfold was being deliberately obtuse now, to conceal a growing excitement.

"It's not that at all," the old man denied. "Tim's neat. Tools go well for him. But the gadget never does. Of course, he won't have that—and we don't dwell on it. But, Lord, the whole of Colville knows about Tim. Look, he has a chum, Alec George, who is a keen radio-ham. Has a good job with the local radio-station as a matter of fact. Well, one time, he and Tim thought they would try out a new-fangled directional antenna. Tim did all the building. Alec provided the advice and the diagrams. They brought the whole works right down here, in this room, to try out. You remember, Glen?"

"Am I ever likely to forget? Nothing happened. Not a thing, not a sound. They fiddled, they cursed a little and we just sat and handed out good advice until they gave up and tore the thing apart. It was two days later, before we discovered that the whole of Colville had been listening to us. Nobody has ever been able to figure out how or why that thing should have broadcast like that. Nobody ever does, with Tim's gadgets. He lasted a couple of terms in the engineering and technical side at Colville High and then they retired him. Polite but firm. He'd grown discouraged by that time, anyway. But that's where we heard about Finagle's Laws." Renfold got up, began pacing, restlessly.

"Just let me get this into some kind of order," he pleaded. "This, too, is one of the things I'm finding, that the talent, faculty, power, whatever you call it, comes in clumps by region, sometimes. Sometimes by family. I don't know which this is, yet. But you have it," he nodded to Walter. "Solid, because you're the kind who keeps notes. Evidence there. Even though you don't believe it . . .?"

"Of course I don't," Kane snorted. "It's just coincidence, bad luck, that's all. Same with Tim. Finagle's Laws!"

"Those laws were drawn up by engineers, even if they were meant to be a set of jokes," Renfold pointed out. "The one thing any engineer has to be able to do is to look a fact straight in the eye and admit it, whether he likes it or not. If a thing happens, *that* is what he deals with. Not with what ought to be. Finagle's Laws are the codified expression of things which do happen enough to be noticed. *Something* is there. So, that's two of you. Now . . ." he eyed Glenda. "How about you?"

She shrugged away a thought. "It's all nonsense, of course . . ."

"Of course. That's why I want it. What is nonsense, please?"

"Well . . ." she shrugged again. "As it happens, I keep a house-log, so I *can* prove it. Silly things, mostly. For instance, any copy for the *Examiner* must go in by Thursday afternoon. Most weeks I have something ready and when I run it in, Dan Baines gives the impression he'll have to cut something else to make room for mine. But, comes a week when I haven't anything, that will be the Thursday when Mister Baines will be practically hounding me by phone, imploring me to save him from having to push out this week's issue with great blank spaces in it."

"Fine !" Renfold encouraged. "Any more?"

"Well, there's Tim, and you, Uncle Walt !"

"Me ? What did I do ?"

"What you always do. I keep house for these two. And either I'm the world's worst guesser, or they're just plain awkward. I set a meal, certain they'll be home soon—and they are late. Another time, I leave it. No hurry, plenty of time—and they are early. Always !" Old Walter snorted, but she insisted.

"I can show you in the house-log, week in and week out, for years back. Not that I'm complaining. Who cares if a meal is a bit late ? But it happens just the same."

"Yes," Renfold murmured. "It happens. Thank you, Miss Kane, for being such a good witness."

"You're welcome, I'm sure," she laughed. Then, in sudden seriousness. "It is all nonsense, isn't it ? Really ?" He stood a moment in far-away thought. Then he sat down again, and smiled at her.

"Yes, it's nonsense if you try to explain it. No it is not nonsense if you see it happen, with solid documentation."

Excuse me while I note this down, before I forget the details. Tim—type D-mechanical. Walter, you're a type C-particular. Miss Glenda—type B-general." He put the book away, and caught their wide-eyed look.

"You have it all typed?" Kane demanded.

"Patterns. That's all I'm looking for at the moment. B is the class of people who guess wrong—general and special. C is those people whose actions turn out wrong. Engineers come in strong, there. D is a tentative class of people who make a thing come out in some way it just can't, by design, but with successful results."

"What about class A?" Glenda demanded, and Renfold laughed.

"Not many of those, unfortunately. They're the people who get the result they are after, when all the laws say they shouldn't. Think of Ben Franklin's kite. He should have been electrocuted. Or Maxwell's three-colour photograph. That shouldn't have happened. There are others. Accidents which went right."

"Why so few of them then?"

"Natural law again. Accidents happen to anybody, but the sort of mind which can take advantage of an accident is precisely the sort of mind which will take care it doesn't happen again. I'm inclined to suspect, for instance, Fleming's 'accidental' finding of penicillin. Only a careless man lets a culture-plate get contaminated. And Fleming wasn't a careless man. Just the reverse."

"Well," Walter sighed. "You certainly have yourself a unique line of research there. Some hobby! Mind you, I've seen animals do some mighty queer things." He launched into a highly entertaining account of some recent observations he had made on woodpeckers. "There, now, is a bird that operates in a permanent state of shock. Punch-drunk all the time!"

Renfold met Tim Kane the following morning, just after breakfast. Glenda had called him out early, to go for a walk before the sun got too high, to show him the much written-about lake, the woods, and then up to a little hill above the spur of rock which split the little stream into two.

"It's not at its best," she said. "We haven't seen rain in weeks and this heat is parching everything." She settled by him on a jutting stone which made a fine natural seat. Even his citified eye could see the evidence of water-dearth. There

was a brittle brown tint in the green and the dark purples of distance were almost black. Below, the diminished stream divided on the rock-spur silently.

"It seems to be running mostly into the left-hand channel," he said.

"That's the south fork," she said. "It does that at low water. That one is deep. The north fork is shallow, sweeps round there—and that's Colville, down that way. There's a rather peculiar flood-danger just here. Not now, of course, with the Station in place, and their dams to control the flow, but the way it was before. See, just back from where it splits on Bow Rock, the channel is deep and narrow and there's a twist in it. When the water runs full and even it splits even, too, half into either channel. But should there be a sudden cloudburst—we had one, years ago, when I was tiny—the head of water bursts out of that channel and catches Bow Rock fair and square and it all rushes into the shallow channel, boils up over the banks and floods Colville. Half the town went under water, the last time. Of course, it was only a small place then, and the dam up at the Station will stop it happening again, in any case. We'd better be getting back, to breakfast."

They reached the house just in time to see Tim ride up from the other direction on a dapple-grey mare. As he dismounted to join them, Renfold saw that he was tall, lean, straw-haired, and with a lot of Walter Kane in his grey eyes. In his early twenties, he was obviously bubbling with news and it burst out at the table as soon as they were seated.

"Alec George just told me," he announced, "that they are crying out for somebody to fill a vacancy in the instrumentation section, up at the 'bug-house.' I'd like to apply for the job, Uncle Walter, if that's all right with you?"

"The 'bug-house' being that blasted Research Station? Sure, it's all right with me, if that's the kind of job you want. You go ahead."

"I'm told you're something of a gadget man," Renfold said, mildly. "I envy you. I never was any good with putting things together, at all. My fingers are all thumbs."

"Putting them together is all right," Tim confessed, frankly. "But I never have any luck making things work. Something always seems to go haywire. That's why I want to get in among some real instruments just for once."

"When do you ever have anything to do with gadgets?" Glenda asked of Renfold. "I thought your stuff was all on paper?"

"Oh, I get gadgets, too, as part of my collection. Dowsing rods, for example. As a matter of fact I have the diagram for a gadget right with me. I've been meaning to get somebody to make it up for me, just to see . . ."

"Just to see what?" Tim wanted to know. "What sort of gadget?"

"The inventor claims it is a rain-maker," Renfold said, wryly. "It's a nice theory, too. Something about reversing the polarisation of water-molecules in the atmosphere and the effect spreading out from the focus until you have a critical volume. Then you have thunderstorms and rain."

"We could sure use a thing like that, right now," Walter chuckled. "Get Tim to make it up for you."

"But it's a nutty idea!" Tim objected. "Even if you could do a thing like that, look at the power you'd want. You don't believe this thing works, do you?"

"I don't, no. But the man who designed it thinks it does. Maybe it does, for him. All I'm after is to get it a trial and note the results. I'm not trying to prove anything. I have the diagram right here."

He leafed it out of his wallet and passed it across. Tim took it eagerly and studied the scrawled lines and twists, frowning and nodding to himself.

"It's not like anything I've ever seen before," he mused, "but it ought to be simple enough to knock up. I think I have all the bits. I'll have a go at it, if you like?"

"There's no hurry . . ."

"That's all right. I don't have anything to do in the next hour or so." Tim got up excitedly and was on his way out of the room when Walter called out after him.

"Don't forget to apply for that job you were talking about, lad!"

"That's all right. I have to be there at nine-thirty—plenty of time," and they heard him clattering up the stairs to his room.

"If they are crazy enough to give him a job up there, it's a sure bet that the Station will never be the same again," Walter laughed. "We should have thought of something like this sooner."

Renfold kept his opinions to himself. He was well aware that they saw the oddities of human nature as subjects for jest and he did not expect anyone else to take them as seriously as he did. But he was curious to see just what would happen if Tim *did* get a job in the Station, 'The whole of Colville knows about Tim. The words came back to him. A whole town believing it—would that make a difference? So long as Tim did not consciously accept it, so went the theory. Renfold started, realising that Glenda had spoken to him.

"Come on," she said, mischievously, "let's go look at some more scenery, you unfortunate city-boy. I bet you never took a girl for a walk in the woods in all your life."

"I've always had more important things to think about," he retorted, and was amazed at this secret self of his that could parry thrusts with a pretty girl. He was even more amazed when she led him to a cool spot under the trees close by the shrunken lake and invited him to sprawl on the grass.

"Now . . ." she said, pointedly. "What's your pattern?"

"I don't understand."

"Oh, yes you do. Uncle Walter always misses the very thing he's after. Tim can never make anything come out the way it ought to do. Me—when I'm ready for something, it doesn't happen—when I'm not, it does. Patterns. What's yours? And don't tell me you haven't got one."

"You're too clever for me."

"You bet I am. Come on, tell!"

"Well, with me, it's a bit odd. I can control a thing, a study, a series of actions, so long as I am remote and uninvolved. But as soon as I get personally caught up in a thing, I can't understand it very well. And just as soon as ever I get that feeling—you know, when you say to yourself 'I wish I had never started this'—as soon as that happens, the whole thing runs away completely and the more I fight against it, the worse it gets. This present hobby of mine for instance, does not involve me, personally. I just collect and observe. At the very first signs of that feeling—that I should never have begun—I shall drop the whole affair. Give it away to someone else, forget it!"

She pondered that carefully, staring at the still water. Then she began making tiny finger-twitches, the way one does when marking off mental points and he wondered what it was she was working out. All at once she turned to him and her face was glowing.

"Peter," she said and the use of his name was a distinct shock. "I had a feeling for you, right from the very first moment I saw you up on that platform. I believe in that kind of thing. It's what Uncle Walter would call going by 'feel' and I think he is right . . ."

"But you hardly know me. We met only yesterday . . ."

"That doesn't matter. Only one thing matters just now. You're not—revolted—are you? I mean, at the prospect of being pursued and captured by me?"

"Not at all," he said, unsteadily. "Quite the reverse. And there isn't anyone else. Just to be quite fair. But I still think you're making a mistake. I'm not the marrying kind, nor do I think I'd be so silly as to let myself be caught, especially now that you've warned me."

"That's all right. Let me worry about that part. But I'm going to get you, you know. I have it all worked out, strictly according to your own theories. You'll see. You reckon this isn't something that can be done consciously, but I think you're wrong and I'm going to prove it."

"But this is ridiculous," he protested. "You can't do it like that. I shall be on guard and dodging you!"

"Wriggling is a better word. Go ahead and wriggle, that's part of the plan, too. But you won't get away."

By the time they had strolled back to the house for lunch he had given up trying to work out just what sort of theory she was working on. The more he looked at it, the less clear it seemed, but she was quite calm and confident. It gave him uneasy pleasure, sitting opposite her across a meal-table, to toy with the notion that this state of affairs could become permanent. Such thoughts were a danger and he was thankful that Walter Kane had enough on his mind to dominate the conversation.

"This drought is the devil," he confided. "This is the part of my work that I don't like. When the countryside is dying of thirst it hurts me as much as if it were I who was thirsty. And then there's the flood danger. It should never happen, mark you, not with that Station up there and the new dams, but I don't trust those new ideas altogether. Still, this is something I have to get pictures of, for the record, like it or not."

"Did Tim go after that job, Uncle Walt?"

"Went away just after nine. Didn't come back yet, so it looks like they hired him. Lord help them and their machinery."

Renfold felt a growing sense of irritation that he couldn't account for as old Walter went out.

"You're all treating this as a joke," he complained. "But it won't be so funny if Tim manages to do some serious damage up there."

"Of course it's a joke," she laughed. "You're beginning to believe your own crazy theories now. He can't *really* do any harm!"

"Why does he ride a horse?" Renfold asked suddenly and she laughed again.

