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Vol. 21 No. 61

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In this second long novelette concerning Elric's place in the random scheme of events wherein Order and Chaos are fighting for supremacy of the Earth, the part being played by the mystic rune swords is of paramount importance.

Black Sword's Brothers

by **MICHAEL MOORCOCK**

o n e

One day there came a gathering of kings, captains, and warlords to the peaceful city of Karlaak in Ilmiora by the Weeping Waste.

They did not come in great pomp or with grandiose gestures. They came grim-faced and hurriedly to answer the summons of Elric, last lord of Melnibone, who dwelt in Karlaak with his lately-rescued wife Zarozinia. And they gathered in a great chamber which had once been used by the old rulers of Karlaak for the planning of wars. To this same purpose Elric now put it.

Illuminated by flaring torches, a great coloured map of the world was spread behind the dais on which Elric stood. It showed the three major continents of the East, West and South. That of the West, comprising Jharkor, Dharijor, Shazar, Tarkesh, Myyrrhn and the Isle of Pan Tang, was shaded black, for all these lands were now the conquered Empire of the Pan Tang-Dharijor alliance which threatened the security of the assembled nobles.

Some of the men who stood armoured before Elric were exiles from the conquered lands—but there were few. Few also

were Elric's Immrryrian kinsmen who had fought at the Battle of Sequa and had been defeated with the massed army that had sought to resist the combined might of the evil alliance. At the head of the eldritch Immrryrians stood Dyvim Slorm, Elric's cousin. At his belt, encased in a sturdy scabbard, was the runesword *Mournblade*, twin to the one Elric wore.

Here also was Montan, Lord of Lorrmyr, standing with fellow rulers from the Southlands—Jerned of Filkhor, Hozel of Argimiliar, and Kolthak of Pikarayd, adorned in painted iron, velvet, silk and wool.

The Sealords from the Isle of the Purple Towns were less gaudily clad with helms and breastplates of plain bronze, jerkins, breeks and boots of unstained leather and great broadswords at their hips. Their faces were all but hidden by their long shaggy hair and thick, curling beards.

All these, kings and sealords alike, were inclined to stare at Elric suspiciously, since years before he had led their royal predecessors on a raid of Imrryr which had proved disastrous—though it had left many thrones clear for those now sat on them.

In another group stood the nobles of that part of the Eastern continent lying to the west of the Sighing Desert and the Weeping Waste. Beyond these two barren stretches of land were the kingdoms of Eshmir, Changshai and Okara, but there was no contact between Elric's part of the world and theirs—save for the small, red-headed man beside him—his friend Moonglum of Elwher, an Eastern adventurer.

The Regent of Vilmir, uncle of the ten-month-old king, headed this last group made up of senators from the city-states comprising Ilmiora, a red-clothed archer named Rackhir representing the independent city of Tanelorn, and various Merchant Princes from towns coming under the indirect rule of Vilmir as protectorates.

A mighty gathering, representing the massed power of the world.

But would even this be sufficient, Elric wondered, to wipe out the growing menace from the Westlands?

His white albino's face was stern, his red eyes troubled as he addressed the men he had caused to come here.

"As you know, my lords, the threat of Pan Tang and Dharijor is not likely to remain confined to the Western continent for much longer. Though barely two months have passed since their victory was achieved, they are already

marshalling a great fleet aimed at crushing the power of those kings, dependent, largely, on their ships for livelihood and defence."

He glanced at the Sealords of the Purple Towns and the kings of the Southern continent.

"We of the East, it seems, are not regarded as so much of a danger to their immediate plans and, if we did not unite now, they would have a greater chance of success by conquering first the Southern sea-power and then the scattered cities of the East. We must form an alliance which can match their strength."

"How do you know this is their plan, Elric?"

The voice was that of Hozel of Argimiliar, a proud-faced man inclined it was said to fits of insanity, the inbred offspring of a dozen incestuous unions.

"Spies, refugees—and supernatural sources. They have all reported it."

"Even without these reports, we could be sure that this is, indeed, their plan," growled Kargan Sharpeyes, spokesman for the Sealords. He looked directly at Hozel with something akin to contempt. "And Jagreen Lern of Pan Tang might also seek allies amongst the Southerners. There are some who would rather capitulate to a foreign conqueror than lose their soft lives and easily-earned treasure."

Hozel smiled coldly at Kargan. "There are some, too, whose animal suspicions might cause them to make no move against the Theocrat until it was too late."

Elric said hastily, aware of age-old bitternesses between the hardy Sealords and their softer neighbours: "But worst of all they would be best aided by internal feuds in our ranks, brothers. Hozel—take it for granted that I speak truly and that my information is exact."

Montan, Lord of Lormyr, his face, beard and hair all shaded grey, said haughtily: "You of the North and East are weak. We of the South are strong. Why should we lend you our ships to defend your coasts? I do not agree with your logic, Elric. It will not be the first time it has led good men astray—to their deaths!"

"I thought we had agreed to bury old disputes!" Elric said, close to anger, for the guilt of what he had done was still in him.

"Aye," nodded Kargan. "A man who can't forget the past is a man who cannot plan for the future. I say Elric's logic is good!"

"You traders were always too reckless with your ships and too gullible when you heard a smooth-tongue. That's why you now envy our riches." Young Jerned of Filkhor smiled in his thin beard, his eyes on the floor.

Kargan fumed. "Too honest, perhaps, is the word you should have used, Southerner! Belatedly our forefathers learned how the fat Southlands were cheating them. Their forefathers raided your coasts, remember? Maybe we should have continued their practice! Instead, we settled, traded—and your bellies swelled from the profits of our sweat! Gods! I'd not trust the word of a Southern—"

Elric leaned forward to interrupt, but was interrupted himself by Hozel who said impatiently: "The fact in this. The Theocrat is more likely to concentrate his first attacks on the East. For these reasons: The Eastlands are weak. The Eastlands are poorly defended. The Eastlands are closer to his shores and therefore more accessible. Why should he risk his recently-united strength on the stronger Southlands, or risk a more hazardous sea-crossing?"

"Because," Elric said levelly, "his ships will be magic-aided and distance will not count. Because the South is richer and will supply him with metals, food—"

"Ships and men!" spat Kargan.

"So! You think we already plan treachery!" Hozel glanced first at Elric and then at Kargan. "Then why summon us here in the first place?"

"I did not say that," Elric said hastily. "Kargan spoke his own thoughts, not mine. Calm yourselves—we *must* be united—or perish before superior armies and supernatural might!"

"Oh, no!" Hozel turned to the other Southern monarchs. "What say you, my peers? Shall we lend them our ships and warriors to protect their shores as well as ours?"

"Not when they are so ungratefully spurned," Jerned murmured. "Let Jagreen Lern expend his energies upon them. When he looks towards the South he will be weakened, and we shall be ready for him!"

"You are fools!" Elric cried urgently. "Stand with us or we'll all perish! The Lords of Chaos are behind the Theocrat. If he succeeds in his ambitions it will mean more than conquest by a human schemer—it will mean that we shall all be subjected to the horror of total anarchy, on the Earth and above it. The human race is threatened!"

Hozel stared hard at Elric and smiled. "Then let the human race protect itself and not fight under an unhuman leader. 'Tis well-known that the men of Melnibone are not true men at all."

"Be that as it may," Elric lowered his head and lifted a thin, white hand to point at Hozel. The king shivered and held his ground with obvious effort. "But I know more than that, Hozel of Argimiliar. I know that the men of the Young Kingdoms are only the gods' first mouldings—shadow-things who precede the race of real men, even as we preceded you. And I know more! I know that if we do not vanquish both Jagreen Lern and his supernatural allies, then men will be swept from the boiling face of a maddened planet, their destiny unfulfilled!"

Hozel swallowed and spoke, his voice trembling.

"I've seen your muttering kind in the market places, Elric. Men who prophecy all kinds of dooms that never take place—mad-eyed men such as you. But we do not let them live in Argimiliar. We fry them slowly, finger by finger, inch by inch until they admit their omens are fallacious! Perhaps we'll have that opportunity, yet!"

He swung about and half-ran from the hall. For a moment the other Southern Monarchs stood staring irresolutely after him.

Elric said urgently: "Heed him not, my lords. I swear on my life that my words are true!"

Jerned said softly, half to himself: "That could mean little. There are rumours you're immortal."

Moonglum came close to his friend and whispered: "They are unconvinced, Elric. 'Tis plain they're not our men."

Elric nodded. To the Southern nobles he said: "Know this: Though you foolishly reject my offer of an alliance, the day will come when you will regret your decision. I have been insulted in my own palace, my friends have been insulted and I curse you for the upstart fools you are. But when the time comes for you to learn the error of this decision I swear that we shall aid you, if it is in our power. Now go!"

Disconcerted, the Southerners straggled from the hall in silence.

Elric turned to Kargan Sharpeyes. "What have you decided, Sealord?"

"We stand with you," Kargan said simply. "My brother Smiorgan Baldhead always spoke well of you and I remember his words rather than the rumours which followed his death under your leadership. Moreover," he smiled broadly, "it is in our nature to believe that whatever a Southern weakling decides must therefore be wrong. You have the Purple Towns as allies—and our ships, though fewer than the combined fleets of the south, are smooth-sailing fighting ships and well-equipped for war."

"I must warn you that we stand little chance without Southern aid," Elric said gravely.

"I'm doubtful if they'd have been more than an encumbrance with their guile and squabblings," Kargon replied. "Besides—have you no sorcery to help us in this?"

"I plan to seek some tomorrow," Elric told him. "Moon-glum and myself will be leaving my cousin Dyvim Slorm in charge here while we go to Sorcerers' Isle, beyond Melnibone. There, among the hermit practitioners of the White Arts, I might find means of contacting the Lords of Law. I, as you know, am half-sworn to Chaos, though I fight it, and am finding increasingly that my own Demon-Gods are somewhat loathe to aid me these days. At present, the White Lords are weak, beaten back, just as we are on Earth, by the increasing power of the Dark Ones. It is hard to contact them. The hermits can likely help me."

Kargan nodded. "'Twould be a relief to us of the Purple Towns to know that we were not too strongly leagued with dark spirits, I must admit."

Elric frowned. "I agree, of course. But our position is so weak that we must accept *any* help—be it black or white. I presume that there is dispute among the Masters of Chaos as to how far they should go—that is why some of my own help still comes from Chaos. This blade that hangs at my side, and the twin which Dyvim Slorm bears, are both evil. Yet they were forged by creatures of Chaos to bring an end, on Earth at least, to the Masters' rule here. Just as my blood-loyalties are divided, so are the swords' loyalties. We have no supernatural allies we can wholly rely upon."

"I feel for you," Kargan said gruffly, and it was obvious that he did. No man could envy Elric's position or Elric's destiny.

Orgon, Kargan's cousin-in-law, said bluntly: "We'll to bed now. Has your kinsman your full confidence?"

Elric glanced at Dyvim Storm and smiled. "My full confidence—he knows as much as I about this business. He shall speak for me since he knows my basic plans."

"Very well. We'll confer with him tomorrow and, if we do not see you before you leave, do well for us on Sorcerers' Isle."

The Sealords left.

Now, for the first time, the Regent of Vilmir spoke. His voice was clear and cool. "We, too, have confidence in you and your kinsman, Elric. Already we know you both for clever warriors and cunning planners. Vilmir has good cause to know it from your exploits in Bakshaan and elsewhere throughout our territories. We, I feel, have the good sense to bury old scores." He turned to the Merchant Princes for confirmation and they nodded their agreement.

"Good," Elric said. He addressed the gaunt-faced archer, Rackhir, a hero whose legend almost equalled his own.

"You come as a spokesman of Tanelorn, Rackhir. I have heard that this will not be the first time you have fought the Lords of Chaos."

"True," Rackhir nodded. "Thanks to supernatural aid we destroyed the threat to our peaceful city. I have already sought that aid again—but Chaos had caused the gateways to the Grey Lords to be closed to mortals. We can offer you only our warriors' loyalty."

"We shall be grateful for that." Elric paced the dais. There was no need to ask the senators of Karlaak and the other cities of Ilmiora, for they had agreed to support him, come what may, long before the other rulers were called.

The same was true of the bleak-faced band who made up the refugees from the West, headed by Viri-Sek, the winged youth from Myyrrhn, last of his line since all the other members of the ruling family had been slain by Jagreen Lern's minions.

Just beyond the walls of Karlaak was a sea of tents and pavilions over which the banners of many nations waved sluggishly in the hot, moist wind. At this moment, Elric knew, the proud lords of the South were uprooting their standards and packing their tents, not looking at the war-battered warriors of Shazar, Jharkor and Tarkesh who stared at them in puzzlement. Sight of those dull-eyed veterans should have decided the Southern nobles to ally themselves with the East, but evidently it had not.

Elric sighed and turned his back on the others to contemplate the great map of the world with its shaded dark areas.

"Now only a quarter is black," he said softly to Moonglum. "But the dark tide spreads farther and faster and soon we may all be engulfed."

"We'll dam the flow—or try to—when it comes," Moonglum said with attempted jauntiness. "But meanwhile your wife would spend some time with you before we leave. Let's both to bed and trust our dreams are light!"

t w o

Two nights later they stood on the quayside in the city of Jadmar while a cold wind sliced its way inland.

"There she is," Elric said, pointing down at the small boat rocking and bumping in the water below.

"A small craft," Moonglum said dubiously. "She scarcely looks sea-worthy."

"She'll stay afloat longer than a larger vessel in a heavy storm," Elric clambered down the iron steps. "Also," he added, as Moonglum put a cautious foot on the rung above him, "she'll be less noticeable and won't draw the attention of any enemy vessels which might be scouting in these waters."

He jumped and the boat rocked crazily. He leaned over, grasped a rung and steadied the boat so that Moonglum could climb aboard.

The cocky little Eastlander pushed a hand through his shock of red hair and stared up at the troubled sky.

"Bad weather for this time of year," he noted. "It's hard to understand. All the way from Karlaak we've had every sort of weather, freak snow-storms, thunder-storms, hail and winds as hot as a furnace blast. Those rumours were disturbing, too—a rain of blood in Bakshaan, balls of fiery metal falling in the West of Vilmir, unprecedented earthquakes in Jadmar a few hours before we arrived. It seems nature has gone insane."

"Not far from the truth," Elric said grimly, untying the mooring line. "Lift the sail will you, and tack into the wind?"

"What do you mean?" Moonglum began to loosen the sail. It billowed into his face and his voice was muffled. "Jagreen Lern's hordes haven't reached this part of the world yet."

"They haven't needed to. I told you the forces of nature were being disrupted by Chaos. We have only experienced the

backwash of what is going on in the West. If you think these weather conditions are peculiar, you would be horrified by the effect which Chaos has on those parts of the world where its rule is almost total !”

“ I wonder if you haven't taken on too much in this fight.” Moonglum adjusted the sail and it filled to send the little boat scudding between the two long harbour walls towards the open sea.

As they passed the beacons, guttering in the cold wind, Elric gripped the tiller tighter, taking a south-easterly course past the Vilmirian peninsula. Overhead the stars were sometimes obscured by the tattered shreds of clouds streaming before the cold, unnatural blast of the wind. Spray splashed in his face, stinging it in a thousand places, but he ignored it. He had not answered Moonglum, for he also had doubts about his ability to save the world from Chaos.

Moonglum had learned to judge his friend's moods. For some years before they had travelled the world together and had learned to respect one another. Lately, since Elric had near-permanent residence in his wife's city of Karlaak, Moonglum had continued to travel and had been in command of a small mercenary army patrolling the Southern marches of Pikarayd, driving back the barbarians inhabiting the hinterland of that country. He had immediately relinquished this command when Elric's news reached him and now, as the tiny ship bore them towards a hazy and peril-fraught destiny, savoured the familiar mixture of excitement and perturbation which he had felt a dozen times before when their escapades had led them into conflict with the unknown supernatural forces so closely linked with Elric's destiny. He had come to accept as a fact that his destiny was bound to Elric's and felt, in the deepest places of his being, that when the time came they would both die together in some mighty adventure.

Was this death imminent ? he wondered, as he concentrated on the sail and shivered in the blasting wind. Not yet, perhaps, but he felt, fatalistically, that it was not far away, for the time was looming when the only deeds of men would be dark, desperate and great and even these might not serve to form a bastion against the inrush of the creatures of Chaos.

Elric, himself, contemplated nothing, kept his mind clear and relaxed as much as he could. His quest for the aid of the White

Lords was one which could well prove fruitless, but he chose not to dwell on this until he knew for certain whether their help could be invoked or not.

Dawn came swimming over the horizon, showing a heaving waste of grey water with no land in sight. The wind had dropped and the air was warmer. Banks of purple cloud bearing veins of saffron and scarlet, poured into the sky line the smoke of some monstrous pyre. Soon they were sweating beneath a moody sun and the wind had dropped so that the sail hardly moved and yet, at the same time, the sea began to heave as if lashed by a storm.

The sea was moving like a living entity thrashing in nightmare-filled sleep. Moonglum glanced at Elric from where he lay sprawled in the prow of the boat. Elric returned the gaze, shaking his head and releasing his half-conscious grip of the tiller. It was useless to attempt steering the boat in conditions like these. The boat was being swept about by the wild waves, yet no water seemed to enter it, no spray wet them. Everything had become unreal, dream-like and for a while Elric felt that even if he had wished to speak he would not have been able to do so.

Then, in the distance at first, they heard a low droning which grew to a whining shriek and suddenly the boat was sent half-flying over the rolling waves and driven down into a trench. Above them the blue and silver water seemed for a moment to be a wall of metal—and then it came crashing down towards them.

His mood broken, Elric clung to the tiller and yelled : "Hang on to the boat, Moonglum ! Hang on or you're lost !"

Tepid water groaned down and they were flattened beneath it as if swatted by a gigantic palm. The boat dropped deeper and deeper until it seemed they would be crushed on the bottom by the surging blow. Then they were flung upwards again and down and, as he glimpsed the boiling surface, Elric saw three mountains pushing themselves upwards, gouting flame and lava. The boat wallowed, half-full of water and they set to frantically baling it out as the boat was swirled back and forth, being driven nearer and nearer to the new-formed volcanoes.

Elric dropped his baling pan and flung his weight against the tiller, forcing the boat away from the mountains of fire. It responded sluggishly, but began to drift in the opposite direction.

Elric saw Moonglum, pale-faced, attempting to shake out the sodden sail. He glanced upwards to try and get some kind of bearing, but the sun seemed to have swollen and broken so that he saw a million fragments of flame.

“*This* is the work of Chaos, Moonglum,” he shouted, “and only a taste, I fancy, of what it can become!”

“They must know of our plan and seek to stop us!” Moonglum swept sweat from his eyes with the back of his hand.

“Perhaps—but I think not.” Now he looked up again and the sun seemed almost normal. He took a bearing and found they were many miles off their original course.

He had planned to sail to the South of Melnibone, Isle of the Dragon, and avoid the Dragon Sea lying to the North, for it was well-known that the last great sea-monsters still roamed this stretch. But now it was obvious that they were, in fact, north of Melnibone and being driven further north all the time—towards Pan Tang!

There was no chance of heading for Melnibone itself—he wondered if the Isle of the Dragon had even survived the monstrous upheavals. He would have to make straight for Sorcerers’ Isle if he could.

The ocean was calmer now, but the water had almost reached boiling point so that every drop that fell on his skin seemed to scald him. Bubbles formed on the surface and it was as if they sailed in a gigantic witch’s cauldron. Dead fish and half-reptilian forms drifted about, as thick as sea-weed, threatening to clog the boat’s passage. But the wind, though strong, had begun to blow in one direction and Moonglum grinned in relief as it filled the sail.

Slowly, through the death-thick waters, they managed to steer a north-westerly course towards Sorcerers’ Isle as clouds of steam formed on the ocean and obscured their view.

Hours later they had left the heated waters behind and were sailing beneath clear skies on a calm sea. They allowed themselves to doze. In less than a day they would reach Sorcerers’ Isle, but now they were overcome by the reaction to their experience and wondered, dazedly, how they had lived through the awful storm.

Elric jerked his eyes open with a shock. He was certain he had not slept long, yet the sky was dark and a cold drizzle was falling. As the drops touched his head and face, they oozed down it like viscous jelly. Some of it entered his mouth and he hastily spat out the bitter-tasting stuff.

“Moonglum,” he called through the gloom, “what’s the hour, do you know?”

The Eastlander’s sleep-heavy voice answered dazedly. “I know not. I’d swear it is not night already!”

Elric gave the tiller a tentative push—and the boat did not respond. He looked over the side and it seemed they were sailing through the sky itself. A dully luminous gas seemed to swirl about the hull, but he could see no water.

He shuddered. Had they left the confines of the Earth? Were they sailing through some frightful, supernatural sea?

He cursed himself for sleeping, feeling helpless—more helpless than when he had fought the storm. The heavy, gelatinous rain beat down strongly and he pulled the hood of his cloak over his white hair. From his belt pouch he took flint and tinder and the tiny light was just sufficient to show him Moonglum’s half-mad eyes. The little Eastlander’s face was taut with fear. Elric had never seen such fear on his friend’s face and knew that with a little less self-control his own face would assume a similar expression.

“Our time has ended,” Moonglum trembled, “I fear that we’re dead, at last, Elric.”

“Don’t prattle such emptiness, Moonglum. I have heard of no after-life such as this.” But secretly, Elric wondered if Moonglum’s words were true.

The ship seemed to be moving rapidly through the gaseous sea, being driven or drawn to some unknown destination. Yet Elric could swear that the Masters of Chaos had no knowledge of his boat.

Faster and faster the little craft moved and then, with relief, they heard the familiar splash of water about its keel and it was surging through the salt-sea again. For a short while longer the viscous rain continued to fall and then even that was past.

Moonglum sighed as the blackness slowly gave way to light and they saw again a normal ocean about them.

“What was it, then?” he ventured, finally.

“Another manifestation of ruptured nature,” Elric said with attempted calmness. “Some warp in the barrier between the realm of men and the realm of Chaos, perhaps? Don’t question our luck in surviving it. We are again off-course and,” he pointed to the horizon, “a natural storm seems to be brewing yonder.”

“A natural storm I can accept, no matter how dangerous,” the Eastlander murmured and made swift preparations, furling the sail as the wind increased and the sea churned.

In a way, Elric welcomed the storm when it finally struck them. At least it obeyed natural laws and could be fought by natural means and experience of similar storms in the past.

The rain refreshed their faces, the wind swept through their hair and they fought the storm with fierce enjoyment, the plucky boat riding the waves.

But, in spite of this, they were being driven further and further north-east—towards the conquered coasts of Shazar, almost in the opposite direction to their goal.

The healthy storm raged on until all thoughts of destiny and supernatural danger were driven from their minds and their muscles ached and they gasped with the shock of cold waves on their drenched bodies.

The boat reeled and rocked, their hands were sore from the tightness of their grip on wood and rope, but it was as if Fate had singled them out to live, or perhaps for a death that would be less clean, for they continued to ride the heaving waters.

Then, with a shock, Elric saw rocks rearing and Moonglum shouted in recognition :

“The Serpent’s Teeth !”

The Serpent’s Teeth lay close to Shazar and were one of the most feared hazards of the shore-hugging traders of the West. Elric and Moonglum had seen them before, from a distance, but now the storm was driving them nearer and nearer, and though they struggled to keep the boat away, they seemed bound to be smashed to their deaths on the jagged rocks.

A wave surged under the boat, lifted them and bore them down. Elric clung to the side of the boat and thought he heard Moonglum’s wild shout above the noise of the storm before they were flung towards the Serpent’s Teeth.

“*Farewell !*”

And then there was the terrifying sound of smashing timbers, the feel of sharp rock lacerating his rolling body and he was beneath the waves fighting his way to the surface to gasp in a lungful of air before another wave tossed him and grazed his arm against the rocks.

Desperately, encumbered by the life-giving runesword at his belt, he attempted to swim for the looming cliffs of Shazar, conscious that even if he lived he had arrived on enemy soil and his chances of reaching the White Lords were now almost non-existent.

t h r e e

Elric lay exhausted on the cold shingle listening to the musical sound that the tide made as it drew back over the stones.

Another sound joined that of the surf, and he recognised it as the crunch of boots. Someone was coming towards him. In Shazar it could only be an enemy or potential enemy. He rolled over and began scrambling to his feet, drawing the last reserves from his worn-out body. His right hand had half-drawn *Stormbringer* from its scabbard before he realised that it was Moonglum, bent with weariness, standing grinning before him.

"Thank the gods, you live!" Moonglum lowered himself to the shingle and leaned back with his arms supporting him, regarding the now calm sea and the towering Serpent's Teeth in the distance.

"Aye, we live," Elric said, squatting down moodily, "but for how long in this ruined land I cannot guess. Somewhere, perhaps, we can find a ship—but it will mean seeking a town or city and we're a marked pair, easily recognised by our physical appearance."

Moonglum shook his head and laughed lightly. "You're still the gloomy one, friend. Be thankful for your life, say I."

"Small mercies are all but useless in this conflict," Elric said. "Rest, now, Moonglum while I watch, then you can take my place. There was no time to lose when we began this venture and now we've lost days."

Moonglum gave no argument, but allowed himself immediately to sleep and when he awoke, much refreshed though aching horribly, Elric slept until the moon was high and shining brightly in a clear sky.

They trudged through the night, the sparse grass of the coast region giving way to wet, blackened ground. It was as if a holocaust had raged over the countryside, followed by a rain-storm which had left behind it a marsh of ashes. Remembering the grassy plains of this part of Shazar, Elric was horrified, unable to tell whether men or the creatures of Chaos had caused such wanton ruin.

Noon was approaching with a hint of weird disturbances in the bright-clowded sky, when they saw a long line of people approaching them. They flattened themselves behind a small

rise and peered cautiously over it as the party drew nearer. These were no enemy soldiers, but gaunt women and starvling children, men who staggered in rags and a few battered riders, obviously the remnants of some defeated band of partisans who had held out against Pan Tang.

“I think we’ll find friends, of sorts, here,” Elric muttered thankfully, “and perhaps some information which will help us.”

They arose and walked towards the wretched herd. The riders quickly grouped around the civilians and drew their weapons, but before any challenges could be given, someone cried from the enclosed ranks :

“Elric of Melnibone ! Elric—have you returned with news of rescue ?”

Elric didn’t recognise the voice, but he knew his face was legend with its dead white skin and glowing red eyes.

“I’m seeking rescue myself, friends,” he said with poorly-assumed cheerfulness. “We were shipwrecked on your coasts while on a journey which we hoped would help us lift the yoke of Jagreen Lern from off the Westlands, but unless we find another ship our chances are scant.”

“Which way did you sail, Elric?” said the unseen spokesman.

“We sailed to Sorcerers’ Isle in the south-west, there to invoke the aid, if we could, of the White Lords,” Moonglum replied.

“Then you were going in the wrong direction !”

Elric straightened his back and tried to peer into the throng.

“Who are you to tell us that ?”

There was a disturbance in the crowd and a bent, middle-aged man leaning on a staff with long curling moustachios adorning his fair-skinned face broke from the ranks and stood there. The riders drew back their horses so that Elric could see him properly.

“I am named Ohada the Seer, once famous in Dioperda as a predictor of events. But Dioperda was razed in the sack of Shazar and I was lucky enough to escape with these few people who are all from Dioperda, one of the last cities to fall before Pan Tang’s sorcerous might. I have a message of great import for you, Elric. It is for your ears only and I received it from one you know—one who may help you and, indirectly, us.”

“You have piqued my curiosity and raised my hopes,” Elric beckoned with his hand. “Come, seer, tell me your news and let’s all trust it is as good as you hint.”

Moonglum took a step back as the seer approached. Both he and the Dioperdans watched with curiosity as Ohada whispered to Elric.

Elric himself had to strain to catch the words.

"I bear a message from a being called Sepiriz. He says that what you have failed to do, he has done, but there is something which you must do that he cannot. He says to go to the carved city and there he will enlighten you further."

"Sepiriz! How did he contact you?"

"I am clairvoyant. He came to me in a dream."

"Your words could be treacherous, designed to lead me into Jagreen Lern's hands."

"Sepiriz added one thing to me—he told me that we should meet on this very spot. Could Jagreen Lern know that?"

"Unlikely—but, by the same reckoning, could *anyone* know that?"

Then Elric remembered that Sepiriz and his brothers, who had helped him earlier, were the servitors of Fate. And Fate had already played an important part in this. He nodded. "Thanks, seer."

Then he shouted to the riders.

"We need a pair of horses—the best you have!"

"Our horses are valuable to us," grumbled a knight in torn armour, "they are all we have."

"My companion and I need to move swiftly if we are to save your land. Come, risk a pair of horses against the possibility of vengeance on your conquerors."

The knight dismounted and so did the man beside him. They led their steeds up to Elric and Moonglum.

"Use them well, Elric."

Elric took the reins and swung himself into the saddle. "I will," said he. "What are your plans now?"

"We'll fight on as best we can."

"Would it not be wiser to hide in the mountains or the Marshes of the Mist?"

"If you had witnessed the depravity and terror of Jagreen Lern's filthy rule, you would not make such an enquiry," the knight said hollowly. "Though we cannot hope to win against a man whose servants can command the very earth to heave like the ocean, pull down floods of salt water from the sky and send green clouds scudding down to destroy helpless children in nameless ways, we shall take what vengeance we can! This

part of the continent is calm beside what is going on elsewhere. Dreadful geological changes are taking place everywhere. You would not recognise a hill or forest ten miles north. And those that you passed one day might well have changed or disappeared on the next."

"We have witnessed something of the like on our sea journey," Elric nodded. "I wish you a long life of revenge, friend. I myself have scores to settle with Jagreen Lern and his accomplice."

"His accomplice? You mean King Sarosto of Dharijor?" A thin smile crossed the knight's haggard face. "You'll take no vengeance on Sarosto—he was assassinated soon after our forces were vanquished at the battle of Sequa. Though nothing was proved, it is common knowledge that he was killed at the orders of the Theocrat who now rules the entire continent." The knight sighed. "And who can stand for long against such captains as Jagreen Lern commands?"

"Who are these captains?"

"Why, he has summoned all the Dukes of Hell to him. Whether they will accept his mastery much longer, I do not know. It is our belief that Jagreen Lern will be the next to die—and Hell, unchecked, will rule in his place!"

"I hope not," Elric said softly, "for I won't be cheated of my vengeance."

The knight shrugged. "With the Dukes of Hell as his allies, Jagreen Lern will soon rule the world."

"Let us hope I can find a means of disposing of that dark aristocracy, and keeping my vow to slay Jagreen Lern," Elric said and, with a wave of thanks to the seer and the two knights, turned his horse towards the mountains of Jharkor, Moonglum in his wake.

They got little rest on their perilous ride to the mountain home of Sepiriz for, as the knight had told them, the ground itself seemed alive and anarchy ruled everywhere.

Afterwards, Elric remembered little save a feeling of utter horror and the noise of unholy screechings in his ear, dark colours, gold, reds, blue, black and the flaring orange that was everywhere, the sign of Chaos on Earth.

But on the way he managed to inform Moonglum of his previous encounter with Sepiriz and told him something of what the Lord of Nihrain had mentioned of his destiny, how the last of the royal line of old Melnibone, Elric and Dyvim Storm,

bore blades of Chaos-make which were destined to destroy the rule of Chaos on the planet and prepare the world for its death and rebirth as an era where Law would dominate.

Moonglum had not replied, had, instead, resolved to stand with Elric when the final day came whether they won or lost the war against Chaos.

In the mountain regions close to Nihrain they saw evidence that the rule of Chaos was not so complete as in other parts nearby. This proved that Sepiriz and his nine black brothers, last of the Nihrain, were exerting at least some control against the forces threatening to engulf them.

Through steep gorges of towering black rock, along treacherous mountain paths, down slopes that rattled with loose stones and seemed likely to start an avalanche, they pressed deeper and deeper into the heart of the ancient mountains. These were the oldest mountains in the world, and they held one of the Earth's most ancient secrets—the domain of the immortal Nihrain who had ruled for centuries even before the coming of the Melniboneans whose Bright Empire had lasted ten thousand years.

And then, at last, they came to the Hewn City of Nihrain, its towering palaces, temples and fortresses cut into the living black granite, hidden in the depths of a gorge that might have been bottomless. Virtually cut off from all but the faintest filterings of sunlight, it had brooded here since earliest times.

Down the narrow paths they guided their reluctant steeds until they had reached a huge gateway which was carved with the figures of titans and half-men looming above them, so that Moonglum gasped and immediately fell silent, overawed by the genius which could accomplish the twin feats of gigantic engineering and powerful art.

In the caverns of Nihrain, also carved to represent scenes from the legends of the Nihrain, Sepiriz awaited them, a welcoming smile on his thin-lipped ebony face.

“Greetings, Sepiriz,” Elric dismounted and allowed slaves to lead his horse away. Moonglum did likewise, a trifle warily.

“I was informed correctly,” Sepiriz clasped Elric's shoulders in his hands. “I am glad for I learned you were bound to Sorcerers' Isle to seek the White Lords' help.”

“True. Is their help, then, unobtainable?”

“Not yet. We ourselves are trying to contact them, with the aid of the hermit magicians of the island, but so far Chaos has

blocked our attempts. But there is work for you and your sword nearer to home. Come to my chamber and refresh yourselves. We have some wine which will revitalise you and when you have drunk your fill I'll tell you what task Fate has decided for you now."

Elric put down his cup and breathed in deeply, feeling relaxed and invigorated. He pointed at the wine-jar and said: "A man might easily become addicted to such a brew!"

"I'm addicted already," Moonglum grinned, pouring himself another cup.

Sepiriz shook his head. "It has a strange quality, our Nihrain wine. It tastes pleasant and refreshes the weary, yet once his strength is regained the man who drinks it then is nauseated. That is why we still have some in our cellars. But our stocks are low—the vines from which it was made have long since passed from the Earth."

"A magic potion," Moonglum said, replacing his cup on the table.

"If you like to so designate it. Elric and I are of an earlier age when magic was normal and Chaos ruled, if more quietly than now. You men of the Young Kingdoms are perhaps right to loathe it as you do, for we hope to ready the world for Law soon and then, perhaps, they'll find similar brews by more painstaking methods, methods they can understand better."

"I doubt it," Moonglum laughed.

Elric sighed. "If we are not luckier than we have been, we'll see Chaos unleashed on the globe and Law forever vanquished," he said gloomily.

"And no luck for us if Law is triumphant, eh?" Sepiriz poured himself a cup of the wine, showing that he, also, must be weary with his own efforts.

"What do you mean?" Moonglum asked curiously.

Sepiriz told him that he and Elric, though fighting Chaos, were actually fitted to a world where Chaos, to a great extent, was dominant. In the world they hoped for, where Law ruled, there would be no place for their like.

Moonglum looked sharply at Elric, understanding that much more of his friend's unenviable predicament.

"You said there was work for me and my sword, Sepiriz." Elric leaned forward. "What's its nature?"

"You have no doubt already learned that Jagreen Lern has summoned the Dukes of Hell to captain his men and keep his conquered lands under control?"

"Yes."

"You understand the import of this. Jagreen Lern has succeeded in making a sizeable breach in the Law-constructed barrier which has hitherto kept the creatures of Chaos from wholly ruling the planet. He is for ever widening this breach as his power increases. This explains how he could summon such a mighty assembly of Hell's nobility where, in the past, it was hard to bring one to our plain. Arioch is among them . . ."

"Arioch !" Elric shuddered, for Arioch had always been his patron-demon, the principle god worshipped by his ancestors. That things had got to such a stage gave him a tremendous shock and impinged upon him, deeper than anything else that had occurred, the fact that he was now a total outcast, unprotected either by Law or by Chaos.

"Your only close supernatural ally is your sword," Sepiriz said grimly. "And, perhaps, its brothers."

"Brothers ? Brothers ? What brothers ? There is only the sister-sword *Mournblade* which Dyvim Storm has !"

"Do you remember that I told you how the twin swords were actually only an earthly manifestation of their supernatural selves ?" Sepiriz said calmly.

"Yes."

"Well, I can tell you now that *Stormbringer's* 'real' being is related with other supernatural forces on another plane. I know how to summon them, but these relations are also creatures of Chaos and therefore, as far as you're concerned, somewhat hard to control. They could well get out of hand in some way—perhaps even turn against you. *Stormbringer*, as you have discovered in the past, is bound to you by ties even stronger than those which bind it to its brothers, but its brothers outnumber it and *Stormbringer* might not be able to protect you against them."

"Why have I never known this ?"

"You *have* known it, in a way. Do you remember times when you have called to the Dark Ones for help and help has come ?"

"Yes. You mean that this help has been supplied by *Stormbringer's* brethren ?"

"I do. Already they are used to coming to your help. They are not what you and I would call 'intelligent,' though sentient, and are therefore not so strongly bound to Chaos as its reasoning servants. They can be controlled, to a degree, by

anyone who has power such as you have over one of their brothers. If you need their help, you will need to remember a rune which I shall tell you later."

"And what is my task?"

"To destroy the Dukes of Hell."

"Destroy the—? But that's impossible. They are one of the mightiest groups in the entire domain of Chaos!"

"True. But you control one of the mightiest weapons. That is your task. Already there are hints that the Demon Dukes have taken some of Jagreen Lern's power from him. The fool. He still refuses to realise that he is a puppet of Chaos and thinks he can rule over such supernatural might as the Dukes represent. But it is a certainty that with these friends Jagreen Lern can defeat the Southlands with a minimum of expenditure in arms and men. Without them he could do it—but it would take more time and effort and therefore give us a slight advantage to prepare against him while he subdues the Southlands."