"All right—don't shoot. I admit that much. I wouldn't let him near my car and that's a fact. But it's all nonsense, you know. Come on, let's go back to our seat by Bow Rock again."

He went willingly enough, but something nagged at the back of his mind and made him poor company. They sat a while in silence, staring down at the lazy water and the parched grass on either bank.

"Tell me about the flood danger again," he asked. "You said it was only if the water came down in a sudden rush, didn't you?"

"That's right. If it's a steady flow, no matter how strong, it misses the flat side there, and most of it goes into the deep channel and down that way, it can't do any harm at all. But it won't happen this time, anyway. They will have it all under control up there." He raised his eyes to look up the valley as she did, saw what she saw, and her breathless "Would you just look at *that*?" was completely unnecessary.

The great dark mountain of cloud was an awe-inspiring sight, seeming to thicken and pile up even as they watched. The high reach of the valley cowered under it and the white concrete of the Station stood out in the glare like chalk on a blackboard.

"Young Tim is up there," he said, with sudden insight. "I'll bet he has that gadget with him!"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Her face was white as she turned on him. "Tim never made a gadget to work in all his life!"

"Let's not argue," he snapped. "Come on. Back to the house and the phone. I want him out of there and that gadget with him."

They went back down the trail at a mad rush, Renfold striving to think his way through the double-talk and contradictions as he pounded at her flying heels. One half of him insisted 'You've got to apply this!' while the other half hung back and wailed 'But I haven't got enough data. It takes time to work it out!' But there wasn't any time. Old Walter stood on the porch, grave-faced, as the raced up.

"They had better know what they're doing with that dam," he muttered and as he spoke they saw the first thread-like flickering dance of lightning through the mounting thunder-heads. "That's it," he said. "She's letting down. We're in for it, all right !" Renfold caught his breath, ran for the phone. Agonising moments later, he was through to the operator and then the Station itself.

"Kane residence here," he said. "I must speak to someone in authority, please." A distant voice promised to enquire. Walter Kane came in, anxiously, as Renfold waited. Then, "Administration ? Sorry to bother you, but it is very urgent indeed. Can you get hold of Tim Kane ? Yes—please have him come home, right away. Yes, right away. And tell him to bring *it* with him. That's right. He'll know what. Thank you."

"What the hell . . .?" Walter growled, but Renfold halted him and listened anxiously.

"Yes—as bad as that ? I understand. There should be an alert, anyway. We'll do that, certainly. You'll keep us informed, won't you ? All right—good luck !" He turned to meet Walter's keen gaze.

"It's the dam," he said, soberly. "They're not sure, of course, but they have three feet of water already and the configuration isn't right. They may have to let go, or risk losing the whole structure."

"Hell's bells !" Kane groaned. "That's the worst thing they could do !"

"I promised we'd alert Colville, just in case they do have to let go. How much time will there be ?"

"Ten miles," Kane muttered. "And the water comes down as fast as a man can run. Two and a half miles from here to Colville. An hour, at the outside."

"Let me have that phone," Glenda reached, took it. "Sunday afternoon—it would be !" she listened, closely. "Exchange ? That you, Elsie Harper ? Glen Kane here. Look, can you find Alec George ? He's *at* the radio-station. Good. Put me on to him, would you ? That's a bit of luck, anyway," she sighed. "Hello, Alec. Look, there's an awful big waterspout threatening, up the valley. Yes—here, Uncle Walt, you'd better tell him."

"That's right, Alec. A cloudburst and they aren't likely to be able to hold it, with that new-fangled dam . . ." Renfold moved, uneasily to the porch and Glenda with him. She took his arm.

"You don't really believe that Tim and the gadget had anything to do . . .?"

"That's not the point, right now. The thing is, what do we do next? If that dam goes, an hour isn't going to be long enough to matter." Walter Kane came out to join them, angrily.

"Flapping round in a blasted panic," he growled. "I've put the Station on to direct touch with the radio if anything breaks. And it will. They haven't a ghost of a chance of holding that lot. Just look at it!"

From the porch the dark sun-shot mass of cloud was enormous. "That's all got to come down and there isn't a dam in hell will hold it. The whole bloody Station will come away, if they try it. I told you, I've seen this before. Even without the dam, there will be a wall of water ten feet high through the Corkscrew—and the north fork just won't hold it, that's all." He scowled at the cloud-pile, now alive with threads of fire. "What was all that about Tim?"

"He has that gadget with him. Something he made from a diagram I gave him. It is supposed to concentrate and create thunderstorms." Walter's face was a study in disgust and amazement.

"Man . . ." he said, thickly. "Are you crazy? You think Tim did that? I tell you, that thunderstorm there has been coming for weeks. Besides, Tim never made a gadget to work . . . bah! You must have gone cuckoo!" Kane's very violence was accenting the pattern, to Renfold, making it impossible to avoid. It was staring him in the face. He got that sense of being caught up in something he couldn't control. But he *could* control this. He had a part to play, to apply what he knew. That—or stand by and see Colville washed out. He set his jaw and determined to go through with it.

"All right," he said, roughly. "You stick with your belief in coincidences, if you want to!" He saw Glenda's head come up in surprise at his tone, but he ignored that. "I may be a fool, but I might not be the only one. We'll see when Tim gets here." It was growing dark now and Glenda had to peer before she could be sure enough to say,

"Here comes Tim, now," and they saw the dapple-grey come thundering, to swerve into and leap the garden fence, with Tim crouched forward like a jockey. The first big spots of rain were falling as he leapt off his horse and ran up on to the orch.

"What's wrong?" he demanded anxiously. "I thought Uncle Walt was hurt or something . . ." he paused, uncertainly. Rain began to chatter loudly over their heads. Renfold spoke up.

"That rainmaking gadget—you have it with you?"

"Sure!" Tim's hand went to his hip pocket, and then a stunned look came to his face. "Say! You mean—*this*—did *that*?" The flat tobacco-tin in his hand looked ridiculously inadequate. "But it couldn't!"

"Is it complete, in working order and switched on?"

"Why sure! It was easy enough to do. I just took it along with me to test it for output, in the lab . . ." he faltered, dropping his gaze to the thing in his hand. "But it *can't*!" he insisted. "That hook-up doesn't output anything. There's only a flashlight cell in there—a volt and a half—and it doesn't go anywhere. It's ridiculous!" His voice was shrill, like a child's. Renfold made himself be rigidly objective.

"You didn't believe the gadget would work, then?"

"Not on your life I didn't."

"All right. Now, it doesn't matter whether you believe it or not, but can you reverse the thing? Can you?" Tim frowned, hugely, and rubbed his nose.

"I reckon—yes. Sure. It's just a matter of polarity . . ."

"All right. Away you go and do it, right now. Will you? Never mind if you believe it or not. Just because I ask you. Will you?"

"Just as you say. Sure. I'll do it right away." Tim shrugged, went indoors, and Renfold saw he would have to deal with Walter Kane now.

"See here!" the old man said, angrily. "This is going a bit too far. You will have that lad as crazy as you are, with that damn-fool contraption!" The sharp trill of the phone caught him and he tramped off indoors. The rain was a steady roar on the porch roof now. Renfold stared at the dancing mist, gloomily, hardly noticing Glenda. He turned suddenly to go indoors, and almost bumped into Walter. The old man was grey-faced.

"That was the Station," he said, flatly. "They've passed it on, already. The whole bloody affair is coming down. Their controls are frozen against the sudden rise. Can't do a thing. Can't even let go. It will just pile up until it breaks the whole

thing down. Everything will go, laboratories, offices, the lot. They give it ten minutes, at the outside. They're all clearing out"

"Accept it !" Renfold snapped. "Grasp the fact. Face it. Go on from there. Are we in any danger here ?"

"No. It won't bother us. It will just sweep round either side."

"Can we do anything to help Colville people—anything ?"

"Not a chance," Glenda put in. "We'd just be in the way. We can't do a thing to help. That's the devil of it."

"There is something useful you can do," Renfold stared at Walter. "You know exactly what is going to happen, don't you ? How the water will come, bounce off Bow Rock, sweep into the shallow channel and then over the bank and down to Colville. Now, there's bound to be argument, and enquiry afterwards. You're a photographer, on the spot. You can get a record of this, important and valuable evidence, can't you ?" Kane came out of his stunned wonder and began to bristle as he thought about it.

"You're right, by God !" he snapped. "Renfold, you're a nut in some ways, but you have a first-class idea there. I'll do just that !"

"Clever of you," Glenda said, acidly, as her uncle hurried off. "I do believe Uncle Walter would have wrung your neck, if you hadn't diverted him. All that nonsense about young Tim and the gadget. You should be ashamed, taking advantage of a youngster—and at a time like this !" Renfold sighed, inwardly. 'You, too !' he thought and braced himself.

"Please yourself what you choose to believe," he said, and his tone made her gasp. "I know what I'm doing. Tim, and that gadget, did this. And Tim, with that gadget, will stop it, too. All I ask is that you don't interfere in things you don't understand."

"Well !" she breathed. "Now we know, don't we ? Of all the nerve ! Peter Renfold, miracle-worker. Why don't you try a Hopi Indian dance ? I must say you had me fooled. I thought you were maybe just a little eccentric, you know. Now I know you are just stark, raving mad !" She broke off as Tim came clattering downstairs again.

"All fixed," he said. "Nothing to it. I told you. Now what ?"

Renfold grimly held on to his resolve. "I hope you won't mind getting wet. I'd like you to take that thing, go up to the view-point over Bow Rock—you know where I mean—and wait for the water, *and turn it back* !"

"Turn it back ? With this ?"

"That's what I said. Will you ?"

"But—heck—King Canute, you don't really believe . . . ?"

"I was never more serious in my life," Renfold said firmly. "All I want is that you do it. Never mind whether you believe or not, or whether I believe or not. That doesn't matter. Just *do it*. It's our only chance." Tim held the box, staring at it as if it was a bomb.

"All right, if you say so. Can't do any harm," and he went out, slipping the box into his hip pocket again.

"My God !" Glenda was savage. "Of all the rotten things to do, that must take the all-time cake. Do you know what you've done ? You've sent that poor kid out into the rain, firmly believing that he is going to turn aside a raging flood with a silly gadget in a box. What sort of a monster are you, anyway ?" Renfold only half-heard her. In his mind he was juggling probabilities, desperately trying to weigh up a dozen conflicting factors at once. Kane came through, oilskin clad and jingling with equipment.

"Should be a sight worth seeing," he said, over his shoulder. "You ought to get out there. Might never see anything like this again . . ." and he was gone. The gloomy room was lit, suddenly, in a glare of lightning.

"There goes one," Glenda said, "who doesn't believe you. And I'm another. I'm going out there to watch—and young Tim will hate your guts afterwards, for leading him on to believe in that fool gadget. He'll *hate* you !"

"Just a minute," Renfold ignored her emotions for the moment. "Do you reckon young Tim is beginning to believe in that gadget now ?"

"Of course he does," she flared. "Do you imagine he would go out, in that, and act like a fool, if he didn't believe . . . ?"

"But he mustn't—it's the wrong twist. Hell ! I have to do something to offset that. But what ?" He saw her amazed stare and turned away, thinking furiously. She caught his shoulder to turn him round.

"What new craziness are you hatching ?" she demanded.

"Don't interfere, damn it !" he threw off her hand, and then he had it. Swinging on her, he said, "Get me the radio-station on the phone." She stood, wondering, and he snarled at her. "Do it !" She went to the phone, spoke and listened, blankly. He snatched it from her hand.

"Radio station ? You are keeping an emergency warning programme going ? Good ! Listen carefully. This is Dr. Renfold speaking, from the Kane residence. I want you to put out the following announcement. Be sure to get it right—Tim Kane, at this moment, is taking action against the threatened flood. Using a special device he built himself, which is designed to reverse the flood-water, and avert the danger to Colville. Yes, he made it himself. Yes, he's out there, now !" he put up a shoulder to fend Glenda off, as she tried to snatch the instrument from his hand. "Yes, I'm serious. Damn it, man, don't argue—just make the announcement. Thank you !" He racked the instrument, and turned warily to Glenda. She looked tigerish.

"That just about does it," she muttered. "You have really excelled yourself, this time, haven't you ?"

"Will he broadcast that message, do you think ?"

"Alec George is just comedian enough to do it, even in a case like this. And I'm not blaming him. You're the one who is going to suffer for this, Peter Renfold. You'll get it *all*. You won't drag the Kane family into it. I'll see to that. I'll see that you get the full treatment, mister. Your name will stink all over the country . . ." her voice was lost for a moment in the sudden smash and batter of thunder. He stood a moment, half-dazed by the noise, and uncertain. He hadn't better count on that broadcast. He decided, suddenly, and made for the door. Glenda moved after him, breathing hard.

"That's right !" she scorned. "Run away . . ."

"I'm not running. I'm going to help Tim," and he went out on to the porch, to plunge down the steps. It was a plunge, too. Five steps into that hissing mist and he was as soaked as if he'd fallen into the sea. Half-blinded, he went forward, slithering in the sudden mud, trying to keep the water out of his eyes. It was darker now, but there was just enough light to see by and he knew the way well enough. Then, like a harpy from Hell, he heard Glenda come up at his heels.