Elric did not bother to ask Sepiriz how he knew of the Southerners' decision to fight Jagreen Lern alone. Sepiriz obviously had many powers as was proved by his ability to contact Elric through the seer.

"I have sworn to help the Southlands in spite of their refusal to side with us against the Theocrat," he said calmly.

"And you'll keep your oath—by destroying the Dukes if you can."

"Destroying Ariocho, and Balan and Maluk . . ." Elric whispered the names, fearful that even here he might invoke them.

"Ariocho has always been an intractable demon," Moonglum pointed out. "Many's the time in the past he has refused to aid you, Elric."

"Because," Sepiriz said, "he already had some knowledge that you and he were to fight in the future."

Though the wine had refreshed his body, Elric began to ache in different ways. The strain on his soul was almost at breaking point. To fight the demon-god his ancestors had worshipped for millenia . . . The old blood was still strong in him, the old loyalties still present.

Sepiriz rose and gripped Elric's shoulder, staring with black eyes into the dazed and smouldering red.

"You have pledged yourself to this mission, remember."

Elric drew himself upright, nodded vaguely. "Aye. And even had I been given this knowledge before I made the pledge, I would still have made it. But . . ."

"What?"

"Do not place too much faith in my ability to fulfil this part, Sepiriz."

The black Nihrain said nothing.

Later he left Elric brooding and returned with a white tablet on which old runes were engraved.

He handed it to the albino who received it wordlessly.

"Memorise the spell," Sepiriz said softly, "and then destroy the tablet. But remember, only use it in an extreme emergency for, as I warned you, *Stormbringer's* brethren may refuse to aid you."

Elric made an effort and controlled his emotion. For a long time, long after Moonglum had gone to rest, he studied the rune, learning not only how to verbalise it, but also the twists of logic which he would have to understand, and the state of mind into which he must put himself if it were to be effective.

When both he and Sepiriz were satisfied, Elric allowed a slave to take him to his sleeping chamber, but slumber came hard to him and he spent the night in restless torment until a slave came to wake him the next morning and found him fully dressed and ready to ride for Pan Tang where the Dukes of Hell were assembled.

four

Through the stricken lands of the West rode Elric and Moonglum, astride sturdy Nihrain steeds that seemed to need no rest and contained no fear.

At one time they saw in the distance a frightful sight, a wild and hellish mob destroying a village built around a castle. The castle itself was in flames and on the horizon a mountain gouted smoke and fire. Though the looters had human shape, they were degenerate creatures, spilling blood and drinking it with equal abandon. And directing them without joining their orgy Elric and Moonglum saw what seemed to be a corpse astride the living skeleton of a horse, bedecked in bright trappings, a flaming sword in its hand and a golden helm on its head.

They skirted the scene and rode fast away from it, through mists that looked and smelt like blood, over rivers damned with death, past rustling forests that seemed to follow them, beneath skies often filled with ghastly winged shapes bearing even ghastlier burdens.

At other times they met groups of warriors, many of them in the armour and trappings of the conquered nations, but depraved and obviously sold to Chaos.

These they fought or avoided, depending on the circumstance and, when at last they reached the cliffs of Jharkor and saw the sea which would take them to the Isle of Pan Tang, they knew they had ridden through a land which had become, literally, a hell on earth.

The Nihrain horses were a special gift, for they had certain additional powers to their unnatural strength and endurance. Sepiriz had told them how, in fact, the steeds did not fully exist on the earthly plane and that their hooves did not touch the ground in the strict sense, but touched the stuff of their other plane.

This gave them the ability to appear to ride on air—or water.

Scarcely stopping, Elric and Moonglum rode their horses over the water towards the evil-heavy island of Pan Tang where Jagreen Lern and his terrible allies prepared to sail with their giant fleet and smash the seapower of the south before conquering the Southlands themselves.

“Elric!” Moonglum called above the whining wind, “should we not proceed with more caution?”

“Caution? What need of that when the Dukes of Hell must surely know their turncoat servant comes to fight them!”

Moonglum pursed his long lips, disturbed, for Elric was in a wild, maddened mood. He got little comfort, also, from the knowledge that Sepiriz had charmed his short-sword and his sabre both, with one of the few white spells he had at his command.

Now the bleak cliffs of Pan Tang were in sight, spray-lashed and ominous, the sea moaning about them as if in some special torment which Chaos could inflict on nature itself.

And also around the island a peculiar darkness hovered, shifting and changing.

They entered the darkness as the Nihrain steeds pounded up the steep, rocky beach of Pan Tang, a place that had always been ruled by its black priesthood, a grim theocracy that had

sought to emulate the legendary sorcerer-kings of the Bright Empire of Melnibone. But Elric, last of those kings, and landless now with few subjects, knew that the dark arts had been natural and lawful to his ancestors, whereas these human-beings had perverted themselves to worship an unholy hierarchy they barely understood.

Sepiriz had given them their route and they galloped across the turbulent land towards the capital—Hwamgaarl, City of Screaming Statues.

As they drew nearer, a black-cowled mass of swordsmen seemed to rise from the ground ahead and, chanting a particularly horrible litany, blocked their way.

Elric had no time to spare for these, recognisable as a detachment of Jagreen Lern's warrior-priests.

"Up, steed!" he cried and the Nihrain horse seemed to leap skywards, passing over the disconcerted priests with a fantastic bound. Moonglum did likewise, his laughter mocking them as he and his friend thundered on towards Hwamgaarl!

Their way was clear for some distance, since Jagreen Lern had evidently expected the detachment to hold the pair at least for some time.

But when the City of Screaming Statues was barely a mile away, the ground began to grumble and gaping cracks split its surface. This did not overly disturb them, for the Nihrain horses had no use for earthly terrain in any case.

The sky above seemed to heave and shake itself, the darkness became flushed with streaks of luminous ebony, and from the fissures in the ground, monstrous shapes sprang up!

Vulture-headed lions, fifteen feet high, prowled in hungry anticipation towards them, their feathered manes rustling as they approached.

To Moonglum's frightened astonishment, Elric laughed and the Eastlander knew his friend had gone mad.

But Elric was familiar with this ghoulish pack since his own ancestors had formed it for their own purposes a dozen centuries before.

Evidently, Jagreen Lern had discovered the pack lurking on the borders between Chaos and Earth and had utilised it without being aware of how it had been created.

Old words formed on Elric's pale lips and he spoke affectionately to the towering bird-beasts.

They ceased their progress toward him and glanced uncertainly around them, their loyalties evidently divided.

Feathered tails lashed, claws worked in and out of pads, scraping great gashes in the rock.

And, taking advantage of this, Elric and Moonglum walked their horses through them and emerged just as a droaning but angry voice rapped from the heavens, ordering, in the High Tongue of Melnibone : “ *Destroy them !* ”

One lion-vulture bounded uncertainly towards them. Another followed it and another, till the whole pack raced to catch them.

“ Faster ! ” Elric whispered to the Nihrain horse, but the steed could hardly keep the distance separating them.

There was nothing for it but to turn. Deep in the recesses of his memory he recalled there was a certain spell he had learned as a child. All the old spells of Melnibone had been passed on to him by his father with the warning that, in these times, many of them were virtually useless. But there had been one—the spell for calling the vulture-headed lions and another spell . . .

Now he remembered it ! The spell for sending them back to the domain of Chaos. Would it work ?

He adjusted his mind, sought the words he needed as the beasts plunged on towards him.

Creatures ! Matik of Melnibone made thee

From stuff of unformed madness !

If thou wouldst live as thou art now,

Get hence, or Matik's brew again shall be !

The creatures paused and, desperately, Elric repeated the spell, afraid that he had made a small mistake, either within his mind or in the words.

Moonglum, who had drawn his horse up beside Elric, did not dare speak his fears, for he knew the albino sorcerer must not be hindered while spell-making. He watched in trepidation as the leading beast gave voice to a cawing roar.

But Elric heard the sound with relief, for it meant the beasts had understood his threat and were still bound to obey the spell.

Slowly, half-reluctantly, they crawled down into the fissures and vanished.

Sweating, Elric said triumphantly : “ Luck is with us so far ! Jagreen Lern either under-estimated my powers or else this is all he could summon with his own ! More proof, perhaps, that Chaos uses him and not the other way about ! ”

“ Tempt not such luck by speaking of it,” Moonglum said warningly. “ From what you’d told me, these are puny things compared with that which we must soon face !”

Elric shot an angry look at his friend and nodded briefly. He did not like to think of his coming task.

Now they neared the huge walls of Hwamgaarl. At intervals along the walls, which slanted outwards at an angle to encumber potential besiegers, they saw the screaming statues—once men and women whom Jagreen Lern and his forefathers had turned to rock but allowed them to retain their life and ability to speak. They spoke little, but screamed much, their ghastly shouts rolling over the disgusting city like the tormented voices of the damned—and damned they were.

These sobbing waves of sound were horrifying even to Elric’s ears, familiar with such sounds as they were.

Then another noise blended with them as the mighty portcullis of Hwamgaarl’s main gate squealed upwards and from it poured a host of well-armed men.

“ Evidently, Jagreen Lern’s powers of sorcery have been exhausted for the meantime and the Dukes of Hell disdain to join him in a fight against a pair of mere mortals !” Elric said, reaching with his right hand for the hilt of his black runesword hanging at his left hip.

Moonglum was beyond speech. Wordlessly he drew both his own charmed blades, knowing he must fight and vanquish his own fear before he could encounter the men who ran at him.

With a wild howl that drowned out the screams from the statues, *Stormbringer* climbed from the scabbard and stood in Elric’s hand, waiting in anticipation for the new souls it might drink, for the life-stuff which it could pass on to Elric and fill him with dark and stolen vitality.

Elric half-cringed at the feel of his blade in his damp hand.

But he shouted to the advancing soldiers : “ See jackals ! See the sword ! Forged by Chaos to vanquish Chaos ! Come, let it drink your souls and spill your blood ! We are ready for you !”

He did not wait but, with Moonglum behind him, spurred the Nihrain horse into the ranks, hewing about him with something of the old delight.

Now, so symbiotically linked with the hell-blade was he, that a hungry joy of killing swept through him, the joy of soul-

stealing which drew a surging, unholy vitality into his deficient veins.

Though there were over a hundred warriors blocking his path to the still-open gate, he smashed a bloody path through them and Moonglum, seized by something akin to his friend's mood, was equally successful in dispatching all who came against him.

Familiar with horror as they were, the soldiers soon became loath to approach the screaming runesword as it shone with a peculiarly brilliant light—a black light that pierced the blackness itself.

Laughing in his half-insane triumph, Elric felt the callous joy that his ancestors must have felt long ago when they conquered the world and made it kneel to the Bright Empire.

Chaos was, indeed, fighting Chaos—but Chaos of an older, cleaner sort come to destroy the perverted upstarts who thought themselves as mighty as the Dragon Lords of Melnibone !

A bloody trench had formed in the enemy's ranks and through this the pair plunged until the gateway gaped like a monster's maw before them.

Without pausing, Elric rode laughing through it and people scuttled to hiding as he entered, in bizarre triumph, the City of Screaming Statues.

“Where now ?” gasped Moonglum, all fear driven from him.

“To the Theocrat's Temple-palace, of course. There Arioch and his fellow duke no doubt await us !”

Through the echoing streets of the city they rode, proud and terrible, as if with an army at their backs. Dark buildings towered above them but not a face dared peep from a window. Pan Tang had planned to rule the world—and it might yet—but for the moment its denizens were fully demoralised by the sight of two men taking their huge city by storm.

They pulled their horses to a halt as they reached the wide plaza and saw the huge bronze sepulchre swinging on its chains in the centre. Beyond it rose Jagreen Lern's palace, all columns and towers, ominously quiet.

Even the statues had ceased to scream and the horses' hooves made no sound as Elric and Moonglum approached the sepulchre. The blood-reddened runesword was still in Elric's hand and with it he took a mighty sweep at the chains supporting the sepulchre—the holiest vessel of this unholy place. The supernatural blade bit into the metal and severed the links.

The crash as the sepulchre dropped and smashed was magnified a thousand times by the silence. The noise echoed throughout Hwamgaarl and every inhabitant left alive knew what it signified.

“ Thus I challenge thee, Jagreen Lern !” Elric shouted, aware that these words would also be heard by everyone. “ I have come to pay the debt I promised ! Come, puppet !” he paused, even his triumph not sufficient to fully quench his nervousness at what he must say now. “ Come ! Bring Hell’s Dukes with you—”

Moonglum swallowed, his eyes rolling as he studied Elric’s twisted face. The albino continued :

“ Bring Arioeh, and Balan, and Maluk ! Bring the proud princes of Chaos with you for I have come to send them back to their own realm forever !”

The silence again enfolded his high-challenge and he heard its echoes die away in the far places of the city.

Then, from somewhere inside the palace, he heard a movement. His heart pounded against his rib-cage, threatening to break through the bones and hang throbbing on his chest as proof of his mortality.

He heard a sound like the clapping of monstrous hooves and ahead of it the measured steps that must be those of a man.

His eyes fixed themselves on the great golden doors of the palace, half-hidden in the shadows that the columns threw.

The doors began to open silently.

Then a figure, dwarfed by the size of the doors, stepped forth and stood there regarding Elric with a horrible anger smouldering in its eyes.

On its body scarlet armour glowed as if red-hot. On its left arm was a shield of the same stuff and in its hand a steel sword.

Jagreen Lern, said in a voice that trembled with rage :

“ So, King Elric, you have kept part of your word, after all.”

“ And I plan to keep the rest of it,” Elric said with sudden calm. “ Step forward, theocrat. I’ll meet you fairly in single combat.”

Jagreen Lern gave a sneering, hollow laugh.

“ Fairly ? With that blade in your hand ? Once I met it and did not perish, but now it burns with the blood and souls of a score of my best warrior-priests. I would not be so foolish. No—let those you have challenged meet you.”

He stepped to one side.

The doors gaped wider and if Elric expected giant figures to emerge, he was disappointed. The dukes had assumed the forms of men.

But there was a power about them that filled the air as they moved to stand, disdainful of Jagreen Lern, upon the topmost step of the palace.

Elric glimpsed their beautiful, smiling faces and shuddered again, for there was a kind of love on their faces, a kind of pride—a kind of confidence so that, for a moment, he was filled with the wish to jump from his horse and fling himself at their feet to plead forgiveness for what he had become.

“Well, Elric,” said Arioch, the leader, softly. “Would you repent and return to us?” The voice was silvery in its beauty and Elric half-made to dismount.

But then he clapped his hands to his ears, the runesword hanging by its wrist-throng, and cried:

“No! No! I must do what I must! Your time, like mine, is over!”

“Do not speak thus, Elric,” Balan said persuasively, his words passing Elric’s hands and whispering in his skull. “Chaos has never been this powerful on Earth—not even in earliest days. We shall make you great—we shall make you a Lord of Chaos, equal to ourselves! We give you immortality, Elric. If you behave so foolishly as you behave now, you will bring yourself only death and none shall remember you.”

“I know that! I would not wish to be remembered in a world ruled by Law!”

Maluk laughed softly.

“That will never come to pass. We block every move that Law makes to try to bring help to Earth.”

“And that is why you must be destroyed!” Elric cried.

“We are immortal—we can never be slain!” Arioch said, and there was a tinge of impatience in his voice.

“Then I shall send you back to Chaos in such a way that you shall never have power on the Earth again!”

Elric swung his runeblade into his hand and it trembled there, moaning quietly as if unsure of itself, just as he was.

“See!” Balan walked part-way down the steps. “See—even your trusted sword knows that we speak truth.”

“You speak a sort of truth,” Moonglum said in a quavering tone, astonished at his own bravery. “But I remember something of a greater truth—a law that should bind both Chaos and Law—the Law of the Balance. The Supreme Spirit holds that

balance over the earth and it should be that Chaos and Law war to keep that balance straight. Sometimes the balance tips one way, sometimes another—and thus are the ages of the Earth created. But an unequal balance of this magnitude is *wrong*. In your struggling you of Chaos may have forgotten this !”

“ We have forgotten it for good reason, mortal. The balance has tipped to such an extent in our favour that it is no longer adjustable. We triumph !”

Elric used this pause to collect himself. Sensing his renewed strength, *Stormbringer* responded with a confident purr.

The dukes also sensed it and glanced at one another.

Arioch's beautiful face seemed to flare with anger and his pseudo-body glided down the steps towards Elric, his fellow dukes following.

Elric's steed backed away a few paces.

A bolt of living fire seemed to appear in Arioch's hand and it shot towards the albino. He felt cold pain in his chest and he staggered in the saddle.

“ Your body is unimportant, Elric. But think of a similar blow to your *soul* !” Arioch screamed, the facade of patience dropping from him.

Elric flung back his head and laughed. Arioch had betrayed himself. If he had remained calm he would have had a greater advantage, but now he showed himself perturbed, whatever he had said to the contrary.

“ Arioch—you aided me in the past—aided me to live. You will regret that !”

“ There's still time to undo my folly, upstart mortal !” Another bolt came streaking towards him but Elric passed *Stormbringer* before it and observed, in relief, that it deflected the unholy weapon.

But, against such might, they were surely doomed, unless they could invoke some supernatural aid. But Elric dared not risk summoning his runesword's brothers. Not yet. He must think of some other means.

As he retreated towards the searing bolts, Moonglum behind him whispering almost impotent charms, he thought of the vulture-lions he had sent back to Chaos. Perhaps he could recall them—for a different purpose.

The spell was fresh in his mind, requiring a slightly changed mental state and scarcely changed wording.

Calmly, working mechanically to deflect the bolts of the dukes whose features had changed hideously to retain their previous beauty but take on an increasingly malevolent appearance, he uttered the spell.

*Creatures ! Matik of Melnibone made thee
From stuff of unformed madness !
If thou wouldst live, then aid me now,
Come hither, or Matik's brew again shall be !*

From out of the rolling darks of the plaza, the beaked beasts appeared, prowling.

Elric yelled at the dukes. "Mortal weapons cannot harm you ! But these are beasts of your own plane—sample their ferocity." He ordered the vulture-lions upon the dukes.

Obviously put out by this, Arioch and his fellows backed towards the steps again, calling their own commands to the giant animals, but the things advanced, gathering speed.

Elric saw Arioch shout, rave and then his body seemed to split asunder and rise in a new, less recognisable shape as the beasts attacked. All was suddenly ragged colour, sound and disordered matter.

Behind the embattled demons, Elric saw Jagreen Lern running back into his palace. Hoping that the creatures he had summoned would hold the dukes, Elric rode his horse around the boiling mass and galloped up the steps.

Through the doors the two men rode, catching a glimpse of the terrified theocrat running before them.

"Your allies were not so strong as you believed, Jagreen Lern !" Elric yelled as he bore down upon his enemy. "Why, you foolish latecomer, did you think your knowledge matched that of a Melnibonean !"