"I want to see this," she screamed, over the roar of rain. "I'm going to enjoy it. Renfold the Rain-god. You look the

part, too !” He glanced back grimly over his shoulder. Her yellow hair was a flat mass of rat’s tails over her eyes, and her light cotton dress clung to her like a rag. But for all that, he had something which caught at him. He ached to tell her, but that would have been fatal. Setting his jaw again, he stumbled on. He had never seen rain like this before. Visibility was a few feet, at best, and he hadn’t counted on that. He wanted to be able to see—he *had* to see. For the second time since the advent of that horrible storm cloud, he had that conviction, again, that he had started something he shouldn’t have. It was bound to fail. He shouldered the thought aside, scrambled on, dabbing the rain from his eyes. Up the winding trail and round the last corner, on to the grassy ledge, the rock-seat—and there was Tim, huddled against the rock-wall for shelter and staring down. Renfold went up to him, saw the glint of metal in his hand.

“Any sign of the flood yet ?” he panted, seeking the lee beside Tim.

“Not yet. Any minute, now, I reckon. It’s risen a bit, but that’s our own water, see ?” Renfold peered, and the rain was thinner now. He could see as far as Bow Rock and a bit beyond. The water was dirt brown, boiling and lashed with rain flurries, striped here and there with the cream-foam of a wave-crest. But it was dividing evenly on the rock-spur. Glenda came squelching up, to crowd into the little lee shelter. Tim laughed at sight of her.

“You two look as if you fell in someplace. You should have waited. It’s easing off, now, look.”

“It’s not as bad as feared, then ?”

“That’s just here,” Tim shook his head. “We’ve just caught the fringe. Up there is where the big stuff is.”

“You don’t think, then, that the gadget has driven the rain back ?”

“Heck, no !” Tim laughed. Then he was sober again. “It’s just the way the storm-centre is swinging, of course. But it’s funny, all the same. I didn’t switch on until ten minutes ago. I felt silly, you know, just standing here with this. But now, I don’t know . . .”

“Tim !” Glenda’s voice crackled. “You *can’t* believe this thing really is working, surely ? Can’t you see he’s just making a fool of you ?”

“But why would he do that ?” Tim asked, reasonably.

“Because he’s crazy, that’s why. You know you never made a gadget work in all your life, not even a sensible one.”

"Pay no attention to that," Renfold ordered quickly, but Tim shrugged.

"It's true, I guess. I told you. Something always seems to go cockeyed, when I make things. I'm just unlucky, I guess."

"Never mind," Renfold insisted. "It doesn't matter. Look . . ." he was urgent, now, ". . . those other things, you believed in them, didn't you? You wanted them to work? And they went wrong. But this one, you don't care much, one way or the other, do you? You're just doing it as a favour to me, remember?"

"Peter!" there was a sudden something in Glenda's voice which made him jerk round and stare at her. Understanding? "I've been a fool—oh Lord, what a fool—I can see it all, now, the broadcast and everything . . ."

"Oh, no!" Renfold groaned. "Not *now*! I'm sorry, darling . . ." and he hit her, reluctantly but firmly, on the point of her jaw and caught her as she sagged, in silence. Tim stared, wide-eyed.

"What was that for?" he demanded. "What's the big idea . . .?"

"Sorry. Explain later. Look out, here it comes!"

The growing, burbling growl was warning enough, but the sight was such that they both stood speechless for a breath. Then Tim gave a little strangled cry.

"You expect me to stop *that*?"

Then a solid wall of water, foam-crested, roared into the twisted jaws of the Corkscrew, and surged, leaping, ten, fifteen, twenty feet high, the curling edge falling forward in a mad race to outstrip the water which drove it. There was a high ridge down the middle, and a whipping trail of bushes and twigs along either edge as it surged into the last high-banked cleft. The water lifted up, clawed at a great leaning willow on the bankside, and the tree reeled, its roots bared in an instant. As it fell, the water-wall spouted out of its prison with a roar and smashed, fair and square, into the gleaming-wet side of Bow Rock. Spray shot high into the air, masking the scene.

"There she goes!" Tim gasped, and Renfold sagged, the awful conviction seizing him that he should never have started this insane business. He must have been mad to imagine that anything like this would work—then there was an earth-shaking jar and a great angry grinding. The uprooted tree, branches whirling, had struck the rock like a gigantic spear, the spray spouted even higher.

"Good grief!" Tim said, gripping Renfold's arm. "Look there! I don't believe it!" Renfold looked, and marvelled. The impact of the tree, plus the mighty waterspout, had uprooted Bow Rock, bodily, and spun it half-round. Now it lay like a sunken block-ship, three-quarters masking the shallow channel, while the leaping racing flood waters poured, full spate, into the deep one. "That's just not possible!" Tim denied what his eyes told him. "It can't be!"

"But it *is*!" Renfold laughed, unsteadily. "That's the main thing." Then the ground slipped and stopped under his feet and he jerked away, clutching Glenda. Tim reeled, regained his balance, and stared.

"That's what I mean!" he shouted. "Bow Rock *couldn't* move. It's all solid, all one piece, all the way up to here . . ." and the earth leaped again, almost throwing him off his feet.

"Come on!" Renfold urged. "Let's get away from here. Never mind the argument!" He hoisted Glenda over his shoulder and began to run heavily, Tim by his side. Great groanings and cracking served to make their feet fly faster. Tim was still protesting, until Renfold, breathless, got savage with him. "Switch that damned gadget off, can't you—and for Heaven's sake stop saying that word 'impossible'!"

Then they were clear enough to be able to drop into a walk, and Glenda showed signs of coming round. Renfold put her down gently and waited.

"No explanations," he said, firmly, as soon as she could manage to stand. "Let's get indoors first. Where it's safe."

Old Walter, wet and disappointed, came in to find them towel-clad and seated round a crackling fire.

"A washout, in more ways than one," he growled. "Wasn't more than a bucketful of water, after all."

"You take a look in the other fork," Tim chuckled. "You'll see where the water went, and plenty of it, too."

"The south fork? But why would it go there?"

"Because Peter turned it aside, of course," Glenda smiled. "He had us all fooled. Me, too!"

"Now you're *all* crazy!" Walter grunted. "Here, let me get a look at that fire, and will somebody please explain, in plain English?"

"Let me try," Glenda begged. "Just to see if I've got it right? Well, to start with, the gadget is supposed to be a rain

focus. Peter wanted it made, just to see if it worked. Tim volunteered, because he likes that kind of thing. But gadgets don't work, for Tim—when he believes in them, and wants them to work. This one—well, he didn't believe it—he made it just for the fun of it, so it worked like crazy, and we have a cloudburst. All right, so far ?”

Walter groaned. “That's the craziest string of words I ever heard. Go on, tell me the rest.”

“It gets better. Peter called Tim back here, quick, and the rain came with him. Uncle—have *you* ever seen it rain like that, around here? Then Peter says ‘reverse the gadget.’ Obvious isn't it? Of course the Research Station went wrong. Tim has been working there hasn't he? And he bugs everything he touches, doesn't he? And so it does—and we really have ourselves a problem. Tim can avert that flood, with the gadget, but *only* if he doesn't believe it. And he is beginning to waver. So Peter backs up some of his forces on the side-lines. He sets you, Uncle, to get all ready to photograph the flood. Just that one thing—that special thing—you get it?”

“Well I'm damned !” Walter Kane roared. And then he had to laugh. “You made a monkey out of me, Renfold !”

“*And me !*” she went on. “He talked me into hating him so much that I just *knew* there was going to be a flood. I wanted it to be, just to spite him—and don't think I won't get even for that !” she promised, darkly. “Now, Tim is still wavering. Uncertain whether to believe or not. So Peter rings up Alec George, at the radio-station, and has him announce to the whole of Colville, that Tim is about to avert the flood with a gadget !”

“What ?” The Kanes, uncle and nephew, spoke with a single, horrified voice, but Glenda halted them.

“Don't you get it? Everybody in Colville just knows Tim and his gadgets. They don't work. And, at that very moment, Tim decides to switch on, even if it is nonsense—and the rain goes away from here ! Peter and I get up there in time to check that. Now we go into high gear. Tim doesn't know what to believe. He can't accept that a gadget can stop that great mass of water, the whole of Colville knows that, too. And Peter is desperate, he can see failure, and disaster staring him in the face, because this is *not* going to work out right . . .”

"How did you know that?" Renfold demanded, and Glenda smiled.

"Never you mind. It's true, isn't it? Anyway, the gadget goes into full reverse. Instead of pushing the water away, it pulls all the harder, enough to throw a jet so strong that it snaps off the spike of Bow Rock like a carrot, spins it round, and blocks the north fork!"

"The north fork is blocked?" Walter looked incredulous.

"Just about," Time confirmed. "There's maybe a foot and a half gap. We won't have any more flood problems there, that's certain." Then he turned to Renfold frowning. "That's why you yelled at me to stop—about things being impossible . . .?"

"I was never more scared in my life," Renfold admitted, laughing. "You were really calling the shots in reverse, just then. You and that gadget!"

"Gosh! I feel kind of scared myself, now!"

"Don't worry about it. Only, if it were I, I'd steer clear of any kind of gadget from now on. Unless you like living dangerously . . ."

"Not me!" Tim declared, with conviction. "I'm through with hardware, for life." The phone trilled at them. Tim went to answer it. He came back all smiles. "For you, sir," he said, to Renfold. "They want you down at the radio-station. Quite a crowd, sounds like. They want you to tell them just how you stopped the flood."

"How I stopped it?"

"That's right. I told Alec I didn't have anything to do with it, really. They want you." Glenda sat up, smiling.

"Get yourself dressed, Dr. Renfold," she ordered. "You're news. Come on, I'll drive you into town."

"I suppose I must," he sighed. "All right. Give me ten minutes."

As the little car squelched its way through the mud, Glenda was curious. "What will you tell them?" she wanted to know.

"The truth," he said, mildly. "I'll have to wrap it up in a bit in jargon. Stuff about manipulating contradictory phenomena, natural forces—I'll think it out as I go along. They won't understand a word. Look . . ." he turned to her, "I'm sorry I had to clip you on the jaw, back there. You had realised, you see, and that might have spoiled it."

"That's all right," she laughed. "I had already figured that out for myself. It's handy in a way. It fits in with my plans."

"These plans of yours—I know you can't tell me about them—but are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Quite sure. I'm after you, Peter. And I'm going to get you. And you're wrong in thinking I can't tell you about it, either. I can. It won't make any difference. Not the way I have it figured."

"But I've told you, these are non-conscious activities."

"I know. It still doesn't matter. Look, every time I say I'm after you and I'm going to get you, you get a sort of sinking feeling, don't you? You wish you'd never got into this, it's liable to run away with you—right? That's your pattern. And the more you fight against it, the better it works—right? So—you're trapped, my dear man. Can't you see that?"

"Supposing I don't fight? Supposing I just accept . . ."

and his voice faltered as it struck him. She laughed as she saw his face.

"You see? I still win—either way!"

—John Rackham

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NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD.

7, GRAPE STREET, LONDON, W.C.2.

When thinking in terms of mental disorders and delusions of the mind, one has to have some decisive yardstick of normality or sanity. Take, for instance, the case of the patient in a mental hospital who vanished . . .

MINUS ONE

BY J. G. BALLARD

“Where, my God, *where* is he?”

Uttered in a tone of unassuageable anger and frustration as he paced up and down in front of the high gabled window behind his desk, this *cri de coeur* of Dr. Mellinger, Director of Green Hill Asylum, perfectly expressed the consternation of his entire staff at the mysterious disappearance of one of their patients. In the twelve hours which had elapsed since the escape, Dr. Mellinger and his subordinates had rapidly progressed from surprise and annoyance to acute exasperation and eventually to a mood of almost euphoric bewilderment and disbelief. To add insult to injury, not only had the patient, James Hinton, succeeded in becoming the first ever to escape from the asylum, but he had managed to do so without leaving any clues to his route. Thus Dr. Mellinger and his staff were tantalised by the infuriating possibility that Hinton had never escaped at all and was still safely within the confines of the asylum. At all events, everyone agreed that if Hinton *had* escaped, he had literally vanished into thin air.

However, one small consolation, Dr. Mellinger reminded himself as he drummed his fingers irritably on his desk, was that Hinton's disappearance had exposed the appalling

shortcomings of the asylum's security systems, and administered a salutary jolt to his heads of departments. As this hapless group, led by the Deputy Director, Dr. Normand, filed into his office for the first of the morning's action conferences, Dr. Mellinger cast a baleful glare at each in turn, but their sleepless faces remained mutely lowered to the rich carpeting, as if, despairing of finding Hinton anywhere else, they now sought his hiding place among its deep ruby pile.

At least, Dr. Mellinger reflected, only one patient had disappeared, a negative sentiment which assumed greater meaning in view of the outcry which would be raised from the world outside when it was discovered that a patient—obviously a homicidal lunatic—had remained at large for over twelve hours before the police were notified.

This decision not to inform the civil authorities, an error of judgment whose culpability seemed to mount as the hours passed, alone prevented Dr. Mellinger from finding an immediate scapegoat—a convenient one would have been little Dr. Mendelsohn of the Pathology Department, an unimportant branch of the asylum—and sacrificing him on the altar of his own indiscretion. His natural caution, and reluctance to yield an inch of ground unless compelled, had prevented Dr. Mellinger from raising the general alarm during the first hours after Hinton's disappearance, when some doubt still remained whether the latter had actually left the asylum. Although the failure to find Hinton might have been interpreted as a reasonable indication that he had successfully escaped, Dr. Mellinger had characteristically refused to accept such faulty logic.

By now, over twelve hours later, his miscalculation had become increasingly apparent. As the thin smirk on Dr. Normand's bland face revealed, and as his other subordinates would soon realise, his directorship of the asylum was now at stake. Unless they found Hinton within a few hours he would be placed in an untenable position before both the civil authorities and the trustees.

However, Dr. Mellinger reminded himself, it was not without the exercise of considerable guile and resource that he had become Director of Green Hill in the first place.

"Where is he?"

Shifting his emphasis from the first of these interrogatories to the second, as if to illustrate that the fruitless search for

Hinton had been superceded by an examination of his total existential role in the unhappy farce of which he was the author and principal star, Dr. Mellinger turned upon his three breakfastless subordinates.

"Well, have you found him? Don't sit there dozing, gentlemen! You may have had a sleepless night, but I have still to wake from the nightmare." With this humourless shaft, Dr. Mellinger flashed a mordant eye into the rhododendron-lined drive, as if hoping to catch a sudden glimpse of the vanished patient. "Dr. Redpath, your report, please."

"The search is still continuing, Director," Dr. Redpath, the registrar of the asylum, who was nominally in charge of security, replied dispiritedly. "We have examined the entire grounds, dormitory blocks, garages and outbuildings—even the patients are taking part—but every trace of Hinton has vanished. Reluctantly I am afraid there is no alternative but to inform the police."

"Nonsense." Dr. Mellinger took his seat behind the desk, arms outspread and eyes roving the bare top for a minuscule replica of the vanished patient. "Don't be disheartened by your inability to discover him, Doctor. Until the search is complete we would be wasting the police's time to ask for their help."

"Of course, Director," Dr. Normand rejoined smoothly, a serpentine smile on his lips, "but on the other hand, as we have now proved that the missing patient is not within the boundaries of Green Hill, we can conclude, ergo, that he is outside them. In such an event is it perhaps rather a case of *we* helping the police?"

"Not at all, my dear Normand," Dr. Mellinger replied pleasantly. As he mentally elaborated his answer, he realised that he had never trusted or liked his deputy; given the first opportunity he would replace him, most conveniently with Redpath, whose blunders in the 'Hinton affair,' as it could be designated, would place him forever squarely below the Director's thumb. "If there were ample evidence of the means by which Hinton made his escape—knotted sheets, footprints in the flower-beds and the like—we could safely assume that he was no longer within these walls. But no such evidence has been found. For all we know—in fact, everything points inescapably to this conclusion—the patient is still within the confines of Green Hill, indeed by rights still within his cell. The

bars on the window were not cut, and the only way out was through the door, the keys to which remained in the possession of Dr. Booth"—he indicated the third member of the trio, a slim young man with a worried expression—"throughout the period between the last contact with Hinton and the discovery of his disappearance. Dr. Booth, as the physician actually responsible for Hinton, you are quite certain you were the last person to visit him?"

Dr. Booth nodded reluctantly. His celebrity at having discovered Hinton's escape had long since turned sour. "At seven o'clock, sir, during my evening round. But the last person to see Hinton was the duty nurse half an hour later. However, as no treatment had been prescribed—the patient had been admitted for observation—the door was not unlocked. Shortly after nine o'clock I decided to visit the patient—"

"Why?" Dr. Mellinger placed the tips of his fingers together and constructed a cathedral spire and nave. "This is one of the strangest aspects of the case, Doctor. Why should you have chosen, almost an hour and a half later, to leave your comfortable office on the ground floor and climb three long flights of stairs merely to carry out a cursory inspection which could best be left to the duty staff? Your motives puzzle me, Doctor."

"But, Director—!" Dr. Booth was almost on his feet. "Surely you don't suspect me of colluding in Hinton's escape? I assure you—"

"Doctor, please." Dr. Mellinger raised a smooth white hand. "Nothing could be further from my mind. Perhaps I should have said: your *unconscious* motives."

Again the unfortunate Booth protested: "Director, I insist there were no unconscious motives. I admit I can't remember precisely what prompted me to see Hinton, but it was some perfectly trivial reason. I hardly knew the patient."

Dr. Mellinger bent forwards across his desk. "That is exactly what I meant, Doctor. To be precise, you did not know Hinton at all." Dr. Mellinger gazed at the distorted reflection of himself in the silver ink-stand. "Tell me, Dr. Booth, how would you describe Hinton's appearance?"

Booth hesitated. "Well, he was of . . . medium height, if I remember, with . . . yes, brown hair and a pale complexion.

His eyes were—I should have to refresh my memory from the file, Director.”

Dr. Mellinger nodded. He turned to Redpath. “Could you describe him, Doctor?”

“I’m afraid not, sir. I never saw the patient.” He gestured to the Deputy Director. “I believe Dr. Normand interviewed him on admission.”

With an effort Dr. Normand cast into his memory. “It was probably my assistant. If I remember, he was a man of average build with no distinguishing features. Neither short, nor tall. Stocky, one might say.” He pursed his lips. “Yes. Or rather, no. I’m certain it was my assistant.”

“How interesting.” Dr. Mellinger had visibly revived, the gleams of ironic humour which flashed from his eyes revealed some potent inner transformation, the burden of irritations and frustrations which had plagued him for the past day seemed to have been lifted. “Does this mean, Dr. Normand, that this entire institution has been mobilised in a search for a man whom no one here could recognise even if they found him? You surprise me, my dear Normand. I was under the impression that you were a man of cool, analytical intelligence, but in your search for Hinton you are obviously employing more arcane powers.”

“But, Director, I protest! I cannot be expected to memorise the face of every patient—”

“Enough, enough!” Dr. Mellinger stood up with an imperious flourish, and resumed his circuit of the carpet. “This is all very disturbing. Obviously the whole relationship between Green Hill and its patients must be re-examined. Our patients are not faceless ciphers, gentlemen, but the possessors of unique and vital identities. If we regard them as nonentities and fail to invest them with any personal characteristics, is it surprising that they should seem to disappear? I suggest that we put aside the next few weeks and dedicate them to a careful re-appraisal. Let us look into our consciences, and scrutinise all those facile assumptions we make so readily.” Impelled by this vision, Dr. Mellinger stepped into the light pouring through the window, as if to expose himself to this new revelation. “Yes, this is the task which lies before us now; from its successful conclusion will emerge a new Green Hill, a Green Hill without shadows and conspiracies, where patients and physicians stand before each other in mutual trust and responsibility.”

A pregnant silence fell at the conclusion of this homily. At last Dr. Redpath cleared his throat, reluctant to disturb Dr. Mellinger's sublime communion with himself. "And Hinton, sir?"

"Hinton? Ah, yes." Dr. Mellinger turned to face them, like a bishop about to bless his congregation. "Let us see Hinton as an illustration of this process of self-examination, a focus of our re-appraisal."

"So the search should continue, sir?" Redpath pressed.

"Of course." For a moment Dr. Mellinger's attention wandered. "Yes, we must find Hinton. He is here somewhere, his essence pervades Green Hill, a vast metaphysical conundrum. Solve it, gentlemen, and you will have solved the mystery of his disappearance!"

For the next hour Dr. Mellinger paced the carpet alone, now and then warming his hands at the low fire below the mantelpiece. Its few flames entwined fleetingly in the chimney like the ideas gently playing around the periphery of his mind. At last, he felt, a means of breaking through the impasse had offered itself. He had always been certain that Hinton's miraculous disappearance represented more than a simple problem of breached security, and was a symbol of something grievously at fault with the very foundations of Green Hill.

Pursuing these thoughts, Dr. Mellinger left his office and made his way down to the floor below which housed the administrative department. The floor was deserted; the entire staff of the building was taking part in the search. Occasionally the querulous cries of the patients demanding their breakfasts drifted across the warm insulated air. Fortunately the walls were thick, and the rates charged by the asylum high enough to obviate the need for over-crowding.

Green Hill Asylum (motto, and principal attraction: 'There is a Green Hill Far, Far Away') was one of those institutions which are patronised by the wealthier members of the community and in effect serve the role of private prisons. In such places are confined all those miscreant or unfortunate relatives whose presence would otherwise be a burden or embarrassment: the importunate widows of black-sheep sons, senile maiden aunts, elderly bachelor cousins paying the price for their romantic indiscretions, in short, all those abandoned casualties of the army of privilege. As far as the patrons of Green Hill were concerned, maximum security came first, treatment, if

given at all, a bad second. Dr. Mellinger's patients had disappeared conveniently from the world, and as long as they remained in this distant limbo those who paid the bills were satisfied. All this made Hinton's escape particularly dangerous.

Stepping through the open doorway of Normand's office, Dr. Mellinger ran his eye cursorily around the room. On the desk, hastily opened, was a slim file containing a few documents and a photograph.

For a brief moment Dr. Mellinger gazed abstractedly at the file. Then, after a discreet glance into the corridor, he slipped it under his arm and retraced his steps up the empty staircase.

Outside, muted by the dark groves of rhododendrons, the sounds of search and pursuit echoed across the grounds. Opening the file on his desk, Dr. Mellinger stared at the photograph, which happened to be lying upside down. Without straightening it, he studied the amorphous features. The nose was straight, the forehead and cheeks symmetrical, the ears a little oversize, but in the inverted position the face lacked any cohesive identity and remained a collection of disparate parts.

Suddenly, as he started to read the file, Dr. Mellinger was filled with a deep sense of resentment. The entire subject of Hinton and the man's precarious claims to reality overwhelmed him with a profound nausea. He refused to accept that this mindless cripple with his anonymous features could have been responsible for the confusion and anxiety of the previous day. Was it possible that these few pieces of paper constituted this meagre individual's full claim to reality?

Flinching slightly from the touch of the file to his fingers, Dr. Mellinger carried it across to the fire-place. Averting his face, he listened with a deepening sense of relief as the flames flared briefly and subsided.

"My dear Booth ! Do come in. It's good of you to spare the time." With this warm greeting Dr. Mellinger ushered him to a chair beside the fire and proffered his silver cigarette case. "There's a certain small matter I wanted to discuss, and you are almost the only person who can help me."

"Of course, Director," Booth assured him. "I am greatly honoured."

Dr. Mellinger seated himself behind his desk. "It's a very curious case, one of the most unusual I have ever come across. It concerns a patient under your care, I believe."

"May I ask for his name, sir?"

"Hinton," Dr. Mellinger said, with a sharp glance at Booth.

"Hinton, sir?"

"You show surprise," Dr. Mellinger continued before Booth could reply. "I find that response particularly interesting."

"The search is still being carried on," Booth said uncertainly as Dr. Mellinger paused to digest his remarks. "I'm afraid we've found absolutely no trace of him. Dr. Normand thinks we should inform—"

"Ah, yes, Dr. Normand." The Director revived suddenly. "I have asked him to report to me with Hinton's file as soon as he is free. Dr. Booth, does it occur to you that we may be chasing the wrong hare?"

"Sir—?"

"Is it in fact *Hinton* we are after? I wonder, perhaps, whether the search for Hinton is obscuring something larger and more significant, the enigma, as I mention yesterday, which lies at the heart of Green Hill and to whose solution we must all now be dedicated." Dr. Mellinger savoured these reflections before continuing. "Dr. Booth, let us for a moment consider the role of Hinton, or to be more precise, the complex of overlapping and adjacent events that we identify loosely by the term 'Hinton'."

"Complex, sir? You speak diagnostically?"

"No, Booth. I am now concerned with the phenomenology of Hinton, with his absolute metaphysical essence. To speak more plainly: has it occurred to you, Booth, how little we know of this elusive patient, how scanty the traces he has left of his own identity?"

"True, Director," Booth agreed. "I constantly reproach myself for not taking a closer interest in the patient."

"Not at all, Doctor. I realise how busy you are. I intend to carry out a major reorganisation of Green Hill, and I assure you that your tireless work here will not be forgotten. A more senior administrative post would, I am sure, suit you excellently." As Booth sat up, his interest in the conversation increasing several-fold, Dr. Mellinger acknowledged his expression of thanks with a discreet nod. "As I was saying Doctor, you have so many patients, all wearing the same uniforms, housed in the same wards and by and large prescribed the same treatment—is it surprising that they should lose their

individual identities? If I may make a small confession," he added with a roguish smile, "I myself find that all the patients look alike. Why, if Dr. Normand or yourself informed me that a new patient by the name of Smith or Brown had arrived, I would automatically furnish him with the standard uniform of identity at Green Hill—those same lustreless eyes and slack mouth, the same amorphous features."