Jagreen Lern began to climb a winding staircase, labouring up the steps, too afraid even to look back.

Elric laughed again and pulled his horse to a stop, watching the running man.

"Dukes ! Dukes !" sobbed Jagreen Lern as he climbed. "Do not desert me now !"

Moonglum whispered. "Surely those creatures will not defeat the aristocracy of hell ?"

Elric shook his head. "I do not expect them to, but if I finish Jagreen Lern, at least it could put an end to his conquests and demon-summoning." He spurred the Nihrain steed up the

steps after the theocrat who heard him coming and flung himself into a room. Elric heard a bar fall and bolts squeal.

When he reached the door it fell in at a blow of his sword and he was in a small chamber. Jagreen Lern had disappeared.

Dismounting, Elric went to a small door in the farthest corner of the room and again demolished it. A narrow stair led upwards, obviously into a tower.

Now he could take his vengeance, he thought, as he reached yet another door at the top of the stair and drew back his sword to smite it. The blow fell, but the door held.

“Curse the thing, it is protected by charms !” he swore.

He was just about to aim another blow, when he heard Moonglum's urgent calling from below.

“Elric ! Elric—they've defeated the creatures. They are returning to the palace.”

He would have to leave Jagreen Lern for the meantime. He sprang down the steps, into the chamber and out on to the stair. In the hall he saw the flowing shapes of the unholy trinity. Half-way up the stair, Moonglum was quaking.

“*Stormbringer*,” said Elric, “It is time to summon your brothers.”

The sword twisted in his hand, as if in assent.

Elric began to chant the mind-torturing, throat-torturing rune that Sepiriz had taught him.

Stormbringer moaned a counterpoint chorus to the dirge as the battle-worn dukes assumed different shapes and began to rise menacingly towards Elric.

Then, in the air all about him, he saw shapes appear, shadowy shapes half on his own plane, half on the plane of Chaos. He saw them stir and suddenly it seemed as if the air was filled with a million swords, each a twin to *Stormbringer* !

Acting on instinct, Elric released his grip on his blade and flung it towards the rest. It hung in the air before them and they seemed to acknowledge it. “Lead them, *Stormbringer* ! Lead them against the dukes—or your master perishes and you'll not drink another human soul again !”

The sea of swords rustled and a dreadful moaning emanated from them. The dukes flung themselves upwards towards the albino and he recoiled before the evil hatred that poured from the twisting shapes.

Glancing down he saw Moonglum slumped in his saddle and did not know if he had perished or fainted.

Then the swords rushed upon the reaching dukes and Elric's head swam with the sight of a million blades plunging into the stuff of their beings.

The unholy noise of the battle filled his ears, the dreadful sight of the toiling conflict clouded his vision. Without *Stormbringer's* evil vitality he felt weak and limp. He felt his knees shake and crumple and he could do nothing to aid the black sword's brothers as they clashed with the Dukes of Hell.

He collapsed, aware that if he witnessed such horror much longer he would become totally insane. Thankfully, he felt his mind go blank and then, at last, he was unconscious, unable to know which would win.

f i v e

His body itched. His arms and back ached. His wrists pounded with agony. Elric opened his eyes.

Immediately opposite him, spreadeagled in chains against the wall he saw Moonglum. Dull flame flickered in the centre of the place and he felt pain on his naked knee, looked down and saw Jagreen Lern.

The theocrat spat at him.

"So," Elric said hollowly, "I failed. You triumph after all."

Jagreen Lern did not look triumphant. Rage still burned in his eyes.

"Oh, how shall I punish you," he said.

"Punish me? Then—?" Elric's heartbeat increased.

"Your final spell succeeded," the theocrat said dully, turning away to contemplate the brazier. "Both your allies and mine vanished and all my attempts to contact the dukes have proved fruitless. You achieved your threat—or your minions did—you sent them back to Chaos forever!"

"My sword—what of that?"

The theocrat smiled bitterly. "That's my only pleasure. Your sword vanished with its brothers. You are weak and helpless now, Elric. You are mine to maim and torture until the end of my life."

Elric was dumbfounded by the news. Part of him rejoiced that the dukes had been beaten. Part of him lamented the loss of his sword. As Jagreen Lern had emphasised, without the

blade he was less than half a man, for his albinism weakened him. Already his eye-sight was dimmer and he felt no response in his limbs.

Jagreen Lern looked up at him.

“Enjoy the comparatively painless days left you, Elric, but I leave you to anticipate what I have in store for you. I must away and instruct my men in the final preparations for the war-fleet soon to sail against the South. I won't waste time with crude torture now, for all the while I shall be scheming the most exquisite tortures conceivable. You shall take long years to die, I swear !”

He left the cell and as the door slammed he heard Jagreen Lern instructing the guard.

“Keep the brazier at full blast. Let them sweat like damned souls in hell. Feed them enough to keep them alive once every three days. They will soon be crying for water. Give them only sufficient to sustain their lives. They deserve far worse than this and they'll get their desserts when my mind has had time to work on the problem.”

A day later, the real agony began. Their bodies gave out the last of their sweat. Their tongues were swollen in their heads and all the time as they groaned in their torment, they were aware that this terrible torture would be nothing compared to what they might expect. Elric's weakened body would not respond to his desperate struggling and at length his mind dulled, the agony became constant and familiar, and time was non-existent.

Finally, through a pain-thick daze, he recognised a voice. The hate-filled voice of Jagreen Lern.

Others were in the chamber. He felt their hands seize him and his body was suddenly light as he was borne, moaning from the cell.

Though he heard disjointed phrases he could make no sense of Jagreen Lern's words.

He was taken to a dark place that rolled about, hurting his scorched chest.

Later, he heard Moonglum's voice and strained to hear the words.

“Elric ! What's happening ? We're aboard a ship at sea, I'd swear !”

But Elric mumbled disinterestedly. Gradually his deficient body was weakening, faster than would a normal man's. He

thought of Zarozinia, whom he would never see again. He knew he would not live to know whether Law or Chaos finally won, or even if the Southlands would stand against the theocrat.

And these problems were fading in his mind again.

Then the food started to come and the water and it revived him somewhat. At some stage, he opened his eyes and stared upwards into the thinly smiling face of Jagreen Lern.

“Thank the gods,” said the theocrat. “I feared we’d lost you. You’re a delicate case to be sure, my friend. You must stay alive longer than this. To begin my entertainment, I have arranged for you to sail on my own flagship. We are now crossing the Dragon Sea, our fleet well-protected by charms against the monsters roaming these parts.” He frowned. “Thanks to you, we haven’t the same call for the charms which would have borne us safely through the chaos-torn waters. They are almost normal for the moment. But that will soon be changed.”

Elric’s old spirit returned for a moment and he glared at his enemy, too weak to voice the loathing he felt.

Jagreen Lern laughed softly and stirred Elric’s gaunt white head with the toe of his boot. “I think I can brew a drug which will give you a little more vitality.”

The food was foul-tasting and had to be forced between Elric’s mumbling lips, but after a while he was able to sit up and observe the huddled body of Moonglum. Evidently the little man had totally succumbed to his torture. To his surprise, Elric discovered he was unfettered and he crawled the agonising distance between himself and the Eastlander, shaking Moonglum’s shoulder. He groaned but did not respond.

A shaft of dim light appeared and Elric looked up to see that the hatch-cover had been prised aside and Jagreen Lern stared down at him.

“Good, good. I see the brew had its effect. Come, Elric, smell the invigorating sea and feel the warm sun on your body. We are not many miles from the coasts of Argimiliar and our scout-ships report quite a sizeable fleet sailing hence.”

Elric cursed. “By Ariocho, I hope they send you all to the bottom !”

Jagreen Lern pursed his lips mockingly. “By whom? Ariocho? Do you not remember what ensued in my own palace?”

Arioch cannot be invoked. Not by you—not by me. Your stinking spells saw to that.”

He turned to an invisible lieutenant. “Bind him and bring him on deck. You know what to do with him.”

Two warriors dropped into the hold and grasped the still-weak Elric, tying his arms and legs and manhandling him on to the deck. He gasped as the sun's glare struck his eyes.

“Prop him up so he may see all,” Jagreen Lern ordered.

The warriors obeyed and Elric was lifted to a standing position, seeing Jagreen Lern's huge, black flagship with its silken deck canopies flapping in a steady westerly breeze, its three banks of straining oarsmen and its tall ebony mast bearing a sail of dark red.

Beyond the ship's rails, Elric saw a massive fleet surging in the flagship's wake. As well as the vessels of Pan Tang and Dharijor there were many from Jharkor, Shazar and Tarkesh but on every scarlet sail the Merman blazon of Pan Tang was painted.

Depression filled Elric, for he knew that the Southlands, however strong, could not match a fleet like this.

“We have been at sea for only three days,” said Jagreen Lern, “but thanks to a witch-wind, we're almost at our destination. A scout ship has recently reported that the Lormyrian navy, hearing rumours of our superior sea-power, is sailing to join with us. A wise move of King Montan—for the moment, at any rate. I'll make use of him for the time being and, when his usefulness is over, I'll have him killed for the treacherous turncoat he is.”

“Why do you tell me all this?” Elric whispered, his teeth gritted against the pain that came with any slight movement of his face or body.

“Because I want you to witness for yourself the defeat of the South. I want you to know that what you sought to avert will come to pass. After we have subdued the South and sucked her of her treasures, we'll vanquish the Isle of the Purple Towns and press forward to sack Vilmir and Ilmiora. That will be an easy matter, don't you agree?”

When Elric did not reply, Jagreen Lern gestured impatiently to his men.

“Tie him to the mast so that he may get a good view of the battle. I'll put a protective charm around his body, for I do not want him to be killed by a stray arrow and cheat me of my full vengeance.”

Elric was borne up and roped to the mast, but he was scarcely aware of it, for his head lolled on his right shoulder, only semi-conscious.

The massive fleet plunged onwards, certain of victory.

By mid-afternoon Elric was aroused from his stupor by the shout of the helmsman.

“Sail to the south-east ! Lormyrian fleet approaches.”

With impotent anger, Elric saw the fifty two-masted ships, their sails bright against the sombre scarlet of Jagreen Lern's vessels, come into line with the others.

Lormyr, though a smaller power than Argimiliar, had a larger navy. Elric judged that King Montan's treachery had cost the south more than a quarter of its strength.

Now he knew there was absolutely no hope for the south and that Jagreen Lern's certainty of victory was well-founded.

Night fell and the huge fleet lay at anchor. A guard came to feed Elric a mushy porridge containing another dose of the revitalising drug. As he revived, his anger increased, and Jagreen Lern paused by the mast on two occasions, taunting him savagely.

“Soon after dawn we shall meet the southern fleet,” Jagreen Lern smiled, “and by noon what is left of it will float as bloody driftwood behind us as we press on to establish our reign over those nations who so foolishly relied on their sea-power as defence.”

Elric remembered how he had warned the kings of the Southlands that this was likely to happen if they stood alone against the theocrat. But he wished that he had been wrong. With the defeat of the south, the conquest of the east seemed bound to follow and, when Jagreen Lern ruled the world, Chaos would dominate and the earth revert to the stuff from which it had been formed millions of years before.

All through that moonless night he brooded, pulling his thoughts together, summoning all his strength for a plan that was, as yet, only a shadow in the back of his mind.

s i x

The rattle of anchors woke him.

Blinking in the light of the watery sun, he saw the southern fleet on the horizon, riding gracefully in hollow pomp towards the ships of Jagreen Lern.

Either, he thought, the southern kings were very brave or else they did not understand the strength of their enemies.

Beneath him, on Jagreen Lern's foredeck, a great catapult rested, and slaves had already filled its cup with a large ball of flaming pitch. Normally, Elric knew, such catapults were an encumbrance, since when they reached that size they were difficult to rewind and gave lighter war-machines the advantage. Yet obviously Jagreen Lern's engineers were not fools. Elric noted extra mechanisms on the big catapult and realised they were equipped to rewind rapidly.

The wind had dropped and five hundred pairs of muscles alone strove to row Jagreen Lern's galley along. On the deck, in disciplined order, his warriors took their posts beside the great boarding platforms that would drop down on to opponent ships and grapple them at the same time as they formed a bridge between the vessels.

Elric was forced to admit that Jagreen Lern had used foresight. He had not relied wholly on supernatural aid. His ships were the best equipped he had ever seen.

The southern fleet, Elric decided, was doomed. To fight Jagreen Lern was not bravery—it was insanity.

But Jagreen Lern had made one mistake. He had, in his gnawing desire for vengeance, ensured that Elric's vitality was restored for a few hours and this vitality extended to his mind as well as his body.

Stormbringer had vanished. With the sword he was, among men, all but invincible. Without it, he was helpless. These were facts. Therefore he must somehow regain the blade. But how? It had returned to the plane of Chaos with its brothers, presumably drawn back there by the overwhelming force of the rest.

He must contact it.

He dare not summon the entire horde of blades with spell, that would be tempting providence too far.

He heard the sudden *thwack* and roar as the giant catapult discharged its first shot. The flame-shrouded pitch went

arching over the ocean and landed short, boiling the sea around it as it guttered and sank. Swiftly the war-engine was rewound and he marvelled at the speed as another ball of flaring pitch was forked into its cup. Jagreen Lern looked up at him and laughed.

“My pleasure will be short—there are not enough of them to put up a decent fight. Watch them perish, Elric !”

Elric said nothing, pretended to be dazed and frightened.

The next fireball struck one of the leading ships directly and Elric saw tiny figures scampering about, striving desperately to quench the spreading pitch, but within a minute the whole ship was ablaze, a gouting mass of flame as the figures now jumped overboard, unable to save their vessel.

Now the air around him sounded to the rushing heat of the fireballs and within range now, the southerners retaliated with their lighter machines until it seemed the sky was filled with a thousand comets and the heat almost equalled that which Elric had experienced in the torture chamber.

Black smoke began to drift as the brass beaks of the ships' rams ground through timbers, impaling ships like skewered fish. The hoarse yells of fighting men began to sound and Elric heard the clash of iron as the first few opposing warriors met.

But now he only vaguely heard the sounds, for he was concentrating.

At last he was ready and, aware that his voice would probably not be heard by human ears above the noise of war, called in a desperate and agonising voice : “*Stormbringer !*”

His straining mind echoed the shout and he seemed to look beyond the turbulent battle, beyond the ocean, beyond the very earth to a place of shadows and terror. Something moved there. Many things moved there.

“*Stormbringer !*”

He heard a curse from beneath him and saw Jagreen Lern pointing up at him.

“Gag the whitefaced sorcerer.” Jagreen Lern's eyes met Elric's and the theocrat sucked in his lips, deliberating a bare moment before adding : “And if that doesn't put an end to his babbling—slay him !”

The lieutenant began to climb the mast towards Elric.

“*Stormbringer !* Your master perishes !”

He struggled in the biting ropes but could hardly move.

“*Stormbringer !*”

All his life he had hated the sword he relied so much upon. Now he called for it as a lover calls for his betrothed.

The warrior grasped his foot and shook it. "Silence! You heard my master!"

Elric looked down with insane eyes at the warrior who shuddered and drew his sword, hanging to the mast with one hand and readying himself to make the stab at Elric's vitals.

"*Stormbringer!*" Elric sobbed the words. He *must* live. Without him Chaos would surely rule the world.

The warrior gasped and the sword dropped from his fingers. He seemed to grapple with something invisible at his throat and Elric saw his fingers sliced off and blood spurt from the stumps. Then, slowly, a shape materialised and, with bounding relief, the albino saw that it was a sword—his own runesword impaling the warrior and sucking out his soul!

The warrior dropped, but *Stormbringer* hung in the air and then turned to slash the ropes restraining Elric's hands and nestle firmly, with horrid affection, in its master's right fist.

At once the stolen life-stuff of the warrior began to pour through Elric's being and the pain of his body vanished. Quickly he grasped a piece of the sail's rigging and cut away the rest of his bonds until he was swinging by one hand on the rope.

"Now, Jagreen Lern, we'll see who takes vengeance, finally," he grimaced as he swung towards the deck and dropped lightly upon it, the unholy vitality from the sword surging through him to fill him with a godlike ecstasy. He had never known it so strong before.

But then he noted that the boarding platforms had been lowered and only a skeleton crew remained on the flagship. Jagreen Lern must have led his main strength on to the ship which was now held fast by grapples.

Close by was a great barrel of pitch, used to form the fireballs. Close to that was a flaring torch used to ignite them. Elric seized the brand and flung it into the pitch.

"Though Jagreen Lern may win this battle, his flagship shall go to the bottom with the southern fleet," he said grimly and dashed for the hold where he had been imprisoned, aware that Moonglum lay there helplessly.

He wrenched up the hatch-cover and stared down at the pitiful figure of his friend. Evidently he had been left to starve to death. A rat scuttled away as the light shone down.

Elric jumped into the hold and saw, with horror, that part of Moonglum's right arm had been gnawed already. He heaved the body on to his shoulder, aware that the heart still beat, though faintly, and clambered back on to the deck.

How to ensure his friend's safety and still take vengeance on Jagreen Lern was a problem. But Elric moved towards the boarding platform which he guessed the theocrat to have crossed. As he did so, three warriors leapt towards him. One of them cried :

“ The albino ! The reaver has escaped ! ”

Elric struck him down with a blow that required only a flick of his wrist. The black sword did the rest. The others retreated, remembering how Elric had entered Hwamgaarl.

New energy flowed through him. For every corpse he killed, his strength increased—a stolen strength, but necessary if he was to survive and win the day for Law.

He ran, untroubled by his burden, over the boarding platform and on to the deck of the southern ship. Up ahead he saw the standard of Argimiliar and a little group of men around it, headed by King Hozel himself, his face gaunt as he stared at the knowledge of his own death. A deserved death, thought Elric grimly, but nonetheless when Hozel died it would mean another victory for Chaos.

Then he heard a shout of a different quality, thought for a moment he had been observed, but one of Hozel's men was pointing to the North and mouthing something.

Elric looked in the direction and saw, with mixed emotions, the brave sails of the Purple Towns. They were brightly painted and gay, some even embroidered, for the only rich decoration the Sealords allowed themselves was upon their sails.

But they had arrived belatedly. Even if they had sailed with the other southern vessels it would have been unlikely that they could have turned the day against Pan Tang.

At that moment, staring around him, Jagreen Lern saw Elric and bellowed at his men who moved forward warily and reluctantly, approaching the albino in a wide semi-circle.

Elric cursed the brave Sealords who had added a further factor to his indecision.

Menacingly he swung the moaning runeblade about him as he advanced to meet the half-terrified Pan Tang warriors. They dropped back, some of them groaning as the blade touched them. The way was now clear to Jagreen Lern.

But the ships of the Purple Towns were drawing closer, almost within catapult range.

Elric looked directly into Jagreen Lern's frightened face and snarled : " I doubt if my blade has the strength to pierce your burning armour with one blow, and one blow is all I have time for. I leave you now, theocrat, but remember that even if you conquer all the world including the unknown lands of the East, I'll have my sword drink your black soul at length."

With that he dropped Moonglum's unconscious body overboard and dived after it into the choppy sea.

Resuming his hold on his friend's body, he began to swim with superhuman strokes towards the leading vessel of the Sealords. Kargan's ship.

Now, behind him, Jagreen Lern and his men saw their own flagship blazing. Elric had done his work well.

That, too, would serve to divert attention from Kargan's fleet.

Trusting to the sealords' famed seamanship he swam directly in the path of the leading galleon, shouting Kargan's name.

The ship veered slightly and he saw bearded faces at the rail, saw ropes flicker towards him and grasped one, letting them haul him upwards with his burden until he was pulled over the side.

Kargan stared at him with shocked eyes.

" Elric ! We thought you dead—and now I see you have been, or worse !"

Elric spat salt-water from his mouth and said urgently :

" Turn your fleet, Kargan ! Turn it back the way it has come, there is no hope of saving the southlanders—they are doomed. We must preserve our forces for a later struggle."

Hesitating momentarily, Kargan gave the order which was swiftly relayed to the rest of his sixty strong fleet.

As the ships turned away, Elric noted that hardly a southern ship remained afloat. For more than a mile the water burned and the spluttering of the flaming, sinking ships was blended with the screams of the maimed and drowning.

" With the southern seapower crushed so decisively," Kargan said, watching the physician who was tending to Moonglum, " the lands will not last long before Pan Tang's marching hordes. Like us, the south relied too much on its ships. It has taught me that we must strengthen our land defences if we are to have any chance at all."

“From now on we’ll use your island as our main headquarters,” Elric said. “We’ll fortify the whole place and from there keep in close touch with what is happening in the south. How is my friend, physician?”

The physician looked up. “These are no battle-made wounds. He’s been hurt sorely, but he’ll live. He should recover to perfect fitness given a month or so of rest.”

“He’ll have it,” Elric promised. He gripped the runesword at his belt and wondered what other tasks lay in store for them before the last great battle between Law and Chaos was joined.

Chaos would soon rule more than half the world, in spite of the powerful blow he had dealt it in forever sentencing the Dukes of Hell to their own plane; the more power that Jagreen Lern gathered, the more the threat from Chaos would increase.

He sighed and looked Northwards.

Two days later they returned to the Isle of the Purple Towns, the fleet remaining in the largest harbour of Utkel since it was thought wise to have it at hand and not disperse it.

All that following night, Elric talked with the Sealords, ordered messengers to Vilmir and Ilmiora and, towards morning, there came a polite knock on the door of the room.

Kargan got up to open it and stared in astonishment at the tall, black-faced man who stood there.

“Sepiriz!” Elric cried. “How did you come here?”

“On horseback,” smiled the giant, “and you know the power of the Nihrain steeds. I had come to warn you. We have, at last, managed to contact the White Lords but they can do little as yet. Somehow a path to their plane must be made through the barricades which Chaos has constructed against them. Jagreen Lern’s ships have vomitted their contents on the southern shores and his warriors swarm inland. There is nothing we can do now to stop his conquests there. Once consolidated, his Earthly power increased, he will be able to summon more and more allies from Chaos.”

“Then where does my next task lie?” Elric asked softly.

“I am not sure yet. But that is not what I came for. Your blade’s sojourn with its brothers has strengthened it. You may have noticed how swiftly it pours power into your body now?”

Elric nodded.

“That power is evilly-gained and is evil in itself. The blade’s strength will continue to increase and yours will, also. But, as

Chaos-begotten power fills your being, you will have to fight, yet more strongly, to control the force within you."

Elric sighed and grasped Sepiriz's arm.

"Thanks for the warning, friend, but when I beat the Dukes of Hell, to whom I formerly pledged allegiance, I did not expect to escape with a mere scratch or a flesh-wound. Know this, Sepiriz," he turned to the watching sealords, "and know this all of you."

He drew the groaning runeblade from its scabbard and held it aloft so that it shone and flared in its awful power.

"This blade was forged by Chaos to conquer Chaos and that is my destiny, too. Though the world crumbles to boiling gas I shall live, now. I swear by the Balance of the Cosmos that Law shall triumph and the New Age come to the Earth."

Taken aback by this grim vow, the sealords glanced at one another and Sepiriz smiled.

"Let us hope so, Elric," he said. "Let us hope so."

—Michael Moorcock

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Here is the second of the two hitherto unpublished Mervyn Peake stories—and one which is completely different in mood than “Same Time, Same Place,” published in our last issue.

DANSE MACABRE

BY MERVYN PEAKE

Whether it was the full moon that woke me, I do not know. It may have been. Or it may be that the melancholy which had settled on my spirit and which coloured my dreams, had become too strong for me to bear and had broken through my sleep and left me, of a sudden, aware and trembling.

It is no part of my story to tell you of the unhappy circumstances which had driven my dear wife away from me. I cannot tell you of that dreadful separation. It is sufficient to say that in spite of, or it may be *because* of our ill omen'd love, we were driven apart, although, as you shall hear, this desperate act brought nothing but horror in the end.

I had drawn wide the curtains when I had gone to bed, for the night was close, and now, with my eyes wide open, I found that my bedroom was filled with the light of the moon.

Facing me, as I lay upon my side was my wardrobe, a tall piece of furniture and my gaze wandered across the panels until they came to rest upon one of the metal door knobs.

Uneasy as I was, I had as yet no concrete cause for alarm; and would have closed my eyes had it not been that all at once my heart stopped beating. For the metal knob on which my gaze was fixed had begun, very slowly, very surely, to revolve, without a sound.

I cannot recall with any exactness what thoughts possessed me during the interminable turning of that brass knob. All

I know is that what febrile thoughts I had were soaked in fear, so that my brain began to sweat no less than my body. But I could not turn my eyes away, nor close them. I could only watch as the cupboard door itself began to sway slowly open with hideous deliberation until it lay wide to the moon-filled room.

And then it happened . . . happened in the stillness when not so much as the call of a little owl from the nearby woods or a sigh in the leaves, disturbed the small hours of that summer night, when my dress clothes on their hanger, sailed slowly out of the depths of the wardrobe and with infinite smoothness came to a rest in mid-air immediately before my dressing table.

So unexpected, so ludicrous was this, that it was a wonder I did not lose my nerve and scream. But the terror was caught in my throat and I made no sound but continued to watch as the trousers slid from the cross-bar of the hanger until their extremities were no more than a couple of inches from the floor, in which position they remained, loose and empty. No sooner had this happened than an agitation at the shoulders made it plain that the white waistcoat and the long black tailcoat were trying to dislodge themselves from the hanger and then, all at once they were free, and the hanger, leaving behind it in the room a headless, handless, footless spectre, floated into the depths of the cupboard and the door closed upon it.

By now the limp arms, for all their lack of hands, appeared in dumb-show to be knotting a white tie about a white collar, and then, most strange of all, the empty figure at the next moment was leaning forward in mid-air at an angle of thirty degrees from the floor flinging the limp sleeves forwards as though about to dive and with a whisk of the 'tails' it floated across the room and out of the window.

Before I knew what I was doing I had reached the window and was just in time to see far away beyond the lawn, my dress clothes skimming their way towards the oak wood where they disappeared into the darkness beneath the trees.

How long I stood staring down across the lawn to the long dense margin of the oak wood I do not know, nor yet, when at last I returned across the room, how long I stared at the knob on the wardrobe door, before I had the courage to grip it and turn it and fling it open. I only know that at last I did so and saw the naked wooden hanger suspended there.

At last I slammed the door upon them and turned my back upon the cupboard. I began to pace the room in a fever of fearful foreboding. At last I fell exhausted upon my bed. It was only when dawn broke that I fell into a clammy sleep.

When I awoke it was past mid-day. The countryside was alive with familiar sounds; the squabbling of sparrows in the ivy outside the window; a dog barking and the drone of a tractor several fields across and listening half-asleep, it was a full minute before I recollected the nightmare I had suffered. Of course it was a nightmare ! What else could it have been ? With a short laugh I flung the bedclothes from me and got to my feet and began to dress. It was only when I was about to open the wardrobe door that I paused for a moment. The dream had been too vivid to be entirely disregarded even in the same light of a summer day but again I laughed, and the sound of my own laughter chilled me. It was like a child I once heard shouting out in his terror, " I'm not afraid of *you*. I'm not afraid of *you*."

Opening the door of the cupboard I sighed with relief for there, hanging demurely in the semi-darkness, were my evening clothes. Taking a tweed jacket from its hanger, I was about to close the door when I saw, clinging to the knee of my evening trousers, a wisp of grass.

It has always been a habit of mine, almost a fixation you might say, to keep my clothes in good condition. It seemed odd to me this being so, that, having brushed my suit a night or two previously, there should be any kind of blemish. Why had the wisp of grass not caught my attention ? However, strange as it seemed, I told myself there must, of course, be some simple explanation, and I dismissed the little problem from my mind.

Why I do not quite know, but I told no-one of the dream, perhaps because anything strange or bizarre is distasteful to me and I presumed, perhaps wrongly, that such things are distasteful to others also. The memory of that horrible night lingered all day with me. Had it not been that I hate to be thought peculiar I think I would have found release in confiding the silly dream to someone or other. You see it was not simply frightening; it was ludicrous too. Something more to smile about than to be afraid of. But I found I could not smile.

The next six days passed uneventfully enough. On the seventh evening, which was a Friday, I went to bed much later than is my usual practice, for some friends who had come to dinner with me had stayed talking until well after midnight and when they had gone I began to read, so that it was close upon two o'clock before I climbed to my bedroom where I sank upon the bed still fully clothed and continued for at least twenty minutes more to read my book.

By now I was drowsy but before I got to my feet in order to undress, I found that against my will I was directing my gaze at the cupboard. Fully believing that the dream had indeed been a dream, and nothing but a dream, the hideous habit had taken hold of me, so that the last thing I saw before I fell asleep was always, the doorknob.

And again it moved, and again as terrible to me as ever before, it went on turning with the deliberate rotation and my heart seemed to be stuck between my ribs, hammering for release in the silence of the second ghastly night. The sweat poured out of my skin and the avid taste of terror filled my mouth.

The fact that it was happening all over again; that it was a *repetition* in no way helped me, for it appeared that what was once *unbelievable* was now an unarguable fact.

Slowly, inexorably, the knob turned and the cupboard door swung open and my evening clothes floated out as before and the trousers slid until they touched the ground, the hanger dislodged itself from the shoulders and it seemed there was no change in the absurd, yet ghastly ritual, until it came to that moment when the apparition was about to turn to the window. This time it turned to me, and, though it had no face, I knew it *was* looking at me.

Then, as its entire body began to shake violently, I closed my eyes for no more than a second but during that instant the clothes had disappeared through the open window.

I leapt to my feet and rushed to the window. At first I could see nothing for I was directing my gaze at the lawn that stretched away for about sixty yards to the outskirts of the woods. No creature, ghost or mortal could have covered that distance in the few seconds it took me to reach the window. But then, some movement in the semi-darkness caused me to look down, and there it was, standing on the narrow gravel path immediately below me. Its back was to

the house and its sleeves were raised a little on either side, empty though they were.

Being exactly above the headless creature I found that I was forced to see down into the horrible darkness of that circular pit whose outward rim was formed by the stiff, white collar. As I started, nauseated, it began to skim, or glide—towards the lawn; it is hard to find a word that can adequately suggest the way it propelled itself across the ground, the tail-coat unnaturally upright, and the trouser-ends appearing almost to trail the grass, although they did not really touch the ground.

That I was dressed, I think, gave me courage, for, in spite of my inner terror, I ran down the stairs and out of the house and was just in time to see the apparition about to disappear into the woods beyond the lawn. I noted, as I ran, the spot at which it entered the forest, and fearing that I might lose the unholy thing, I raced feverishly across the widespread lawn.

It was well that I did this for on reaching the margin of the oak-wood, I caught a glimpse of the high white collar and the gleam of cuffs away ahead and to the right.

Of course I knew the forest well enough by daylight but by night it seemed a very different place, yet I followed as best I could, stumbling at times and all but losing sight of the floating thing as it flitted through the trees ahead of me. There seemed to be no hesitancy in its progress and it occurred to me that, judging by the direction it was taking, it must very soon be coming upon the first of those long rides that ran from east to west across the forest.

.And this was so, for it was only a few moments later that the foliage cleared above my head and I found myself standing on the verge of the long grassy avenue of oaks and not a hundred paces to my left I saw my bodiless vesture.

Bodiless it may have been, but it did not appear so in spite of the lack of feet or hands or head. For it became obvious that the garments were in a high state of agitation, turning this way and that, sometimes circling an oak tree on the far side of the avenue, sometimes floating an inch above the ground with the shoulders stooping forwards, almost as though in spite of its headlessness it peered down the long dwindling perspective of the forest ride.

Then, of a sudden, my heart leapt to my mouth; for my evening dress (its cuffs and collar gleaming in the dim light) had begun to tremble violently, and turning my eyes in the direction in which the suit was facing, I saw, gliding towards us from a great way off, an ice-blue evening dress.

Nearer and nearer it came, nearer and nearer, floating with an effortless beauty, the long skirt trailing the ground. But there were no feet, and there were no arms or hands. And there was no head and yet there was something *familiar* about it as at last it reached my black attire and as I saw the sleeve of my coat pass itself around the ice-blue silken waist of the hollow lady and a dance began which chilled my blood, for although the movements were slow, almost leisurely, yet the headless thing was vibrating like the plucked string of a fiddle.

In contrast to this horrible vacillation, the evening dress of the other dancer moved in a strangely frozen manner made all the more horrible by its lack of arms. As I watched I began to feel a horrible sickness in my body and my knees began to give. In reaching for support I gripped a branch at my side and to my horror it snapped off in my hands, with a report, which in the silence of the night sounded like a gunshot. I lost my balance and fell upon my knees, but recovering at once I turned my gaze to the dancers. They were gone—gone as though they had never been. The avenue of tall trees stretched away in solemn, moonlit silence.

And then I saw what seemed to be a little heap of material jumbled untidily together on the sward. Steeling myself I stepped out into the moonlight and made my way, step by step towards the lifeless heap, and on reaching to within twelve feet of it I saw that it was composed of black material intertwined with a lovelier fabric the colour of blue ice.

I began to sweat where I stood, and I cannot tell how long I must have remained there, the sickness mounting in my stomach and my brain when a movement in the untidy heap led at once to a further movement, and then before my eyes the parts began to disentangle themselves and to rise one by one from the ground and to reassemble in the air, and in another instant they were gone; the lovely dress skimming the grass in the direction from which it had come until it dwindled to an ice-blue speck in the distance of the ride. My

suit, no less swiftly fled in the opposite direction and was gone and I was left alone.

How I reached my home I shall never know—more I think by instinct than by reason, for I was feverish and deadly tired.

When at last I stumbled up the stairs and into my room I fell upon my knees and could not rise again for several minutes. When I did regain my feet I turned my gaze to the wardrobe, and stared at the brass knob until a gust of courage filled me and I turned the handle and the door swung open.

And there, hanging as primly as ever, were my tails and trousers.

During the week that followed I lived in a state of nervous excitement; an excitement most beastly. I was frightened, but I was also fascinated. I found myself thinking of nothing else but what would happen on the following Friday. The few friends I saw in the vicinity of my house were shocked at my appearance for my face, which was naturally a fresh and ruddy colour, had turned grey. My hands trembled and my eyes kept darting here and there as though I were at bay.

I told no-one of what had happened. It was not that I was brave. It was more that I was cowardly. I have always had a distaste for the unearthly or anything remotely smacking of the supernatural and I would never have lifted my head again in public if I knew myself to be regarded as some kind of metaphysical crank. I knew that I would rather go through this business alone, frightened as I was, than risk the raised eyebrows—the sidelong glance. When possible over the next seven days I avoided my friends. But there was one particular engagement which I could not avoid, nor wished to avoid.

I had promised, faithfully promised, to join some friends who were giving a small dinner party on the following Friday. But it was not just that—for if that had been all I would have invented some plausible excuse. No, it was for a very different reason. It was because my wife was to be there—our mutual friends, in their ignorance, were eager to re-unite us. They had seen our illness mounting. For myself, my whole system was sick, for in truth I was but half a creature without her. And *she*? She who left me, seeing no hope for us but only a strengthening of that perverse and hideous *thing* that drives men to their own destruction, the more the love, the more

the wish to hurt. What of her? Like me, they told me, those friends of mine, she also was sickening fast.

We were too proud to meet of our own will. Too proud, or too selfish. And so this dinner had been cunningly arranged and the time came when I arrived and was greeted by my hostess and my host and began to mix with the guests.

There was dinner and there was a little dancing, and, were I not to have been possessed, I might have enjoyed the evening, but my face kept turning to a little gold clock on the mantelpiece and from the clock to the door beyond the curtains that led to the hall.

As the evening wore on I began to suffer an absolute darkness of the spirit when suddenly she appeared and my heart gave a great bound and I trembled desperately, for though she was completely beautiful, it was not her face I noticed first but the ice-blue of her dress.

We came together as though we had never parted and though we knew that our meeting had been engineered, yet there was suddenly too much joy in us for any thought of resentment to darken our thoughts.

But underneath our mounting joy was terror, for we could see in one another's eyes that we had suffered the same nightmare. We knew that, as we danced, our clothes were only waiting for the moment, two hours ahead, when some kind of dreaded thing could arrive and invest them with another life.

What were we to do? One thing we knew at once and that was that we must get away from the music and the gathering—a gathering which felt pleased with itself no doubt, for we must have looked like lovers as we left the room trembling and hand in hand.

We knew we must keep together. But I also knew, as she knew, that if we were to break the spell at all we must attack; and end our role. But how? What could we do? Firstly, we must stay together, secondly we must remain in our evening clothes.

The last hours before three o'clock were as long as all the days of our lives. I had driven her back to my house, or *our* house again, and we had rested there for the most part in silence. At first we talked of what it could mean but it was beyond us. We had been chosen, so it seemed, to be the playthings of some demon.

We had all but fallen asleep when the first tremor swarmed my spine. Her head had been on my shoulder and she awoke in an instant to find me rising to my feet, my body quaking and the material of my back and across my shoulders beginning to flap gently like a sail. Even in my horror I turned to her and she was rising also from the divan, rising as though drawn upwards with no effort and most horrible of all, there was a kind of blur across her lovely face, as though her features were less real than before.

“Oh Harry,” she cried, “Harry, where are you?” and she flung out her hand to me, and, oh, how precious was the touch of one another’s fingers, for they had seemed to be no longer *there*, and by now our faces had *fled* also and our feet and our hands, yet we could *feel* the ground with our feet and the pressure of our cold palms.