Unclasping his hands, Dr. Mellinger leaned intently across his desk. "What I am suggesting, Doctor, is that this automatic mechanism may have operated in the case of the so-called Hinton, and that you may have invested an entirely non-existent individual with the fictions of a personality."

Dr. Booth nodded slowly. "I see, sir. You suspect that Hinton—or what we have called Hinton up to now—was perhaps a confused memory of another patient." He hesitated doubtfully, and then noticed that Dr. Mellinger's eyes were fixed upon him with hypnotic intensity.

"Dr. Booth. I ask you: what actual proof have we that Hinton ever existed?"

"Well, sir, there are the . . ." Booth searched about helplessly. ". . . the records in the administrative department. And the case notes."

Dr. Mellinger shook his head with a scornful flourish. "My dear Booth, you are speaking of mere pieces of paper. These are not proof of a man's identity. A typewriter will make any marks you choose. The only conclusive proof is his physical existence in time and space or failing that, a distinct memory of his tangible physical presence. Can you honestly say that either of these conditions is fulfilled?"

"No, sir. I suppose I can't. Though I did speak to a patient whom I assumed to be Hinton."

"But was he?" The Director's voice was resonant and urgent. "Search your mind, Booth, be honest with yourself. Was it perhaps another patient to whom you spoke? What doctor ever really looks at his patients? In all probability you merely saw Hinton's name on a list and assumed that he sat before you, an intact physical existence like your own."

There was a knock upon the door. Dr. Normand stepped into the office. "Good afternoon, Director."

"Ah, Normand. Do come in. Dr. Booth and I have been having a most instructive conversation. I really believe we have found a solution to the mystery of Hinton's disappearance."

Dr. Normand nodded cautiously. "I am most relieved, sir. I was beginning to wonder whether we should inform the civil authorities. It is now nearly forty-eight hours since . . ."

"My dear Normand, I am afraid you are rather out of touch. Our whole attitude to the Hinton case has changed radically. Dr. Booth has been so helpful to me, We have been discussing the possibility that an administrative post might be found for him. You have the Hinton file?"

"Er, I regret not, sir," Normand apologised hastily his eyes moving from Booth to the Director. "I gather it has been temporarily displaced. I have instituted a thorough search and it will be brought to you as soon as possible."

"Thank you, Normand, if you would." Mellinger took Booth by the arm and led him to the door. "Now, Doctor, I am most gratified by your quick perceptiveness. I want you to question your ward staff in the way I have questioned you. Strike through the mists of illusion and false assumption that swirl about their minds. Warn them of those illusions compounded on illusions which can assume the guise of reality. Remind them, too, that clear minds are required at Green Hill. I will be most surprised if any one of them can put her hand on her heart and swear that Hinton *really* existed."

After Booth had made his exit, Dr. Mellinger returned to his desk, pleasantly rubbing his hands. For a moment he failed to notice his deputy.

"Ah, yes, Normand. I wonder where that file is? You didn't bring it?"

"No, sir. As I explained—"

"Well, never mind. But we mustn't become careless, Normand, too much is at stake. Do you realise that without that file we would know literally nothing whatever about Hinton? It would be most awkward."

"I assure you, sir, the file—"

"Enough, Normand. Don't worry yourself." Dr. Mellinger turned a vulpine smile upon the restless Normand. "I have the greatest respect for the efficiency of the administrative department under your leadership. I think it unlikely that they should have misplaced it. Tell me, Normand, are you sure that this file ever existed?"

"Certainly, sir," Normand replied promptly. "Of course, I have not actually seen it myself, but every patient at Green Hill has a complete personal file."

"But Normand," the Director pointed out gently. "The patient in question is not *at* Green Hill. Whether or not this hypothetical file exists, Hinton does not."

He stopped and waited as Normand looked up at him curiously, his eyes narrowing.

A week later, Dr. Mellinger held a final conference in his office. This was a notably more relaxed gathering; his subordinates lay back in the leather armchairs around the fire, while Dr. Mellinger leaned against the desk, supervising the circulation of his best sherry.

"So, gentlemen," he remarked in conclusion, "we may look back on the past week as a period of unique self-discovery, a lesson to all of us to remember the true nature of our roles at Green Hill, our dedication to the task of separating reality from illusion. If our patients are haunted by chimeras, let us at least retain absolute clarity of mind, accepting the validity of any proposition only if all our senses corroborate it. Consider the example of the 'Hinton affair.' Here, by an accumulation of false assumptions, of illusions buttressing illusions, a vast edifice of fantasy was erected around the wholly mythical identity of one patient. This imaginary figure, who by some means we have not discovered—most probably the error of a typist in the records department—was given the name 'Hinton,' was subsequently furnished with a complete personal identity, a private ward, attendant nurses and doctors. Such was the grip of this substitute world, this concatenation of errors, that when it crumbled and the lack of any substance behind the shadow was discovered, the remaining vacuum was automatically interpreted as the patient's escape."

Dr. Mellinger gestured eloquently, as Normand, Redpath and Booth nodded their agreement. He walked around his desk and took his seat. "Perhaps, gentlemen, it is fortunate that I remain aloof from the day-to-day affairs of Green Hill. I take no credit upon myself, that I alone was sufficiently detached to consider the full implications of Hinton's disappearance and realise the only possible explanation—that *Hinton had never existed!*"

"A brilliant deduction," Redpath murmured.

"Without doubt," echoed Booth.

"A profound insight," agreed Normand.

There was a sharp knock on the door. With a frown, Dr. Mellinger ignored it and resumed his monologue.

"Thank you, gentlemen. Without your assistance that hypothesis, that Hinton was no more than an accumulation of administrative errors, could never have been confirmed."

The knock on the door repeated itself. A staff sister appeared breathlessly. "Excuse me, sir. I'm sorry to interrupt you, but—"

Dr. Mellinger waved away her apologies. "Never mind. What is it?"

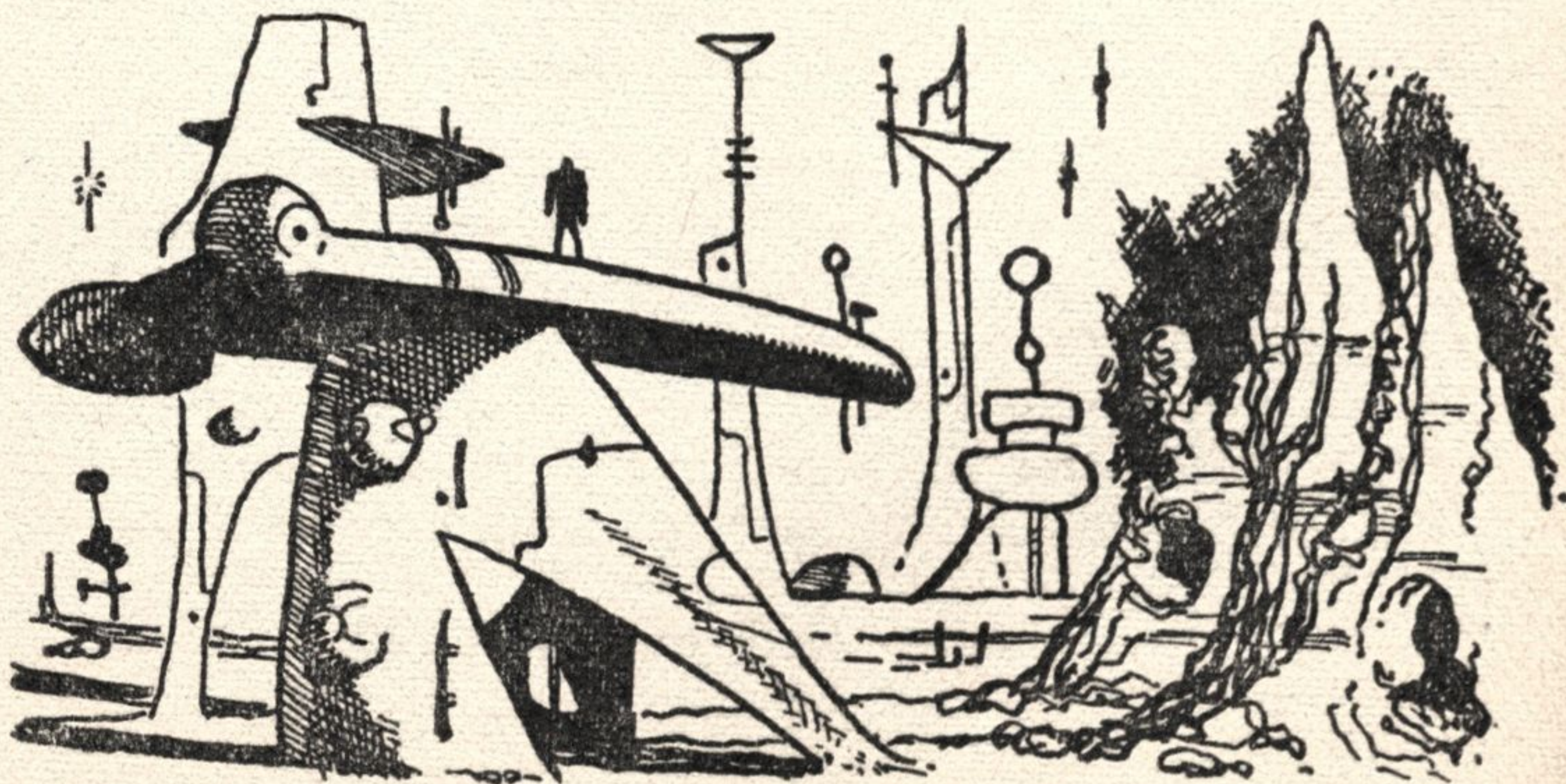
"A visitor, Dr. Mellinger." She paused as the Director waited impatiently. "Mrs. Hinton, to see her husband."

For a moment there was consternation. The three men around the fire sat upright, their drinks forgotten, while Dr. Mellinger remained stock-still at his desk. A total silence filled the room, only broken by the light tapping of a woman's heels in the corridor outside.

But Dr. Mellinger recovered quickly. Standing up, with a grim smile at his colleagues, he said: "To see Mr. Hinton? Impossible, Hinton never existed. The woman must be suffering from terrible delusions, she requires immediate treatment. Show her in." He turned to his colleagues. "Gentlemen, we must do everything we can to help her."

Minus two.

—J. G. Ballard



All that Jenssen had left after his wife died was his memories—the memories of a thousand exotic yesterdays. Then he found that there was a machine which could recreate his mental images and make them almost reality.

ALL MY YESTERDAYS

BY LEE HARDING

The funeral was nearly over.

I had watched them consign her to the foul excavation newly-ripped from the dark soil, I had suffered the pious platitudes that the minister had cast down upon the descending coffin and had borne the simpering grief of those huddled around the lip of the grave until I felt sure that my body would burst asunder from the pressure of the incredible hypocrisy.

One at a time, they had each in turn stepped forward and dropped their limp wreaths in upon the polished casket. I heard the skittering noise of a handful of dirt being cast down by the minister's wrinkled hand upon the coffin, upon my Jeanette's upturned face.

And I turned away.

It was so hard to connect the girl I had known with an obscure religious sect that still practised the repulsive burial

rites of another age. Even as I stumbled away across the uneven rubble of the cemetery, I still couldn't face the fact that her family *were* Primitives, and that they believed that interment in the earth was a fitting end for one so fair.

Before me there hovered the terrifying image of the girl I had loved sealed away beneath the soil, her exquisite body becoming fodder for worms.

If only her life had not ended so ignominiously !

There was nothing to fear in the purifying instant of cremation. That way her memory would have remained unchanged. Now I would find myself haunted by the foul indignity her family had wrought upon her dead body.

For a moment I had been tempted to force my way through that solemn tableau and demand that they put a stop to the whole ghastly charade. It only took away from Jeanette the dignity her death deserved.

But what would have been the use ? What right had I, an interloper, a stranger even, to challenge *their* wishes ?

Every right. I was more to Jeanette than any of them had ever been. I had loved her in a way that none of them ever could. For a brief moment, torn recklessly from the tattered shawl of time, she had *belonged* to me.

Now the worms would claim her.

It was a mistake to go back to the flat.

The rooms were worse than empty—something vital and irreplaceable seemed to have fled. The half-filled percolator and the saucer full of cigarette butts were items of carelessness Jeanette would never have permitted. The living room was an untidy mess of cushions and discarded magazines. The sunken lower level was a grotesque jumble of unfinished canvasses and pathetic mobiles. My studio had never seemed so barren or so desolate.

I made the mistake of going into the bedroom.

The bed was un-made. Had been for several days. The sheets trailed over on to the floor and discarded clothing lay in crumpled heaps.

I felt as though I had profaned a temple.

I closed the door and went over to the sofa and sat down. One bare wall stared bleakly back. I covered my face with my hands and pressed my fingers deeply into my aching forehead.

Jeanette . . . Jeanette . . .