Then there came to us the long shudder and the beginning of the *malevolence*. All I could see of her now was her ice-blue dress but an evil of some kind, a malevolent evil, seemed to be entering our clothes—a vile restlessness, and we were torn apart and from that moment I was never able to touch her again, or receive the blessing of her fingertips. And then, against our wills, we began to move, and as we moved together towards the windows I heard her voice again, “Harry! Harry,” very faint and far away, although we were quite close to one another, “Harry! Harry, don’t leave me.”

I could do nothing for we were swept together out of the wide windows and without touching the lawn with our feet were flung to and fro in the air as though our clothes had but one object—to shake themselves free of us. There was no way of knowing how long this silent tumult went on. I only knew it was fraught with evil.

But, as the moments passed there seemed to come a slackening in the violence, and though the sense of evil was in essence as vile as ever, yet it seemed that the clothes were tiring. By the time they entered the wood, they appeared to rest themselves on our bodies and though we heard nothing, it was as though they were gasping for breath, or gasping for strength. It was as though there was the *will* to kill us, but the means of doing so eluded them. By the time we reached the ride we were moving laboriously and a little later we collapsed together beneath the oak tree.

It was almost dawn when I recovered my consciousness. I was drenched with an icy dew.

For a moment I had no idea where I was but then the whole thing rose in my mind, and turning my head to right and left I found I was alone. My wife had gone.

In an agony of mind I stumbled home and up the stairs and into my bedroom. It was dark and I struck a match. I hardly knew which way I was facing as I struck it but I was not long left in doubt for before me was the long mirror of the wardrobe. There facing me by the light of the match was a headless man, his shirt front, his cuffs and his collar were gleaming.

Turning away in horror, not only at the sight, but at the idea that the apparition was even now at large and that our struggle with the demons had been of no avail, I struck another match and turned to the bed.

Two people were lying there side by side, and peering closer I could see that they were smiling peacefully. My wife lay nearest to the window and I lay in my accustomed place, in the shadow of the wardrobe.

We were both dead.

—Mervyn Peake

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Our old friend Belov, cyberneticist extraordinary, footloose and fancy free once more after his time-adventures in "Möbius Trip" (No. 57) is once again in trouble, this time over a camera which warps people into another dimension . . .

THE JUNG AT HEART

by EDWARD MACKIN

I was lying on a shiny, black couch of the kind favoured by psychiatrists, and a couple of these white-coated nutcrackers were bent over me. One was short, fat, bespectacled and completely bald. The other was tall and thin with a straggling, grey beard, and a wisp of hair plastered optimistically across his almost equally bald head.

"And what kind of a dog are you?" inquired the tall one, interestedly.

I growled, and snapped at his hand, and he drew back. Then something seemed to click in my brain. It was almost like a circuit being switched off. I sat up and looked at them.

"What the devil is this?" I demanded. "How did I get here?"

"Let me hear you growl again," said the fat one, and wrote something in a notebook. "Come on, there's a good dog."

"There must be some mistake," I said, desperately. "Are you sure you've got the right animal? My name is Belov," I added. "Hek Belov."

They nodded significantly to each other and withdrew to the other end of the room for a whispered consultation.

Before I had time to collect my scattered wits they were back again. They stood, one on each side of the couch, with their arms behind their backs and frowned at me.

“Your name has figured in the news flashes quite a lot recently,” the fat one told me. “You see, you’ve been running around all over the place biting people. You even bit the Chief Constable. Between times you visited about thirty restaurants, and stole a vast amount of food. It took the authorities three weeks to catch you.”

“It was that damned alien !” I blurted out, as the circumstances of my predicament began to come back to me.

“That what ?” they asked in unison, and with evident eagerness.

I saw the trap just in time. “A private joke,” I told them with a forced laugh. “The whole thing was the result of a bet. I stood to win a substantial sum of money if I could have stayed free for a month.”

They looked surprised. “We appear to have been wasting our time, Mr. Pughberry,” the tall one said, grimly.

The other nodded. “Apparently so, Mr. Jacksville. Yet I would have staked my reputation that this was a genuine case of para-induced caninity. I suppose we should inform the police.”

They left the room indignantly and together, their hands still behind their backs. This was when I discovered that I was fettered by the ankles to the bottom of the couch. Luckily the ankle-bands were locked magnetically, and by wrenching the plug from the wall I was able to release them.

I crossed the room quickly and tried the door. It was locked. Turning round I caught a glimpse of myself in a long mirror set in the wall. It was quite a shock. I had a magnificent growth of beard, which covered most of my face, and I was completely naked. Grabbing up a white coat lying over a chair I put it on and padded over to the window.

I think the coat must have belonged to the short, fat one ; but I didn’t dare speculate on how I must have looked in it. I needed all the confidence I could muster in this escape bid. The window opened quite easily, and there was a drop of only about six feet to the Level. I had one leg over the sill when a uniformed cop strolled up and tapped my foot with his stick.

“Wuff, wuff !” he grinned. “Get back inside, Buster. No-one’s got a licence for you.”

I went in without a word and closed the window. Sitting on the couch I began to re-assess the situation. I was in a spot all right, and it was no use telling them about the alien, because that would only get me a nice quiet room with discreetly-padded walls. On the other hand, if they believed it was a hoax. I was liable to get at least six months in the can. Recollecting the bitten Chief Constable I added another six months, and swore quietly to myself.

This, friends, is what comes of trying to help a fellow human being or, to be more precise, a photographer. I only knew him slightly. In fact, I'd met him just once before when we both fell foul of a character named Bhorgil.

This particular morning I had been sitting outside the *Hotel Roma*, in Progress Square, listening to the artificial birds in the artificial trees singing their little resonators out to the comings and goings of the flabbily affluent, helped by a very indifferent amplifier. I didn't think much of the residents, or the clientele, either. They were too smoothly plump, too obviously rich, and too damned indifferent to the reproving glare I gave them as they passed me, carefully avoiding my outstretched foot. Life is full of such minor frustrations and disappointments.

I hauled my foot in and searched my pockets for a cigarette end, without success. The smell of expensive cigars was driving me mad, so I decided to move on. At this point I was joined by the photographer.

I recognised him immediately ; but I was surprised to see him carrying a solido, and apparently still following his old occupation. When a photographer has an extremely expensive solido camera bounced off the Level on his first assignment he is virtually certain to be bounced himself in these days of scarce employment. But there he was, nursing a similar piece of apparatus, and looking very depressed indeed.

"God bless you !" I said. "And what happened this time ? Did your prospect leave his face at home ?"

"No," he returned, with some bitterness. "I left my brains at home." He was boasting, of course. "I let someone switch cameras. It probably happened in the office," he added. "This one's completely useless."

"Why should anyone do a thing like that ?" I asked. "Whose corns get under your feet ?"

"Everyone's unemployed relative," he frowned. "That's not hard to work out. Things are bad."

“They’re worse than that,” I said, “when even genius fails to find a niche.”

“Oh, I’m not as good as all that,” he protested, modestly. The damned egotist!

“I was referring to myself,” I said, coldly.

“I’m not in the mood for jokes,” he told me. “I’ve some very awkward explaining to do about this lot, particularly if the good camera has gone missing.”

“Leave it to me,” I said, taking the camera from him. “Your problem is practically solved.” I took the back off. It was a colour-solido, and about as complicated as anything yet in this super-electronic garbage dump of an age. “It must have had quite a knock,” I told him; “but leave it to me. I’ll have it working again in half-an-hour.”

“You understand these things, then?” he asked, hopefully.

“Of course. As a matter of fact I was responsible for a number of major improvements in this very device—or I should have been if my ideas hadn’t been anticipated by several years. That’s the story of my life. Always some lesser intelligence gets there first.”

“I shouldn’t like you to meddle if you don’t understand it,” he said, anxiously. “An expert could probably do something with it as it is now . . .”

I snapped my teeth at him. “Some people are born with green fingers,” I said; “but I was born with electronic digits. I can fix anything electronic that was ever spawned by the human brain, and I can produce a hook-up for every contingency. My name is Hek Belov,” I added, extending a hand.

“Bill Parker,” he said, and we shook, perfunctorily. “I’ll have to take a chance on you because my picture should come through that door any minute now. You’ve heard of him I expect. His name’s William Hope Rattleorb.”

I nodded. “Runs a chain of grocery stores. Married with three grown-up daughters, and an acid-tongued wife. This side of fifty, but not much. If *Flashpic* want a shot for their evening smutcast it must mean he’s running a little cutie round and about the place. He’s not going to like that.”

“They never do,” he said, and observing my look of distaste he shrugged his shoulders. “What can you do? A job’s a job.”

“One has to live,” I agreed.

I removed the crystal block and examined it. The contact holder was broken right across.

"The quantum-reflex-diode-matrix," I said, with the intention of impressing him, "is pretty well shot at. A replacement will cost you about forty pounds ; but it so happens that I know a man . . ."

"I'm broke," he said, simply.

I never have any luck !

"In that case," I said, making the best of it, "I shall have to perform something not far short of an electronic miracle of electronic engineering. Do you have any string ?"

A perfectly normal request, but it seemed to throw him. "String ?" he echoed, faintly.

"Never mind," I told him. "I've a piece of tape that might do."

He watched, fascinated, while I bound the thing together.

"A miracle of electronic engineering," he sneered. "What do we do now ? Throw it away ?"

The dog !

"There may be some minor side effects," I explained, patiently, "due to sub-optical fractures in the block ; but nothing of any consequence. There are almost certain to be some irregularities in the depletion layers, too, and the image build-up may be slightly non-linear."

He nodded. "That makes two of us who don't know what will happen."

I could see no future for him. His perspicacity was too offensively accurate. Clipping the back on I handed him the camera without another word.

He took a few steps backwards, lining the camera up on me. Apparently, I was to be the test subject. Then he glanced over his shoulder, and quickly swung his camera towards the imposing entrance of the *Hotel Roma*.

William Hope Rattleorb was standing there, having a word with the flashily-dressed doorman. Hanging on to Rattleorb's arm was a young piece of perhaps nineteen or twenty. She had dark, almost beetle-black hair, a perfect profile, and a figure that couldn't be faulted. Not uncommon in this day and age, perhaps ; but she had something else, too. It was that indefinable quality that, for want of a better term, has been called sex-appeal. She had enough of it, friends, to shatter the

armour of a confirmed misogynist. My hatred of the filthy rich went up another notch, and I cursed my own aseptic impecuniosity.

The girl looked straight towards us, and at that moment both she and her escort appeared to shrink. I shook my head and looked again. Now they were about a foot high, and were dwindling rapidly ; or, rather, they seemed to be retreating in space. Surrounding them was a kind of black halo edged with crimson. They were getting further and further away, as though they were being swept backwards down a long, black tunnel.

Parker lowered his camera, and looked suitably astonished. The doorman was standing to the left of the entrance with his mouth agape. Suddenly he belted down the steps, and fled to the back of the building somewhere, perhaps to video the police. Tomorrow there would be a new doorman, because no-one was likely to believe him. It's a sad fact, friends, that there never was a time when you didn't have to trim the coin of truth to fit the slot of credulity.

Rattleorb and the girl had vanished altogether ; but by straining the eyes you could just see a small black, and diminishing circle. Then this was gone, too. There weren't many people around, and no-one else appeared to have noticed anything unusual, so the question naturally arose what was I prepared to do about it. As far as I could see, it boiled down to which was the nearest, and fastest, pedstrip going anywhere.

My photographer friend came over, looking rather bemused. "Where'd they go?" he asked.

"To hell for ice!" I told him. "Let's get away from here, and dump that thing over the Level."

"Dump my camera? Are you crazy?"

"No," I said, "just uncommonly sane. The one is often mistaken for the other. I expect you can find your own way home. Don't bother to keep in touch. I never saw you in my life before."

I jumped the fast south pedstrip, almost knocking down another photographer. "Krythorp bulgess," he remarked with a smile as he dodged out of the way, clutching his camera with both arms.

"I shouldn't be surprised," I said, "especially at this time of the year."

There was something odd about him, quite apart from the language, and I turned to glance back. I forgot about the foreign cameraman, however, when I saw Bill Parker approaching me. I had reckoned without his agility, and his confounded stickability.

"I happen to be going your way," he said. "I've got an apartment in Zone Three, north side."

"Marvellous," I said, snapping my teeth at him; "but I've just remembered that I'm on the wrong strip." I grabbed the change-bar at the next commuter strip, and then stepped off that when the fast north showed up at Belling Corner. I couldn't shake him. "You just happen to be going my way," I said, as we landed together on the north strip. "You must have apartments all over the place."

One thing he did have was a sensitive conscience. "What are we going to do?" he asked, nervously. "It was practically murder."

"Nonsense," I soothed him. "The most that can be said is that we left them in somewhat reduced circumstances."

"I'm going to the police," he said, firmly.

I patted him on the back. "You're a model citizen," I said, "and I'm proud of you. When they've kicked you half to death just keep that in mind. It may help. Stay on this strip. There's a police post at the terminus. I get off at the next intersection."

"No you don't," he frowned. "You'll have to come with me. After all, it was you who fixed the camera."

That's the way it goes, friends. Do a man a favour, and he won't rest till he sees you in gaol. In the end we arrived at a compromise. We went to his apartment to talk things over. No-one can say that I am not a reasonable man. Besides, he kept that damned camera pointed at me all the way, with his finger on the release button.

The first thing he did was to remove the back of the thing. I stood behind him, away from the business end, and watched him remove the photo-block.

"Clear," he said. "Not a thing on it."

"That proves it," I pointed out, with rather shaky logic. "You had nothing to do with the snatching, or whatever it was. Put it down to coincidence. No doubt their sins had caught up with them."

“Don’t be so beastly !” he frowned. “She seemed a decent enough girl to me.”

So that was the concern ! Well, well ! *Cherchez la femme*, and very nice, too.

“Forget her,” I advised him. “She’s out of your income bracket. Now, I know a smart, little stores assistant . . .” He glared at me. “Well, maybe not,” I finished. I picked up the photo-block, and examined it—holding it up to the light.

Approaching in the seeming distance were two tiny figures. I watched, open-mouthed, for a spell, and then I handed the block to Parker.

“Just have a look,” I said. “It could be I’m seeing things.”

He glanced at it, and then his body went rigid, like a pointer dog indicating a dead bird. Perhaps she was at that.

“That’s her !” he said, delightedly.

“Rattleorb’s there, too,” I pointed out. It seemed to have escaped him.

“They’re moving !” he exclaimed. “They’re actually moving !”

He put the block on the table, and we watched them get larger and larger until they almost filled the available photo space. Rattleorb seemed more enraged than distressed ; but the girl was completely expressionless. They were talking. At least we could see their lips moving. Bill Parker picked the block up and put it to his ear in a vain attempt to hear what they were saying. When he put it back on the table the two little figures were in full retreat as though they were running for their very lives.

“What made them run away like that ?” asked the photographer, frowning.

I looked at him in disgust. “We’re probably out of focus,” I said ; “but when you stuck your ear against the block they saw that all right. Wouldn’t *you* run if you suddenly saw an enormous hairy ear taking up the whole thoroughfare, and shutting out the sky ?”

“It’s not hairy !” he said. “Maybe it was something else that scared them. After all, we don’t know where they are.” The figures had disappeared and the block was clear again. Bill sighed. “I don’t get it,” he said, dejectedly. “I just don’t get it.”

I had the beginnings of a theory. I was trying to recall what I knew about Pohler's still-disputed monograph on the sympathetic field. It was published in 1997; but physicists for the most part still refuse it credence. It almost fitted this situation, though.

Pohler said that if you set up two *sympathetically* vibrating fields there was actually only one point in time where they would be *replicate*, and cutting off either at that precise point of time would mean that transference would take place, presumably through hyper-space. He kept the maths to a minimum; but what really upset his brother physicists was his odd choice of terms. Some of them still regard it as a hoax; but Corlus Bram Pohler isn't around any more to provide the rebuttals. He went into his laboratory one day to embark on some experiment or other, and he never came out. Someone broke the door down eventually; but there was nothing there—not even a laboratory. Just the bare walls; no shelves, no equipment, nothing.

I mentioned this to Parker.

“For heaven's sake,” he protested, “the situation's complicated enough without introducing that nut. He's the fellow that said he had gone beyond mathematics into the controlling world of symbolism, or some such rubbish. What I say is that any man who discards mathematics, or discounts them, is nothing but a moron.”

I should have knocked him down, of course; but I am a gentleman to my fingertips. I merely treated his remark with the contempt it deserved.

“Your damned, figure-infested, inch-holed, worm-eaten intellect,” I snarled at him, “isn't capable of appreciating an idea that hasn't previously been pinned down like a beetle on a card, and examined exhaustively in one of those mangy little text books that they murder children with!” I clicked my teeth at him. “You have an alternative hypothesis, of course?”

He shook his head. “All right, then,” he said, “accepting this theory, where do we go from there.” He indicated the photo-block. “I mean how do we extricate them from their predicament?”

“Let's eat first,” I suggested. “Do you have any favourite restaurant—somewhere where your credit is good?”

“How can you think of food at a time like this?”

“I have a tyrannical stomach,” I explained, “and it won’t be denied. Come on, we’ll both feel better after a good meal.”

“The *Golden Fleece* is where I generally go,” he said; “but it’s on the other side of town.”

“The further the better,” I told him. “It might help us to get a fresh slant on things.”

We took the ped-strip and arrived at the restaurant about fifteen minutes later. “What do you say to lobster?” Bill Parker asked, after we found a table. “They do that best.”

“It suits me admirably,” I said. “I’ll have a couple with loads of trimmings.”

He frowned at me. “My credit isn’t that good. Perhaps we should have a couple of sandwiches.”

“Don’t insult me,” I said, holding out the wine list. “What would you suggest?”

He took it off me, and threw it under the table. “The water here,” he informed me, “is excellent.”

“Make mine Vichy,” I said. After all, one has to keep up appearances. You never know who is watching.

I knew about three seconds later. A voice to the left of me said quietly; but furiously: “You pair of damned scoundrels!”

Bill Parker was moving his mouth, without voicing any words. He looked as though he was understudying for Hamlet in the ghost scene, and overdoing the part. I glanced round and was astonished to find myself gazing into the angry features of William Hope Rattleorb.

I swallowed my surprise, and nodded to him. “Good afternoon,” I said. “Do you come here for the crab, or are you just naturally crustaceous?”

“I don’t wish to make a scene,” he returned, in a fierce whisper. “So I suggest that you leave this table and join me at mine. I want an explanation before I call the police.”

I looked at poor Parker. He nodded, weakly, and we followed Rattleorb over to another table where his girl friend sat quietly sipping at a glass of chilled Burgundy and looking cooler than the ice bucket. I was aware of a faint, pleasant, but strangely disturbing scent. Our eyes met for an instant and she smiled in a slightly amused fashion.

“We were just about to order,” I told Rattleorb. “Perhaps you could catch the eye of the head waiter. I’ll have lobster to

start with, and plenty of dressing. The burgundy looks good. You should order some more. A couple of bottles apiece would do." One must make the most of one's opportunities.