Where was there sense to it ? The girl I loved lying beneath a pile of earth, my life useless and empty again. How could I possibly manage to absorb this barren future rushing towards me ?

Even the walls seemed to be whispering her name. I sensed her presence in everything I touched, in every breath I wrested from the unwilling air. Her image flitted like some ghostly wraith through the mirror of my mind.

Memories. That was all I had left. If only I could convince myself that the body I had seen interred in the earth was not the Jeanette I had loved, but only the husk that had once contained the personality I knew as Jeanette. And that she could live on in my mind as long as I remembered her. That is the only true immortality. The rest is artifice.

How long, I wondered, could one really trust memories ? How long before time began its corrosive work and gradually eroded the brilliantly etched images of the past like some subtle acid, and the mind, in a frantic effort to restore them to their original lustre, replaces them with idealised and deceptive half-truths, so that they are no longer the truth but inaccurate fabrications ? How long before the trusted fabric of memory became, like quicksand, deceptive and treacherous ?

I opened my eyes and looked around me. An intolerable pressure seemed to be building up within the walls of the apartment. A wan twilight was filtering sluggishly in through the one window.

I recognised the signs. They had been with me every day since the accident, days that had seemed to have been scraped from the very bottom of the barrel and cast down, disinterestedly, before me. And in the womb of each evening I had perceived the foetus of yet another tomorrow, always in the shape of the day that had only just passed away.

And I sensed it again.

Blindly, illogically, I fled from the apartment, and was ejected into the busy whirlpool of the city, to be drawn along and somehow lost within the monolithic jabberwocky of down-town night-life. There, a million sounds and sensations battered away at my terrible loneliness. A frantic succession of images began forcing their way through my mind—with one intent. To oust that terrifying image of a delicate body decaying in communion with the filthy creatures of the soil.

When the bistros were exhausted and the video halls forgotten, I found myself wandering through the crowded streets of Dream City.

It had been many years since I had been to a fairground. My mind was busy summoning up half-remembered moments of my youth when such a place had been the ultimate entertainment. But places such as this had become more sophisticated with the advent of a new millenium and the accompanying marvels of technology. Coney Island had become Paradise Playground, city of vicarious thrills, where anything could be had—for a price. And Luna Park had become Dream City. Five square miles of island separated from the mainland by a narrow causeway, where the citizens of the twenty-first century could find an outlet for their repressions and frustrations.

For a moment I felt repelled by the great vortex of people swirling excitedly around me. Their voices rose high and shrill with impatience as they each sought their respective catharsis, each cry blending into a bastardised sound that surged against my ear drums like some hungry sea. For a moment I was tempted to go back.

To the flat ?

The prospect had never seemed quite so bleak. So I let the crowd carry me along the winding avenues.

Overhead, the long chains of marquee lights buffeted the night sky with a bewildering kaleidoscope of colour. Hidden speakers cajoled the crowd, spilling subtle enticements into the eager pockets of their ears, blending with the impatient tide of sound swelling through the City until it seemed to grow into a great homogenous entity crouching over the island like some restless animal snarling at the bewildered stars.

I paid scant attention to the gaudy-fronted pleasure palaces. Only the eager faces of the people swirling around me registered. The scintillating neons bathed everyone with a strangely satanic countenance.

I blundered into a group of young men, excused myself, and stood there looking up at the object of their attentiones. My clumsiness had not even disturbed their heated discussion.

“Go on, Alfie, bet you can’t pin *her* down !”

On a narrow stage several feet above street level a striking young woman reclined gracefully upon a divan. Her body was as supple and as beautiful as a leopard. She wore only a wisp

of aqua material between her thighs and her nipples were encrusted with a glittering dust of an identical colour.

There was a sign glowing above her that proclaimed :
WRESTLING.

One of the boys, quite obviously the younger, was being badgered by the other three. They kept nudging him in the ribs and sniggering to themselves. In between times they sneaked quick, hungry looks at the girl on the ledge.

She wasn't watching them. Her eyes wavered curiously towards mine. Perhaps aware that she was attracting attention, she shifted her weight around to her left elbow, so that her breasts moved sensually. Her lips curled into a lascivious smile.

"Go on, Alfie, give it a go."

The young boy licked his lips nervously. A narrow tip of tongue moved across his bottom lip, several times, in a peculiarly sexual motion. His eyes were fixed on the circular emblem above the open doorway. It said :

Two cents.

Entertainment was cheap in Dream City. The State saw to that.

The boy seemed to make up his mind. His right hand twitched uncertainly and then plunged into a pocket in search of the magical coins.

I watched all four of them walk through the entrance. Then I looked back at the girl. Her eyes mocked me indolently.

I felt sorry for the boy. His opponent would probably be an expert at judo and karate. But he would have his furtive little tussle and get his hands around some naked feminine flesh before he was ignobly subdued upon the mat. And then, if his appetite had been sufficiently rewarded, the proprietors would see to it that his embryonic basic urge would be satisfied in other ways.

The whole business sickened me. I turned my back on the woman and hurried away.

I put the crowded hub of the City behind me and made for the backwaters of the fair. Here, where the streets narrowed into subdued thoroughfares and the caterwauling of the masses was replaced by the restraint of the more sophisticated pleasure seeker, I found some respite.

I explored the Streets of Dreams until I found a programme capable of sustaining my interest. I went inside one of the

buildings, found myself a booth and paid my half a dollar. And there I sat, with a Dreamer unit wrapped around my skull, and forgot the real world for an hour, while my mind was pumped full of the powerful splendour of an ancient empire.

Alexander's.

I had forgotten just how real a Dreamer tape could be. Perhaps because it had been so long since I had experienced one of the tapes, or maybe they had only increased the potentials of their machines since I had last imbibed. Either way, my mind ceased to be a reasoning entity and became instead some vicarious sponge that soaked up the impressions fed through the unit and directly into my brain.

As a documentary it was rather spectacular. I came out of it feeling unusually refreshed, and for the next few hours I wandered from booth to booth trying to exhaust my interest in a succession of increasingly tedious historical reconstructions.

I even entered a booth that purported to specialise in 'fantasy' tapes, but I had only been under the unit for five minutes before I realised I had been duped. The fact that there was no choice of programme should have given me an indication of what to expect, but the receptionist had been particularly persuasive.

I watched the slow succession of disjointed, plot-less images move through my mind, seeing them emerge in all their dark and carnal eroticism. I took it for a while, until the sickly swirl began to coalesce into a depraved *blanc mange*.

I switched the machine off and got up.

Pornography wasn't my particular interest at the moment—or at any time. I imagined a stream of doddering old men and pubescent youths making a regular pilgrimage to a place like this, some trying to recapture their lost youth and others eagerly anticipating. It was all so horribly calculated.

There was no refund on my ticket. I had paid for a full half hour and it was my fault if I left in ten minutes.

The hell with them.

I stormed out into the street and headed back towards the centre of the City.

I had gone only a short distance when a discreet green neon attracted my attention.

RE-CAPTURE Inc.

I crossed the street to get a closer look at the small plaque beneath the sign.

Re-live fond moments of the past, it said.

Well, this was something new in Dreamers. I wondered what the gimmick was.

Definitely no pre-arranged tapes used—only your own memories.

The blurb intrigued me. After my last experience I was rather hesitant to get caught by another pseudo-pornographic tape. Yet, this intrigued me. And besides, it was only ten-thirty. The night was young and the prospect of trying to sleep was beyond me at the moment.

So I went inside.

A pert little blonde explained everything to me while she adjusted the dreamer unit preparatory to lowering it over my head.

"Is this your first time, Mr. Jenssen?"

I nodded.

"Have you ever used a jogger?"

"Of course." Who hasn't had occasion to press one of those slender little rods just so against the forehead and felt the minute electrical current dislodge a particularly elusive memory from the dingy cupboards of the past?

"Good." She came around and leant on the arm of my 'barber's chair.' She tapped the hovering headpiece growing out of the wall. "This uses a modification of that same principle. But instead of a tiny electrical current this machine creates an area of extremely intense local stimulation, so that not only the desired memory is recalled in its original clarity, but the feelings, impressions and atmosphere of that particular moment. In other words, you are not actually remembering, but *re-living*. That is why we call this process we have developed 'recapturing.'"

I stared at her with surprise. If what she claimed was true then I was certainly in for an interesting half hour. But previous experience tempered my enthusiasm. I just nodded my head in a puzzled manner.

"The operation is relatively simple," she went on. "You see this square plastic button near your right hand? To activate the machine you have only to press lightly with the palm of your hand. To terminate, another depression is all that is necessary. In a moment I will lower the headpiece and you can begin. The important thing you must remember if the success of your recapturing is to live up to your expectations, is

to establish a sufficiently strong *rapport* with your chosen memory. Don't hit that button too soon. Think over the image. Make sure you know it from every angle. *Then* start the machine. Now is everything clear?"

"I suppose so."

My world dimmed as the headpiece of the unit lowered over my head and rested lightly upon my shoulders. The girl's voice came through to me a little muffled.

"In the beginning you will find that the intensity of the experience will vary and will improve as your association with the technique gathers strength. For this preliminary, the machine is set for automatic cut-off after thirty minutes, just in case you get too involved in your recall."

There was a short pause. Then :

"I'm extinguishing the lights now. You may go ahead whenever you are ready."

A sudden swathe of darkness blanketed my world and I was staring at nothing, conscious only of this thing around my skull.

Well, I had paid my dollar-fifty. I may as well get my money's worth and see just how well the machine lived up to the girl's spiel.

Concentrate, she had said. Establish a rapport—a *strong* one.

Very well, then. I concentrated.

On what?

My hand fidgeted uneasily over the square button. Where was the girl? Watching me, waiting to see that I did everything right?

Probably.

The hell with her. Blank-faced little bitch.

Impatiently, I began riffling the pages of memory in search of an image. My mind leapt quickly, *too* quickly, it seemed, across the gulf of recent events and set my scrabbling fingers to work in the nostalgic world of youth.

What better place to begin?

I took hold of a particularly warm image and held it for a long moment, analysing it from every angle until I felt sure that I was aware of its precious intricacy and that the necessary rapport had been established. Then I depressed the button.

And was plunged abruptly into yesterday.

It was dark inside the cave. Nothing moved except my own distorted shadow, a grotesque shape hurled through the narrow opening by the eager sunlight and stretched eerily across the low ceiling of the place. As I stared into the uneasy gloom the only sounds I could hear were the hurrying splash of water over rocks in the creek outside, and my own excited breathing.

What a place of mystery ! I looked furtively behind me, half expecting someone or some thing to come lurching up the sand-bank to grasp at my legs, but I saw only the flare of the bald sky and the distant skyline of the city. Inside, there were some scattered pieces of paper on the floor of the cave but nothing else. My mind immediately conjured up fanciful pictures of drunken sailors or frightened criminals using such a place for refuge . . .

It was like dreaming and being aware of the dream but unable to alter the flow of the dream. I felt like some detached observer witnessing an event happening to another part of me.

But it was *real* !

Just like the girl had said. And more. More than remembering, more than recalling. I was actually *living* this moment over again. I was *there*.

I lingered in my long lost cave for a few moments longer and then, impatient with the potentialities of the machine, depressed the button for a second time and returned to

Now.

And darkness returned. I stared into the inky blackness, my heart hammering excitedly. But only for a moment. There was so much to do, so much to think of . . .

My hand shook as I sought for the button and depressed it again.

And again.

And again.

And again.

Time ceased to have meaning. I shuttled backwards and forwards through the past, snaring and recapturing incredibly vivid past experiences. I began to feel a delirious intoxication. Reality seemed to have sloughed off around me like some discarded carapace and I lost myself in a bewildering succession of images.

And then, instead of fumbling for the next image amongst the dog-eared relics of the distant past, my eager mind pounced upon a furtive image and, before the unseen censor could

intervene, had grasped it firmly within the twin paws of memory and depressed the button.

This time, there was no need to waste valuable seconds establishing a strong rapport. The memory was so extraordinarily vivid as to render such temporising unnecessary.

I was hunkered down in a corner of Alec Marsden's lounge, my backside resting comfortably on a cushion, my back against the wall and the remains of a martini resting on the floor beside me. Around me thundered the chatter of a flock of Alec's friends, and Alec himself was staring down at me.

"You haven't met Jeanette, have you, Harry?"

I looked up with what must have seemed a rather bored expression. My eyes crawled away from my friend's good-natured goatee and focussed reluctantly upon the girl he had with him. There was an amused little twist playing with the corners of her mouth.

"Charmed," I said, or something equally asinine. The truth was that I couldn't think of anything else to say. Like in a dream, time had slowed down to such a degree that, if it hadn't actually stopped, was certainly moving at a metaphysical snail's pace.

Of course it was the girl. I had never seen anybody quite like her. She stood out from the pack of gesticulating queers and pseudo-intellectuals packing the room like something clean and whole and real. She was tall, but not too tall. Attractive, but not astonishingly so. Her figure was compact and feminine enough under the conservative green slacksuit she was wearing. Her black hair was cropped short and combed forward slightly to help diminish a high forehead. Her face was open and clean and honest—and without make-up. Her complexion was deep olive and her eyes were the darkest of browns.

"So you're Harry Jenssen," she said.

"That's right."

"Alec's told me a lot about you."

"Lies. All of it. He used to be in public relations, you know. It's become second nature. Can't really be held responsible, I suppose, after seven years of that."

We exchanged banter for a while longer, after which Alec left us to our own resources. The girl sat down beside me and in the course of conversation I discovered quite a bit about her.

To begin with, she was a musician. Composer, actually, specialising in the re-construction of the archaic systems of the

twentieth century—the Berg/Webern period, I think she called it.

“And what do you do, Harry?”

I shrugged. “Paint. A little welded sculpture, but mainly mobiles. Nothing extravagant. Just another by-product.”

Those sombre eyes regarded me curiously. “By-product?”

“What else?”

Would she have preferred the label artist? Never was there a more maligned word.

“What are we,” I asked, “if we are not by-products of an automated millenia living on the dole of automation? Never before has the human race produced so many would-be and surprisingly untalented geniuses. Give the unemployed masses something to do, the State decrees. So they subsidise our intellectual fads and to hell with real art. It went down the drain a century ago, anyway.”

She shook her head, a trifle bewildered. “My, but you are reactionary, aren’t you?”

I felt quite foolish then. “I apologise,” I said, “It’s become a habit with me.” I waved one hand to encompass the crowd of people fouling up Alec’s lounge room. “Just look at them and see if you can see any sense to it. They’re all fakes. Sometimes I even find myself wondering if Alec’s only half real himself, but that’s only when I really get down in the dumps.”

Sometimes I wondered why I kept coming to Alec’s damned parties. His guests amused me, their mannerisms irritated me and their conversation bored me. Yet I kept coming. Curiosity, I suppose. Or maybe I needed a mental purgative now and again.

I wanted to tell Jeanette that she wasn’t like them. That she was real. But somehow, I couldn’t. It would have sounded . . . trite. And already I could sense this vague sort of uneasiness flowing between us and through us, a strong sort of empathy that made me feel that my life was already undergoing a subtle change, and could never be the same again.

I looked up at her and her features seemed suddenly indistinct. Then they began to blurr, like a video tape going out of phase, and began a rapid dissolution. The whole room was running together like treacle.

I grappled frantically to bring her back into clear focus but it was hopeless. Everything became a swirling blur of colour that was rapidly sucked away from the present into the hidden vaults of the past . . .

I came out of it conscious, not of the familiar darkness, but of a ghostly half light. And my hand crushing down again and again on the square button.

"What happened," I mumbled, dazed. "What *happened*?"

There was a click of heels and a voice said, reassuringly, "Nothing 'happened,' Mr. Jenssen. The machine cut out, that's all. Your preliminary half hour is completed. How do you feel? No after effects? Dizziness, anything like that?"

Her unfeeling twittering scraped along the raw ends of my emotions, "No, no," I muttered, impatiently. "Everything functioned . . . very well."

Some understatement!

"That's very good. Do you wish to continue . . .?"

"Yes, yes. Of course." Relief washed through my system. For a moment I had feared that the machine had broken down and that I would be denied my Jeanette. Now I could return to her.

My fingers ached with an impatient, consuming fire.

"You're very fortunate," continued the disembodied voice beyond the headpiece. "Not many achieve a strong rapport immediately . . ."

"Look, would you mind—"

Her voice stopped abruptly. There was a moment's silence, then: "You may go ahead. For one hour."

"Thank you," I said, and almost snarled the words. And as an afterthought: "Would you please get the hell out of here and let me alone?"

She didn't answer, but I heard the door close shortly after the lights were extinguished. I was alone in the booth.

Alone with Jeanette.

What incredible chain of circumstances had led me here, to find her again in the discarded dross of the past? No longer was there any need to fear the gradual dissolution of her tragic memory, when I had only to come here to Dream City and return her face, her voice, her *self* to stunning reality. This way, I could never really lose her.

A great exultation swept up and consumed the abyss inside me. I glared defiantly towards the future and thought again of Jeanette.

Very carefully, I pressed the button.

From that evening, life began to have some sort of meaning again.

I spent a few hours each night in the *Re-capture* booth in Dream City, reliving the tempestuous, passionate moments of our love, and through this began to find some sort of strength to face my treacherous tomorrows.

In a way, it was like time-travel. All my yesterdays lay at my fingertips, and most important of all were the hours and days and weeks I had lived with Jeanette. Before her, I seemed hardly to have lived at all. A blind automaton dancing to the strings of the State. And now I could forget the world I loathed so much and watch the growth of our love through its successive stages, like some delicate flower turning from bud to blossom.

Gradually, I retraced our life together, and returned again and again to the more profound moments. The first embarrassed evenings together, long nights in the apartment spilling the endless words of art and literature and music and feeling this great and wonderful thing growing between us, forging our two beings into one. And the shy, delicate surrendering of her body to mine, the warm submission to my caresses and her eyes always searching, probing deeply into mine, always trying to see deeper and yet more deeper and never finding an end to what she saw. The days and nights that blended together so that past and future seemed remote and meaningless and only the vibrant now had any meaning.

And now she awaited only the touch of my hand. As she had always done. The touch of my fingertips to bring her to life, the brush of my palm against a small piece of plastic, our bridge to eternity, the way I would find a reason to life.

I even began working again.

After days and weeks of lonely desolation I began to think creatively again. With Jeanette there whenever I needed her there was no longer the dreadful gulf inside of me.

A powerful explosion seemed to erupt from the very centre of my body, generating a tremendous pressure that sought outlets through my eyes and my hands.

I returned to the paints and brushes I had discarded an eternity ago, and fell upon fresh canvas with an intensity that dwarfed my past accomplishments. I covered the walls of the flat with blazing abstracts. The room throbbed with the wild colours I committed to canvas. And always, Jeanette was with me, looking over my shoulder, guiding my hand, offering advice. *As she had always done.*

But I found no release from the intolerable pressures. In desperation I discarded the paints and brushes and turned to fiery metal. Only then did I find satisfaction. The contorted mobiles that took shape under the beam of the laser seemed to gratify my urge. I worked like a man obsessed, turning out one work after another, trying to express in the grotesque convolutions the passion within me. I poured my heart and soul into those inanimate fabrications, and in each shape I seemed to see a scream of protest at the uncaring universe.

One evening, when I was just about to set off for Dream City, Alec came around to see me.

I opened the door and there he was, looking all incongruous in his overcoat and ridiculous little beard.

"Hullo, Harry. Mind if I come in?"

I just stared at him as though he were some creature from another planet. "Oh. Sure . . ."

"I was wondering what had happened to you," he said, as I closed the door. His eyes flitted quickly around the room and his attention was snared by the forest of mobiles down in the studio.

"I see you've been busy."

I didn't answer straight away. I was trying to decide whether I was glad to see him or not. I decided that I wasn't.

My aggressive silence must have upset him. He looked back at the mobiles. "I, ah, heard about Jeanette. A few days ago. I've been meaning to come around but—you know how it is." He seemed to be having difficulty in maintaining his customary aplomb. "I . . . I'm sorry, Harry."

His concern only unsettled me. I didn't *want* his sympathy. I didn't *need* his confounded understanding. I only wanted to be alone.

I walked across the room and down to my working bench. I switched on the laser and resumed work on a half-finished mobile.

Alec came over and stood just outside the jumble of welded sculpture. He ran one finger along a particularly complex convolution, but he was obviously not admiring its cleverness. He seemed to be relieved for some reason.

"I thought you might have . . ." Words tumbled into an untidy heap of good intentions. "I'm glad to see you've been busy, anyway."

I continued to ignore him, concentrating on the narrow beam of the laser. I wanted him to go.

"I wish," he said, impetuously, "I wish I'd found out sooner! I would have . . ."

I swung around. "*Gone to her funeral?*"

All my bitterness channelled into a sentence, gathered by my lips and hurled across the space that separated us.

"Would you like to know what they did to her, those precious parents of hers? They dug a hole in the ground, Alec, a filthy hole in the ground. They nailed her into a wooden box and then they put her in the pit. They sang ridiculous songs and prettied the whole dirty business up with flowers and nice robes. Then they covered her up—*covered her up!* They shovelled the dirt back on top of her and left her there to rot. They were *primitives*, dirty, filthy christians. And they did *that* to her!"

My vision was all blurry. I couldn't see a damn thing. I wiped the sweat from out of the corners of my eyes and stared down stupidly at the back of my hand, because it didn't look like sweat.

Alec looked shocked. And well he might be. "I . . . I didn't know," he said, weakly.

"That her parents were primitives?"

He nodded. "You just, well, you don't associate a girl like Jeanette with savages like that."

That was the beauty of it. You didn't, you *couldn't* associate her with anyone other than herself.

The mobile had become a mess. The laser appeared to have proceeded under its own volition and reduced the fragile spirals to a fused ruin. I swore and switched it off and replaced it in the cradle.

"You've been taking it rather badly, haven't you?"

I looked up, quickly. And noticed that he was staring intently at my hands. I was surprised to see that they were shaking. Angrily, I clenched them together and moved away from the bench.

I stepped up into the living room purely as an excuse to move. The same motivation prompted me to go over to the audio and thread through a tape. Subdued atonalities ventured the sullen silence.

By now Alec seemed to have gauged the depth of my mood. There was something almost apologetic about his manner as he came up the steps.

"I'm sorry for butting in on you."

"That's all right." *At last, he was getting the message !*

"I just thought—"

"I know. Thanks." *But would you please get the hell out of here ?*

"I guess you'd rather be on your own. If you don't want to talk about it. But any time you feel like some company, drop around and . . ."

"Sure, sure." *Why didn't he go ?*

He went over and opened the door and stood there for a moment, his hand resting on the edge. Something seemed to be troubling him. "Harry," he finally got out, "there's one thing . . ."

I just looked at him, wishing he was dead.

"You've been going to Dream City a lot, haven't you ?"

Now, what the hell . . .

"Fred Sands saw you there a few nights back. Coming out of one of the Dreamer booths."

What bloody business was it of his what I did with my spare time ? Who did he think he was—my God-damned godfather ?

"I saw you there myself, last night," he went on, uneasily now, wondering if he had said too much. "I called out to you but you didn't seem to hear me. Then the crowd swallowed you up and I couldn't find you."

"What the hell are you getting at ?" I snapped. "What were you doing there, anyway ?"

"I was looking for you."

"Looking for *me* ?"

Spying on me !

I said, very carefully, "I'd appreciate it, Alec, if you'd mind your own damned business. I don't *need* your help. Understand ?"

A look of desperation leapt into his eyes. "But those recapture places ! I never thought I'd see you . . ."

My fists clenched. "See me *what* ?"

He swallowed. "Look, there's no sense in getting upset. I'm only trying to help you. I've *seen* Dreamer addicts, Harry. I know what happens to their brains. And there's worse than that . . ."

"Alec," I said, "would you please *get out*."

His face froze resignedly. Then he said, "Harry, don't you know what they *do* in those places ?"

I took a step towards him.

"All right," he said, quickly, "I'm going."

He did. And slammed the door behind him.

I stood there staring at the sullen panel for a few moments while my temper simmered down. Then I went back to my work bench and began a fresh mobile.

I was late getting to Dream City that night, and hours after Alec had gone my mind continued to be unsettled. I gave up cursing him for an old fool and tried to forget his intrusion. But even sitting in the 'barber's chair' with the dreamer unit hovering over me I found it far from easy.

In the past weeks my life had managed to congeal into an acceptable pattern. Alec had blundered in upon my world and left a wedge between mine and his. Already I could feel the cold draught of tomorrow breathing in through the gap he had created. I needed Jeanette to help me close it.

And I sat there, with the lights out, and stared into a darkness that was suddenly unfriendly.

Why was my hand hesitating over the plastic button? Why was I having difficulty in establishing that all-important rapport? Why did my Jeanette elude me so?

There was a dreadful feeling of wrongness about what I was doing, as though I was using my memories for a vicarious thrill and turning something that had been personal and meaningful into a cheap dreamer tape that I could run over at will.

And it wasn't like that! It wasn't!

Yet time slipped inexorably by. I had already been in the booth for what seemed like ages, but a time check showed that only ten minutes had elapsed.

Ten precious, irreplaceable minutes.

Desperately I pounced upon a vague image, held it fractionally lest its outlines suddenly disintegrate, and depressed the button under my palm.

And in that fraction of a second the picture wavered and disappeared, and another was thrust suddenly through the heavy curtains by the unseen censor of my actions, a stark, terrible image, liberated at last by the pressures of despair.

And there was nothing I could do to prevent it.

Dusk on Fifty-Third street.

The world humming busily around us. The sidewalk wide and clean and almost deserted. Hovercars and autobuggys moving

discreetly along the overhead freeways. The breeze snatching at my words and buffeting them through the monstrous canyons of the city streets.

"But you don't understand!"

"What is there to understand, Harry?"