"Shut up!" he exclaimed, savagely. "I've several questions I want answering, and you two are going to answer them!"

"By all means," I assented, agreeably. "but let's eat first."

Rattleorb seemed to control himself with a great effort. "All right," he said. "We'll play it your way."

He signalled to a waiter and I did the ordering. Everyone else appeared to have lost interest in food. Rattleorb sat there folding and unfolding his arms, while I demolished the lobster, and guzzled half a bottle of wine. Bill Parker gazed at the girl, and seemed to have forgotten her escort. I wasn't too busy eating to notice the glances that passed between them. Rattleorb was too busy boiling us in oil to notice anything else.

"Haven't you damned well finished yet?" he asked when he saw me chivvying the last of the lobster around the plate.

I pushed it away and touched my lips delicately with the napkin. "Now then," I said, "let's hear your grievance."

"My grievance!" he fumed. "I'll tell you what my grievance is. You and your smart Alec friend have committed a felony against my person, to say nothing of this young lady. You fired something at us from that damned camera, and the next thing I remember is being somewhere else—a few yards from here, in fact. I don't know how you did it. Some drug or other, I suppose, rigged in a capsule that breaks on impact. Then you must have driven us here somehow. Is that how it was? Were we kidnapped? Who's behind it? You might as well know that I've been to the police about it . . ."

"You've been to the police and they didn't prove very co-operative. They thought your story was crazy?" I grinned at him. "Right?"

He nodded, surlily. "You banked on that, didn't you. Yes, you're right about the police. They wouldn't dare say it; but they intimated that perhaps I had had too much to drink. There's something else . . ." His voice trailed off. "Never mind," he went on. "Just tell me what's behind it, that's all."

"Before you go any further," I told him, "you might as well know that we are as much in the dark as you are. We happened to be there at the time. No more than that."

He groaned. "That only makes it worse. What are we going to do?" He rubbed his hands together in a hopeless despairing way, and for the first time I felt sorry for him. "I had a couple of policemen come along with us to the spot where we were first dumped and something very odd happened. There's some kind of mental barrier—it can't be anything else—that prevents our going any further than that spot, and no matter which way we walk we seem channelled towards it. When we tried to go further the buildings began to grow taller, and we seemed to get smaller and smaller. Then we were at the end of everything, with darkness on all side, staring out of a great, glass box at a blaze of colour. Once there was this great, hairy ear, about a hundred feet across . . ."

Bill looked uneasily at me, and touched the offending ear, self-consciously. Rattleorb continued with his story :

"We ran as fast as we could back to where we had left the police ; but they'd gone. Back at the station I checked with them ; but they swore that we'd dodged them, somehow, and I was advised to go on home and sleep it off. The point is that I can't get home. No matter which way we go we find ourselves looking out of this glass box. I keep thinking about that ear. I'm not a nervous man ; but . . . well, I don't want to bump into any monsters, hallucinatory, or otherwise."

"Tell him all about it," I urged Bill Parker.

Bill explained at length. When he had finished Rattleorb leant back helplessly in his chair. "You mean to say that you really don't know how it happened?" he asked.

"Yes and no," I said, cautiously. "We have a kind of theory, but it requires working on."

"I'm a ruined man!" moaned Rattleorb, with deep conviction.

He was, too. By now the police would have informed his wife, and probably the video boys, that he was rolling round the town blind drunk, and with a beautiful young popsy in tow.

I turned to the photographer. "Come on," I said. "We've got work to do." I got up and patted Rattleorb on the shoulder. "Keep heading into that glass box. I'll have you through it before the night's out or my name's not Belov."

"If you don't," he returned, nastily, "your name's mud. I'll get you both at least ten years apiece if it costs me a million to make it stick!"

"God bless you, Mr. Copperfield!" I said. "You should be shackled to a ghost!"

The girl laughed, delightedly. "Perhaps he is," she said.

Rattleorb glowered. "That will do, Valda!" he said, angrily.

I glanced at her. The merriment had vanished and her baby blue eyes had a dead quality as though someone had switched off the brain behind them.

Outside I caught a glimpse of the foreign photographer who had spoken to me near the *Hotel Roma*. I wondered vaguely if perhaps he had had anything to do with the snatching of Rattleorb and Valda. I watched him take the fast east strip and he was whisked away out of sight, still carrying what seemed to me a rather odd-looking camera.

"What do you think of the girl?" I asked Bill Parker.

"She's wonderful!" he said, ecstatically. "She's absolutely perfect."

"Perfect like a robot," I told him. "There's something odd about her, as though she is under some kind of hypnosis."

Bill hadn't heard a word of it. He was still gazing at the *Golden Fleece*, and obviously dreaming the dreams of the deeply stricken. There was a fixed smile on his face. I snapped my fingers before his eyes and he came to with a start.

"I could really rocket in on that girl," he said, as we walked away. "Couldn't you?"

"You have a point," I admitted, "on the purely pulchritudinal level, but the last time the Moon struck me my affections went into orbit and stayed there. Food is what excites me most nowadays—with brief intervals of lunacy, of course."

"What happened to the girl?" he asked, as we took the slow east-circular pedstrip.

"She got back on her broomstick. The last I heard of her she was heading for America with a married man old enough to be her father, and rich enough to buy a mile wide chunk of New York, which he did."

"Tough luck," he commented.

"It might have been worse," I pointed out. "She might have stayed."

"What are we going to do?" he asked, as gloom descended on him again.

That intrusive *we* rubbed me the wrong way, and it struck me quite suddenly that I wanted out. I have a nose for trouble and I sensed a whole heap of it piling up somewhere—for someone.

“Leave it to old Belov,” I said. “I’ve got it all worked out. I’ll see you anon, whenever that is. I’ve some special equipment to collect.”

“Now wait a minute . . .” he began to object, but I jumped for the fast north as the intersection came up and across that to the other side of the Level. I just managed to dive into a grav-lift as the doors were closing and swinging round I thumped the free-fall button. We went down nine Levels while the only other occupant, a young lady with slightly bulging eyes, screamed her head off.

As soon as we touched bottom I hoofed it out of that lift faster than I had entered it in case someone got the wrong idea, and took the Up-Level escalator, catching another lift going up on the next Level. I emerged at Top-Level, and looked cautiously about me. I’d shaken him.

A shabbily-dressed old gentleman fell into step with me as I moved off. “I wonder,” he said, “if you have ever considered the possibility of communicating with the animal world?”

“I’ve been communicating with them all my life,” I told him.

“I mean the lower animals,” he said, sternly.

I shook my head. “I never speak to politicians,” I said, walking a little faster.

He increased his own pace. For an old man he had plenty of steam. “You still here?” I asked, pointedly.

“Like chimpanzees and horses and things,” he said, desperately. “I happen, sir, to be collecting for this selfsame worthy cause. I represent the Society For the Encouragement of Communication With the Lower Animals. A donation however small . . .”

“I’ll send my trained parrot round to see you,” I promised. “He’s smarter than me. He can say no in nine languages.”

“Cheapskate !” he snarled, as I walked on, and shook his fist in my direction. I passed a policeman, who seemed mildly interested in us and piled on the pace a bit. I had a shrewd suspicion that the old fraud wouldn’t let it rest there. “That man’s collecting for a bogus charity,” he told the policeman in a loud voice.

I was off on the old routine again, jumping the pedstrips and heading for the nearest operational grav-lift, most of them being out most of the time. It was a kind of economy measure. It cut down on power, and on the number of engineers required to service the things. Cheeseparing is something we know more about than any other nation.

Ten minutes later I had been through the Levels three times, using lifts, escalators and pedstrips as they came. I had made a number of enemies, too, and left three women and an artist type with purple hair having hysterics ; but I had lost the cop and the old fellow who had tried to put the bite on me. On *me* ! That made a change, anyhow ; but I was in no mood to appreciate the funny side of it. I looked around for a seat, found one, and sat down to mop the perspiration from my brow.

“ I didn’t expect to see you again,” a familiar voice remarked, and I looked up into the scowling face of Bill Parker. You see how it is, friends ? I never have any damned luck ! “ Where’s this special equipment you had to collect ?” he wanted to know.

“ On consideration,” I said, “ I don’t think it will be necessary. The problem, as I see it, is purely a matter of field-image technology.”

“ What’s that ?” he asked, suspiciously.

I hadn’t the faintest idea. These things sometimes come to me out of thin air, like a snatch of verse to a poet. It’s a kind of inspiration. Perhaps I should have been a poet. It’s a far more dignified way of starving to death than being an unemployed cyberneticist.

“ It’s based on the work of Pohler,” I said, waffling like mad, because I had a sneaking idea that Parker was in the mood to unload his troubles on the first policeman that passed. I had nothing to fear, of course, but I am just naturally cautious. “ All we need to do is build a mock-up of the field-image in question. You know, Rattleorb and the girl as they are at any one point in time. We don’t even need to do that. The field-image already exists in that photo-block. This is what Jung would call the visible florescence . . . ”

“ You’re not bringing him into it,” he asked, suspiciously. “ All that myth and stuff. How can that help ?”

“ . . . the visible fluorescence,” I continued, ignoring the interruption, “ as opposed to the *rhizome*, which is invisible and eternal. What we have to remember is that, in cases like this one, symbolism has more precision than science, because it can be tailored to the individual problem. Science, as Jung said, only deals in averages.”

“ Get to the point,” he demanded, impatiently.

I began to wish I could.

“ Do you happen to have a cigarette ?” I asked him.

He handed me one, and lit one himself. "You were saying," he said.

"Well," I said, "let me put it like this. We have the field-image mock-up and we have the field-image proper. The next thing is to replicate them, if you'll pardon the term. How do we do that? Let's see, now . . ." I crashed my brain into top gear and wrenched another idea from it. "What's more replicate than a reflection? Remember that we're dealing more with symbolism than science. All we need do now is place a mirror in front of the photo-block, and when Rattleorb and the girl approach it they will see, facing and walking towards them, the replicate field-image. The instant they recognise this fact, belief being an integral part of the whole symbolic set-up, precise syntonous replication will have been achieved. Transferences should then take place—or something equally ridiculous."

"It sounds like a lot of old rubbish to me," he commented, sourly.

"Not to the Jung at heart," I quipped. "Shall we go?"

The field-image set-up worked perfectly. Having arranged the mirror in front of the block, which I'd placed in the centre of the floor, we retired to a discreet distance just in case. After a while I saw a movement, a kind of flickering in the photo-block, and straining my eyes was rewarded with a glimpse of the unhappy couple. It was just a glimpse, and then they were in the room.

Rattleorb looked about him a bit dazedly and then he took a swing at Bill Parker. "You criminal swine!" he roared. "I'm going through that door and don't you dare try to stop me, or I shall probably do you an injury. Follow me, Valda."

The girl shook her head. "No, I have to meet someone here."

"So that's it!" he said. "Blackmail. And you are all in on it. Well, let me tell you that you won't get a penny from me. You've overplayed your hand. Thanks to you and the thick-headed force my wife is probably in possession of some of the facts already. Anything else you may have to tell her will only be piling Pelion on Ossa . . ."

"Now look . . ." began Bill Parker.

Rattleorb made a sudden leap for the door and was gone before any of us could move.

"Let him go," said the girl. "He is not very interesting."

"No," I said, "he's not. But you are, darling."

“Cut it out,” the photographer told me. “She’s been through a great deal. How do you feel?” he asked the girl. “Are you all right?”

She giggled, putting her hand to her mouth. “It was really very funny,” she said. “That poor man was in such a rage all the time, but he became a bore. I don’t suppose he can help it. His brain has been carefully stripped of almost everything except the acquisitive faculty. He only wanted me because I looked like a nice bit of property to show off to his business friends. Did you know I was to be his secretary?”

“The third this year,” I said. “His wife fires them as fast as he engages them. Who are you really?” I had been watching her eyes. They were intelligent, bright blue, but unwavering. “Don’t you ever blink? And who switches you on and off?”

A slight frown creased her brow. “You are very observant. Normally I blink perfectly; but there is a short in one of the subsidiary circuits, which controls some of the muscles in that area.”

Bill Parker looked from one to the other of us with a puzzlement showing in his face. “What is this?” he asked. “I don’t seem to be with it at all. Come on, Belov. What goes on?”

“Our friend,” I said, “is not what she seems. Unless I am very much mistaken. She doesn’t belong to this planet at all. In fact, she is an alien.”

“Don’t talk rubbish!” he said, angrily. “Anyone can see that she is a very beautiful girl.”

I shook my head. “That’s only a borrowed body.” I turned to the girl. “What do you really look like? Tell him about your dog-headed friends back on Kee-blood or wherever the devil it is.”

I knew almost at once that I’d gone too far. One should never trifle with an alien—supposing she was an alien, and I couldn’t see what else she could be. Maybe I didn’t really believe it. I don’t know what other reason could have led me into such an indiscretion. It suddenly struck me that the company wasn’t quite to my taste; but before I could exit through the door and belt for the nearest pedstrip, a change came over Valda. Anger suffused the lovely face and her right arm moved so fast that I wasn’t sure it had. In her hand now and pointing at me was a shiny little instrument that looked like a weapon of some kind.

“ I withdraw the remark about your dog-headed friends,” I said, phrasing my apology perhaps a little clumsily. “ They are probably very nice people.”

Bill was edging for the door, the miserable coward, and I threw myself sideways with the intention of getting him between me and the alien ; but I wasn't quick enough. Ice-cold lightning crackled from the gun and I literally froze in my tracks. Then the alien mind was inside my brain, or so it seemed to me, making slight adjustments here and there, and tripping what were the equivalent of switches.

After this the whole sequence of events was blurred, although odd things stuck out like Emilio hanging on grimly to a link of sausages while I dragged him all over the kitchen, finally making off, on all fours, with a good half of them. I can hear Emilio's voice now, raised in indignant protest :

“ What is this, Belov ? What you think you are, huh ? You don't let go and I chop you up ! All right, then,” taking up a cleaver, “ I chop you up !” But I was away like a greyhound, dragging the sausages over the Level . . .

Sitting there, on the psychiatric couch, it occurred to me that I must have eaten them raw. I shuddered. I certainly owed that alien something. I also owed it to humanity to expose her for the monster she was, without hazarding my freedom, of course. I owed that to myself. First of all, however, I had to get the hell out of here and fast.

The door opened just then and closed softly. It was Valda. Standing beside her was the man I had met near the *Hotel Roma*. The one I had thought to be a foreign photographer.

“ Krythorp blugess !” he said, which was what he had remarked on our first encounter. He patted what I had taken to be a camera. Looking at it now it was more like a gold-plated oscilloscope with a double screen and a protective grille of silver rods that seemed to move and change position from time to time.

“ Pardon my *deshabille*,” I said, dodging behind the couch ; “ but I don't often entertain here.”

“ Do not be afraid,” the girl said. “ We are here to help you.”

The man nodded vigorously. “ Rodat beng vulgar,” he said, frowning slightly.

“ I'm not as rude and vulgar as all that,” I protested. “ I just happen to have no clothes.”

All the time I was getting ready to dodge that slick pistol hand of Valda's. The thing was to keep them occupied by talking until help came ; but I couldn't think of a thing to say.

"I owe you an apology for acting so hastily," the girl told me ; "but it was the image I saw of myself in your mind which triggered off my reaction. We are not like that, although there is no way of explaining what we do resemble. There is nothing on Earth or in your wildest conceptions remotely as we are." Her companion nodded and murmured something I couldn't catch. "My friend Nolden suffers from a kind of vocal inadequacy," she explained. "He is unable to pronounce words even in our own tongue. Nevertheless, he is an excellent telepath, as are we all, so he is able to communicate in that way with his own kind. He also expresses his sympathy with you for what you have been through."

"There's someone at the door," I said. "Aren't you going to let them in ? I'm sure they'll be interested in what goes on in the outer reaches of space ; in the general planetary mishmash and astral hoo-ha pertaining in your galaxy."

Just let them turn their backs and I was out through the window, glass and frame and all if necessary.

Valda smiled. "I've told you that there is no need to fear us, but if you do attempt to jump through the window I shall have to freeze you to prevent you breaking your neck."

"Marvellous," I said. "While you're in my mind have a good look round. It says 'Private' everywhere and we like to keep it that way."

"I'm sorry," she said, laughing. "You've no idea how archaic and amusing I find mankind. That is why I come here for my rest period. You must be wondering about the body I am using. Well, it is purely artificial, a vehicle for the spirit. It doesn't require food and it can be switched on and off like a robot. It is too complicated to explain the why and the how of it ; but it is only our minds that make the journey across interstellar space. Our bodies stay in a kind of coma until we return. We have suitable robotic bodies on all the planets throughout the universe."

Someone was trying to break the door down and we could hear the confused sound of voices as something crashed against it again and again. It would be down within the next few seconds the way the hinges had sprung. "It is time," Valda

said and nodded to her companion. "He is holding the transferer," she told me. "We will go to your friend's apartment."

Nolden operated the doodah he was holding and without any sensation except for a slight tingling sensation we were instantly in Bill Parker's place. The photographer wasn't there, which was perhaps as well.

"We could have taken you to your own residence had we known it," Valda said. "As it is we hope this will do. You will be able to clean up and clothes have been provided. They are in the bedroom."

"Thank you very much!" I returned, bitterly. "All I have to do now is to live down my dog days, and hope that the Chief Constable doesn't throw the key away when he finally gets me inside."

Nolden looked sympathetic. "Grogez waygo impellitan," he observed.

Valda sighed. "I am sorry; but we are quite unable to help further. It would complicate matters and perhaps make the authorities suspicious. We can't take that risk."

One thing I had to know. "Tell me," I said, "was Nolden responsible for your spectacular fade-out on the hotel steps. He was there. I saw him."

Nolden shook his head, furiously, and treated me to an explosive burst in his own tongue.

"His being there was just a coincidence. He didn't even see what happened. The incident you refer to was caused by a local power failure, which affected our control computer and our own emergency supply was sluggish in coming in. This has now been rectified."

"And the replication field mock-up?"

She smiled and looked at her companion. He nodded. "I am only allowed to say that the Pohler-Jung field techniques are worth pursuing. Similar techniques are used extensively by us. Now we must go . . ."

"Some technique!" I commented to the empty air. All that remained to remind me of my alien friends was the faint, lingering, indescribable and pleasant scent that I associated with Valda. Her companion was the biggest question mark, though. He had *nodded* to her. Whatever he was, he was certainly no telepath.

He wasn't either, nor was he an alien. I had just recollected where I had seen him before. I had first seen his picture on the inside cover of an old text book many years ago ; but I had seen the same picture several times since then in various publications. He was one of the most controversial figures of his time. His name was Corlus Bram Pohler. This only extended the queries into the realm of the impossible. For one thing he hadn't aged a day.

"The hell !" I said and went and found a depilator. Then I had a shower and put on the clothes that Valda had left on the bed for me. Everything was identical with the clothes I had been wearing ; the only difference being that these were all brand new.