Her voice even colder than her eyes. A stranger, a girl I had never met, yet somehow still Jeanette. A girl I had forgotten.

Forgotten.

There was the answer. This, but a culmination of a dozen other quarrels, always within the reach of my eager fingers yet somehow kept hidden behind the censor's curtains, so that a dream might be kept.

In a such a way had I deceived myself.

"I'm sick to death of your complaints," she went on, quietly, remorselessly. "If you're so set against society, why don't you do something about it? You don't have to live on earth. There are colonies on Mars and Venus—why not try them. Or haven't you the guts to make a decision like that? Do you really prefer to sit around and complain about the State?"

"But Jeanette, you said . . ."

"I'm tired of your dreams, Harry. And tired of you too, I guess. Once I believed in them and in you. But I didn't really know you then, did I? I thought you really wanted to do something with your talent and benefit yourself from it. Now I realise that you're content to sit on your backside and accept the dole of automation. You're just another fake, no different than the rest. Only you deceive yourself as well as others."

"That's a lie, and you know it! But how can you carry on like this? You know how I feel about you."

A wistful look crept into those cold, brown eyes. "Yes, that I do. But do you? I'm sorry, Harry, it was great while it lasted, but I just can't understand your sort of love. And I can't accept it. Let's just leave it the way it is and not quarrel."

Emotion was choking me. "You call it great . . .?"

"Please, Harry," she said, "let's not make a scene. Let's not be children. These things happen. We can't predict them, but we can at least accept them and be sensible about them. Believe me, I didn't want this to happen . . ."

Anger all but blinded me, and I wanted to strike her, to smash in the face of the love she had dismissed so lightly, and perhaps I even raised my hand for she took a sudden step backwards, her eyes wide.

I stood there, waving my ineffectual hand aloft.

Her face softened, pityingly. "Oh, Harry," she whispered, "Harry . . ."

"Go damn, you, go !" I cried. Somehow, I couldn't face her any more.

So she left me. Alone on the sidewalk with a sudden great void inside me where none had been before, all reason atrophied, the mere concept of speech clotted in my throat, while all around me tumbled the flimsy walls of my dream, my love, my tower . . . my sandcastle. All my yesterdays disintegrating and showering down upon me like tinkling shards of shattered time.

It was like coming out of a nightmare. And once I had struggled back to *now* there was only the grim spectre of truth to face.

If we had never quarrelled she would never even have thought of moving to the other side of the continent to forget me. The Boeing intercontinental floater would have left without her and she would not have been one of the three hundred passengers who had been twisted, mangled and torn asunder fifteen seconds after take-off from the terminal. She would have been alive and upright and her eyes smiling with the sheer joy of living, her infectious laughter ringing out across the room and her irreplaceable soul mine, mine, *mine*, instead of six feet under a mound of earth.

In a way, I had killed her. I was responsible for her death. Illogical but true.

And, unbidden, there rose from the dark depths of memory the whole hideous spectacle of her internment. So vivid that for a moment I thought I had depressed the button that activated the Dreamer unit.

I twisted in the chair, trying to escape the terrible images thrusting into my mind. And then, when I could stand it no longer, I sought refuge in the past. I grasped at an image, *any* image, and fled the terrifying *now* for the unchanging gardens of the past.

Again and again my hand pumped down on the plastic square, sending a tumultuous surge of images through my head, cleansing out the ogres of conscience and replacing them with the idyllic memories of our love. Snatches of enchanted days, minutes from endless nights, Jeanette laughing beside me her body naked and glowing in the moonlight, her beautiful neck arched back and the bubbling sounds infecting me with their

own merriment. And afterwards, that same exquisite body beneath me and ourselves lost—oh ! so lost—in the ecstatic communion of mind and body, where nothing existed save the tumultuous, surging *now* that must go on forever and it seemed that the very walls would give way and dissolve under the pressure of such passion.

Something was wrong.

My consciousness was abruptly shocked out of rapport, and my recall seemed to thunder on like a wild express train while 'I' was flung aside to watch its passage.

And I was not alone. There was something else, some other *presence* sharing my vision. An insidious intruder trespassing upon my thoughts . . .

An icy horror began to creep over me as I sensed more and more of this incredible intrusion. A bewildered, frightened presence. *Old*. Senile, the shadows of death approaching and snivelling in the dark pools of peversion.

And it was aware of me !

I felt its own shock and horror of discovery, bounced back to me like an india rubber ball. Desperation, panic,

Oh help me, help me, someone . . .

And I understood.

I screamed.

That was the only possible reaction. I opened my mouth and screamed again and again and again. I punched down savagely on the plastic button and continued hammering away at it long after the horrible images had been expunged. I tried to rise out of the chair but the head piece wouldn't budge.

The door was flung open. And still I screamed, tearing great pieces out of the silence.

Hands fumbled at the unit. I felt it lift and swing away against the wall. I looked up and there was the girl standing a little away, her eyes wide and troubled.

"What happened, Mr. Jenssen ? Is something the matter?"

I could say nothing. My whole body was shaking uncontrollably. I buried my head in my hands and moaned over and over, *Jeanette, Jeanette . . .*

"Mr. Jenssen, would you please tell me what is . . ."

Something snapped.

I rose out of the chair and grabbed her savagely around the waist and clamped one hand across her mouth. I hated her so

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much I wanted to tear great pieces of flesh out of her face. I wanted to kill her.

"Listen," I snarled. "These units. They're connected up somewhere else, aren't they? So people can listen in on other people's thoughts? *Aren't they?*"

Her face blanched and her eyes rolled. For a moment I thought she had passed out. I released my hand from her face and pushed her roughly against the wall.

"Tell me," I said, "or so help me—I'll kill you."

Sudden fear gave her voice. "Please," she all but whispered. "*Please.* Yes, you're right. The machines are . . . are connected up to . . . other booths. There must have been a . . . a short circuit or something like that. It has . . . happened once or twice . . . before."

She was desperately afraid.

I stood back. My hands twisted together like impotent beasts. *Oh, Jeanette, Jeanette . . . what have I done?*

All my hatred focused on the girl. "You perverted little slut."

I struck her with the ferocity of a wild beast. The blow sent her spinning towards the door and her scream sliced through the silence of the room.

But I left her.

Dope-pedlars never touch the stuff.

I remembered Alec's words, "*Don't you know what they do in those places?*"

I had nothing but my hands, yet somehow all my fury leapt into them and sought out a target. In blind, insensate fury I attacked the dreamer unit, ripping wires from the headpiece and kicking in the cabinet with my feet, I felt the satisfaction of glass and plastic shattering before me.

I forgot all about the girl. She must have gone for help. A red haze blotted out everything else in my mind. When they finally arrived and dragged me away from the mess I had made my hands were bloody but my anger unbroken.

I put up quite a fight but there were too many of them. They tossed me out into the street and left me there. I knew better than to try getting back in.

I dragged myself up on to the sidewalk and rested against a building. Gradually, the world stopped whirling around me and began to make sense again.

But the horror remained. There it was, dancing before me like some dirty picture, the reality of what I had done. Turned our love into a peep show for perverts.

I stumbled my way through the crowds, trying to find the entrance to the City.

No sense in coming back. Better to rely on the treacherous film of time than debase an honest memory. I would prevail upon her no longer. I had used her in life—however had I convinced myself of the right to use her even in death? Let her rest in peace.

Somehow, I found my way to the main gate, and before me the narrow causeway stretched away towards the mainland. And out there I perceived the bulk of a great monster spread against the stars.

The *other* city.

A menacing cluster of jagged silhouettes crouching above the horizon, riddled through with a million bright eyes and staring coldly towards me. Omnipotent, implacable, uncaring; a sullen, intractable monster.

The Enemy.

No !

Not there !

A small voice. Was it mine ?

Within my body, buried like some soft, pale jelly, lay the seat of awareness, a consciousness, a personality, the essential 'I.'

There !

The true Adversary.

Oh Jeanette, Jeanette. Where are you now ?

A cold wind blew across from the mainland. I buried my face in my hands and let it cool the sweat on my forehead.

It would be some time before I would begin to think about tomorrow.

—Lee Harding

'Gone Away—No known address'

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The Wall Game

Easter Convention Report by John Carnell

This year's annual British science fiction convention was held virtually within the shadow of the Great Wall of China, for, although "The Bull Hotel," Peterborough, is a far cry from Lan-chow, the descendants of that hardy race of builders and scientists did a roaring trade in their two Chinese restaurants nearly. In fact, at times, there was more of the Convention going on in Keong's 'Great Wall' restaurant than there was in the hotel lounges and main hall. "Gone for a nosh-up" was the general reply whenever a celebrity was missing and required for a programme item.

Despite the chow mein expressions on many of the delegates faces by the end of the fourth day, there was little doubt in anyone's mind that this year's get-together had been a highly successful and interesting one, not the least feature being that these annual affairs are developing more and more into a family gathering—there were some fifteen children present, ranging from a few months to twelve years old, who had a whale of a time in and out of the potted palms and the local circus while their parents were participating in more serious items. In fact, this may well go down in 'history' as the Kiddie-Kon.

On the professional side were such well-known authors as Brian W. Aldiss, John Brunner, Michael Moorcock, Ted Tubb, Kenneth Bulmer, Dan Morgan, John Kippax and two American refugees from Europe, Harry Harrison and Mack Reynolds, headed by Guest of Honour Bruce Montgomery (Edmund Crispin) who was supported from time to time by his friend Kingsley Amis. In fact, most of the professionals were also seen to be supporting each other throughout the non-official proceedings.

On the non-professional side were some 150 delegates of all three sexes, headed by such well-known personalities as Kenneth Slater (who brought his bookshop along for company),

Norman Shorrock of the Liverpool group (who brought a wine cellar), Ron (Eyes and Ears of the Fan World) Bennett, official press agent (who brought a steam iron) and some dozen other Committee members who managed to keep everything moving more or less on time—no mean feat, Conventions being what they are.

On the official programme side, chaired by Brian Aldiss (who brought a 'Hothouse' along with him—her name escapes me) were items ranging from talks, discussions and open forums, slide shows and official business, to a film show and fancy dress party (concerning which, readers will doubtless have read one or another of the biased, prejudiced, incompetent, irrelevant and immaterial reports published by the 'inspired' press, that is, with the single exception of Geoff Doherty's full report in the *Manchester Guardian*).

One of the most outstanding GoH speeches I have ever heard from *anyone* accorded that signal honour was Bruce Montgomery's "Science Fiction : Is It Significant?" in which he pointed out a number of trends in the genre which could ultimately have a bad effect on it as a whole. Much of his talk will, I hope, be appearing soon as a Guest Editorial in *New Worlds*. Running a close second to Mr. Montgomery's talk was one by Harry (Death World) Harrison on "Sex and Censorship in S-F" which started off as a rather mildly humorous satire designed to raise some laughs but quickly developed into a fierce general discussion which showed that many people have very definite objections to the type of sick sex writing which is beginning to appear in some novels and short stories.

Still in the talks and discussions department, Geoff (Aspects of Science Fiction) Doherty gave an interesting one on "New Lamps For Old" which was followed by an ever-changing professional panel who attempted individually to answer any questions thrown at them from the floor—and believe me, by this time (late Sunday afternoon) there were plenty of delegates on the floor, in more ways than one. Subjects ranged from how to write science fiction to how writers work, from European science fiction to news of Russia's first s-f magazine shortly to be published (in which, inevitably, Arthur C. Clarke appears—in prose form, of course), to a variety of light and serious questions, all of which took up sufficient time until the bar opened again.

This year's film show—a traditional item at all conventions, whether here or in America—presented two outstanding movies in the genre. That hardy perennial "Metropolis," which ran the full version few delegates had seen previously, and Jean Cocteau's brilliant French fantasy "Orphee," which few had seen. Based on the Greek legend of Orpheus but placed in a modern French setting, the Underworld scenes were magnificently filmed, the mouldering settings making a macabre backdrop for the bloodshot eyes of the viewers who probably saw the black and white movie through a blood-red haze, or in Michael Moorcock's vision, as a blood-red game.

On the unofficial side, delegates ran the gamut of the usual things they do at these marathons, including wine tasting, and a poker game which went on for three days and nights, at which author Ted Tubb apparently won all his convention expenses and celebrated by writing the opening saga of "The Birth of Elric" for Michael Moorcock. This opus was added to by at least five other writers and eventually bought by publisher Tom Boardman Jr. for the nominal sum of one penny. Doubtless the MS will be auctioned off at next year's Convention, which will again be held at Peterborough over the Easter weekend. You have been warned far enough in advance !

Sympathy was generally expressed for the TV news-reel cameraman who tried to film celebrities at a room party. As fast as he got his lights and equipment set up and ready to shoot, everyone put on dark glasses and departed to another room. After four hours of playing tag, he finally trapped them in a cul-de-sac, by which time he was no longer capable of seeing his victims.

As the convention closed in the usual dismal manner on the final day, with the staff wearily wending their working hours through the jaundiced premises, 150 odd (very odd at times) people wended their way tiredly homeward with the promise of a return visit in 1964.

John Carnell



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