While I was examining myself in the mirror to see how everything fitted I heard the outer door open and close.

Bill Parker almost ran into the bedroom. "Oh . . ." he said, with a mixture of disappointment and surprise. "I thought . . ."

"You thought it might be Valda," I finished for him. "Well, it isn't. She just left. She had a gentleman with her named Pohler. They are busy sewing up the universe, although with what aim I can't say." I felt I had to snap him out of it somehow.

"Forget about her," I advised him. "She's just a private dream of Pohler's. He's got everything on tap via the communal subconscious ; but he's lost the use of language. That's the first casualty when you re-stack reason in favour of symbolism. The smooth flow of thought is lost and you have to think in terms of symbolic quanta. You get things done quicker and easier ; but you have to think with the back of your head and chaos is just around the corner. Language becomes an abracadabra with every word a magic spell until it degenerates into the sound of the wind and the trees and the creaking of mountains giving birth to nothing that means anything in a logical universe . . ."

"Now look here . . ." he began, raising a hand to stop me.

But I wasn't to be stopped. I was in full spate. "Valda, my poor friend," I went on, raising my voice slightly, "is an elemental spirit dressed up in the vestiges of Pohler's logic. Before very long she will eat him up and take a big bite out of

our own universe in the process. The way I measure time I won't be around then. It will be too long ago in the future, if you see what I mean."

"Damned if I do!" he exploded. "And I don't believe a word of it!"

"Neither do I," I confessed; "but it's a beautiful theory and if it isn't that—what? The politics bug me."

"How are you?" he asked, suddenly cautious. "You're not still, er . . ."

"Biting people? No. I caught something off a policeman and a couple of nutcrackers had to turn my brain round. There's lots of it I haven't used yet." I'd been going through the pockets of my suit while I had been talking. Not a penny! "How are you fixed for cash?"

"I'm out of work," he told me. "The chief wouldn't accept the explanation I was able to give him."

I shook my head. "Imagine that!" I said and went towards the door. "Come and see me when you get a job. I might want to borrow some money."

Outside on the Level I wondered what I should say to the Chief Constable. There didn't seem any future in telling him how sorry I was. I took the fast south pedstrip, with Emilio's restaurant in mind and two grim-faced, official-looking men got on with me.

"You're going the wrong way," the one on my left told me.

"How's the Chief?" I asked.

"Pretty sore," the one on the right said. "His flogging arm's still stiff where you bit him. He only beat up three drunks yesterday."

"And the little old lady who cleans up his office," added the other. "She forgot to empty his ash-tray, or something."

That's what I like about the police. They've got such a nice sense of humour.

—Edward Mackin

In the next issue

Skeleton Crew

by BRIAN W. ALDISS

Complete short novel of an unusual Future

Article

This is the first of a series of fascinating and absorbing articles in which Michael Moorcock will diagnose the various aspects of many famous writers and their works as applied to the fantasy field as a whole.

Aspects Of Fantasy**I. Introduction**

by **MICHAEL MOORCOCK**

What is 'fantasy fiction'? It is, of course, a broad field but, on the other hand, fairly easy to define. It is fiction which deals in the fantastic, in what is outside of ordinary human experience.

It contains many sub-categories of which science fiction is one, it is written on many levels by writers of varying ability who use it for a great number of purposes. Today it ranges from the ill-written ghoul-operas published in poor-quality paper backs to the well-written extravaganzas of Peake, Tolkien and others.

A more interesting question, and one which I hope partially to answer in these articles, is *why* is fantasy? Why is it written, why is it read, what is its appeal?

H. P. Lovecraft, that well-known describer of the indescribable, says in his book *Marginalia* :

'Modern Science has, in the end, proved an enemy to art and pleasure ; for by revealing to us the whole sordid and prosaic basis of our thoughts, motives, and acts, it has stripped the world of glamour, wonder, and all those illusions of heroism, nobility, and sacrifice which used to sound so impressive when romantically treated. Indeed, it is not too much to say that psychological discovery, and chemical, physical, and psychological research have largely destroyed the element of emotion among informed and sophisticated people by resolving it into its component parts . . .'

That I disagree with this judgment will be obvious, for I believe that dissection of the fantasy story into its component parts does not detract from the story but rather adds a new dimension to it—a dimension which, to me, is far more interesting and rewarding. In an article published in *The Woman Journalist* for Spring, 1963, J. G. Ballard writes :

' I feel that the writer of fantasy has a marked tendency to select images and ideas which directly reflect the internal landscapes of his mind, and the reader of fantasy must interpret them on this level, distinguishing between the manifest content, which may seem obscure, meaningless or nightmarish, and the latent content, the private vocabulary of symbols drawn by the narrative from the writer's mind. The dream worlds, synthetic landscapes and plasticity of visual forms invented by the writer of fantasy are external equivalents of the inner world of the psyche . . . '

Lovecraft was writing forty years ago, Ballard is writing now and I feel it is likely that the developments in physics and psychology which have taken place since 1922 would have caused Lovecraft to revise his views if he were living today, for Einstein and Jung between them have, by analysis, broadened rather than destroyed the scope of the artist.

The increasing interest in the fantasy form seems to show that intelligent people are, indeed, looking beyond its purely sensational and romantic aspects and finding it a rewarding literary field. Those critics who still decry it for its usual lack of deep characterisation do not see that it completely reverses the 'real' world of the social novel—placing its heroes in a landscape directly reflecting the inner landscape of the ordinary man. The hero ranges the lands of his own psyche, encountering the various aspects of himself. When we read a good fantasy we are being admitted into the subterranean worlds of our own souls.

Therefore the fascination of the fantasy story may well lie in its concern with direct subconscious symbols. The mingled attraction and revulsion felt by its readers may well express the combined wish to see into themselves and at the same time withdraw into 'normal' life when they begin to feel they are probing too deeply.

Generally speaking, fantasy stories can fall into two broad categories. There is the kind that permanently disturbs and the kind that comforts. Part of the purpose of the child's

fairy story is to describe the horror and then, by means of an easily identifiable hero, destroy it, thus laying the ghost. The child is full of fears and fancies. Therefore one of the differences between fairy stories and the major proportion of adult fantasy stories is that an adult story rarely produces a comforting end. Whether the hero wins through or not, the reader is left with the suspicion or knowledge that all is not quiet on the supernatural front. For supernatural also read subconscious and you're still with me.

The typical *Unknown Worlds* story is a kind of rational ghost-laying substitute for the child's fairy story—it diminishes that which is described to the level of whimsey and makes it appear harmless—but it avoids the essential nature of the horror story/supernatural romance and is in many ways a corrupt and unproductive form. Most of the Gothic novels, incidentally, tried to tack 'rational' explanations of their horrors on to their last chapters, although here the rationality was so totally superficial that it did not, in most cases, convince—whereas the supernatural episodes *did*.

The fantasy which we read today is not really very much different from the fantasy of, say, 2000 B.C. It is the oldest form of story-telling and, essentially, it has not changed much.

We are all familiar with the Greek legends, English folk-tales and the stories of King Arthur and his Round Table, even if we haven't read them since our schooldays. One thing is obvious in all of these, and that is the repetition of certain kinds of characters (archetypal characters) and situations (classical situations). They recur constantly and they recur in Chivalric and Gothic romances, in Goethe, Wagner and the Jacobean tragedists, the works of Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Bierce, Dunsany, Blackwood, Machen etc.—through the first half of the twentieth century with James Branch Cabell, E. F. Benson, Charles Williams, Lovecraft, Howard and the *Weird Tales* school, to Bloch, Leiber Bradbury and others in the U.S.A and Peake, Tolkien, Powys, etc., in this country. And, apart from complexities of plot, more sophisticated means of story-telling and the odd change of scenery, the basic form has not changed since Cervantes took the mickey out of it in *Don Quixote*. It is romantic, it is sensational and, at its best, illuminating.

There are writers who go directly to their source of inspiration and write within its context (Thomas Burnett Swann or

Treece, for instance), others who remove the whole machinery to an imaginary setting (Merritt, Howard, Leiber, Tolkien) and yet others who specialise in a contemporary setting, contrasting the prosaic with the supernatural to produce their effects (this particular talent seems to have been all but lost since the days of the Edwardian school). There is the kind of story intended only to horrify (the typical *Weird Tales* story) and the kind which seeks to entertain the reader on a wider canvas (the typical Lost Land or Sword-and-Sorcery story). The difference between these is that the one *hints* at entities, worlds and events existing beyond ordinary human ken, whereas the other attempts to describe them in more concrete terms. Other writers go further—they make use of the symbols, archetypes and narrative machinery of the fantasy story—and attempt to weave them into a structure which, in its implications, causes the reader to sense more deeply the nature of his existence. Cabell's *Poictesme Mythos* and, I suppose, Lewis' *Perelandra* trilogy are obvious examples of authors consciously exploiting the form in order to discuss their own ideas about the nature of Man.

This use of archetypes and classical situations is, of course, to be discovered in the entire body of literature, but only in fantasy, whether it is intended merely to entertain or to enlighten as well, is it at once apparent. This is one of the reasons why writers like Iris Murdoch, William Golding and John Cowper Powys find a sympathetic audience amongst adherents of fantasy fiction, for all three writers use only a thin disguise to clothe their central characters. Indeed, far from limiting the writer, direct use of mythic material increases the richness and range of the work, whether he's a Realist or a Romantic.

As Lovecraft shows, there is no need for the writer to be aware of his real sources, though, as Ballard's work illustrates, it can be greatly improved if he is.

Having sketched in these few initial ideas about the form, I shall now sketch in its development.

First, if we leave aside the basic mythologies and religions of the world, we come to a body of Western literature which, in the form we know it, emerged from the Dark Ages. This literature, though still disguised as hero legends, was created by men who made it their living to journey from place to place telling stories of mighty deeds and supernatural horrors, usually in verse. *Beowulf* is the best-known of these.

Later we begin to find examples of what are generally called Chivalric Romances, stories of brave knights, doomed hero-villain knights (such as Lancelot), fair maidens, dark sorceresses mysterious magicians and foul monsters. The legends of King Arthur and his Table Round are probably the best known in Britain and America, though there are two other important bodies of Chivalric Romance—Charlemagnian and Peninsula. The Charlemagnian cycle involves a set-up similar to the court of King Arthur, with a king uniting his nation and vanquishing the pagan, helped by a group of paladins (usually twelve in number) who are his right hand men. If Lancelot and Galahad are the best-known Arthurian knights, then Roland and Oliver are the best known Charlemagnian knights.

The Peninsula Romances are not quite so complex and are based on the character of El Cid, the legendary champion of Spain who drove the Moslem invaders from his homeland. It is in the Peninsula Romances that we find the main body of what are termed by the experts 'decadent Romances' and it is in the decadent Romance that we find our first real examples of the fantasy story as opposed to the folk-legend for, from about the fourteenth century on, the romance-chronicler ceased hanging his stories on to already existing heroes and began to invent new ones.

Chief of these is *Amadis de Gaul*, probably created by the Portugese Vasco Lobeira, comprising in the original four long books but, in sequels by a host of imitators, making up some fifty books in all. Whereas the original Chivalric Romances were a mixture of ancient pagan legend, later Christian revision, history and myth, the decadent Romances, though borrowing heavily from the original body, were of definite authorship. They were, in fact, the first novels. The fourteenth fifteenth and sixteenth centuries produced a vast spate of these with titles like *Palmerin of England* (a four-volume Romance reprinted in 1807, translated by Southey), *Tirante the White*, *Felixmarte of Hyrcania*, *The Mirror of Chivalry* and hundreds more.

It was these Romances that Cervantes satirized in *Don Quixote* and, in rejecting the Romance form, laid the foundations for the modern novel in his pastoral and picaresque stories.

About fifty years after *Don Quixote* debunked the form, the last of its examples was published. It had given way to the

novel of country life and the colourful novel of thieves and vagabonds, though, in drama and poetry we still find evidence of its appeal—*The Fairy Queen*, for instance, makes direct use of Romantic imagery, while the Jacobean Tragedy, with its emphasis on gratuitous horror was later to influence the Gothic.

For over a hundred years, as the Age of Reason reigned, the prose romance was unpopular with intellectual and general public alike and it took an aesthetic and antiquarian politician Sir Horace Walpole, to instigate the return of the romance in Britain with what is generally thought to be the first real Gothic novel—*The Castle of Otranto*. Though there were one or two hints in other works that it was coming, it was Walpole's short novel that launched the Romantic Revival in English literature. This was published in 1764. It deals with all kinds of sensational supernatural events in and about the grotesque Castle, makes no attempt to rationalise them, from the mysterious appearance one day of a gigantic helmet in the first chapter, to the 'awful spectre' who reminds one of the characters of his duty in the last chapter.

Since later articles will deal with examples in detail, I won't bother to describe the best of the Gothics here. These included the works of Mrs. Ann Radcliffe (*Mysteries of Udolpho*), Matthew Gregory Lewis (*Ambrosio, or The Monk*), Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein*), Charles Maturin (*Melmoth the Wanderer*) and many, many more. For fifty years, from 1770 to 1820, the Gothic novel was the most popular form in England and its influence remained with later writers such as Scott, the Brontes, even Austen, Le Fanu and, of course, Poe and the Victorian/Edwardian school of horror-story writers. In fact it never really died after *Castle of Otranto*, but continued to develop to the present day (my own early "Elric" stories are written, I feel, in the tradition of the Chivalric and Gothic Romance.)

The fantasy story, with its overtones of romance and its undertones of the 'inner world of the psyche,' has never lost its appeal, though it often goes through periods where serious critics abhor it and a large section of the public disdains it. If we take into consideration folk-epics and religious works such as the Bible, the *Bhagavad Gita*, traditional tales such as *The Arabian Nights* and the Norse *Eddara*, we can see that its development has been continuous since primitive man first

began to invent stories. For better or worse, this can hardly be said of any other form.

I should like to finish this introductory article to a series which will deal with specific works of fantasy with a quote from Jung (*Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, pages 180-181):

'It (the second part of Goethe's Faust) is a strange something that derives its existence from the hinterland of man's mind—that suggests the abyss of time separating us from pre-human ages, or evokes a super-human world of contrasting light and darkness. It is a primordial experience which surpasses man's understanding and to which he is therefore in danger of succumbing. The value and the force of the experience are given by its enormity. It arises from timeless depths; it is foreign and cold, many-sided, demonic and grotesque. A grimly ridiculous sample of the eternal chaos . . . it bursts asunder our human standards of value and of aesthetic form. The disturbing vision of monstrous and meaningless happenings that in every way exceed the grasp of human feelings and comprehension makes quite other demands upon the powers of the artist than do the experiences of the foreground of life. These never rend the curtain that veils the cosmos; they never transcend the bounds of the humanly possible, and for this reason are readily shaped to the demands of art, no matter how great a shock to the individual they may be. But the primordial experiences rend from the top to bottom the curtain upon which is painted the picture of an ordered world, and allow a glimpse into the unfathomed abyss of what has not yet become. Is it a vision of other worlds, or of the obscuration of the spirit, or of the beginning of things before the age of man, or of the unborn generations of the future? We cannot say that it is any or none of these . . . In a more restricted and specific way, the primordial experience furnishes material for Rider Haggard in the fiction-cycle that turns upon She . . .'

It is in this more restricted and specific way that I intend to look at some of the more important works of fantasy in subsequent articles.

—Michael Moorcock

Just how accurate can astrology be in the diagnosis of a person's character? And if the stars in their courses do influence peoples' lives, could a first-class astrologer trace a missing man from a diagnosis of those characteristics?

THREE OF A KIND

by STEVE HALL

o n e

Rolf Anders was not in the sunniest of moods as he drove towards the entrance gates of the research establishment as directed by his chief. He felt grouchy about everything; with his job, with the world at large, but most of all with himself. He was at the bottom of one of his rare troughs; at the moment, the past looked wasted, the present pointless, and the future a febrile futility. Here he was, thirty-nine years old, with an engineering qualification and the right sort of experience, with which he should be doing something creative. Instead, for the last five years he had been a private eye, a human bloodhound with a difference; the point being that he had a talent for finding invisible trails, which when made clear, simplified all kinds of government security problems.

“But this is positively the last time,” he said vehemently to the uncomplaining dashboard of his Lagonda. “When this job is over, Anthony Hewlett can go to Hell and find himself another boy!”

The car mumbled deep in its ten-year old throat as he slowed and stopped at the closed iron gates.

A uniformed gate-man came out of the blockhouse, through a smaller side gate, and lost no time in stepping towards the driver's side of the car.

Rolf rolled down his window. "Anders, security," he said shortly, and flashed the pass which would get him into any establishment either government run, or like this one, government subsidised.

The guard looked at the small, flipped-open card and almost instantly nodded his recognition and satisfaction. He raised his arm to a colleague still inside the blockhouse, and the gates opened inwards on hinges which would not dare to even squeak without permission in quadruplicate. The uniformed man walked around to the passenger door and coolly got in.

"I'll direct you from here, sir," he said. "Straight on to the intersection, then turn right."

Rolf was used to the routine of being accompanied when he went into and out of this sort of place, even if the journey from gate to building was of the simplest and shortest possible—but he still didn't have to like it. He said nothing, however, but drove on as instructed. Three minutes later, he pulled up outside the four steps and the outer door of a typical, modern, concrete monstrosity of a building. He flicked the gear lever into neutral and left the engine running.

"Over to you," he said, and got out, to be met by yet another man in uniform.

His first escort slid over into the driving seat.

"I'll be back with her when you're ready," he answered.

Rolf nodded and automatically produced his pass again for the newcomer's delectation. When the man had sated himself visually, Rolf spoke a little wearily, "Lead on Macduff."

The guard nodded. "Professor Newcomb and Mr. Gaskin are waiting for you."

"Big deal," thought Rolf, sourly. "I wonder what the hell the problem is that you're so anxious to drop on to me."

Newcomb was short, fat, slightly pop-eyed and evidently trying hard to give the impression that he was cool, calm and collected, and the nett effect was anything but convincing.

Gaskin, too, appeared uneasy to Rolf's practised eye.

They all shook hands briefly and sat down; Newcomb behind his desk, Gaskin near to one end of the same piece of

furniture, while Anders flopped into the only comfortable looking chair in the room, a wicker-work effort with a cushioned seat.

“O.K.,” commented Rolf, breaking the brittle silence with all the delicacy of a bull in a china shop. “Let’s have it.”

Gaskin of local security, swung his bony face and lantern jaw in Newcomb’s direction. His look said quite plainly, “Will you start?”

The professor nodded unhappily. “I’m sure we’ve brought you here for nothing Mr. . . . ah . . . Anders—at least, I sincerely hope so.”

“Better let Mr. Anders decide that,” recommended Gaskin.

“Yes, yes, of course,” twittered Newcomb, but he still paused irresolutely.

“The fact is that Doctor Hurley has disappeared,” elaborated Gaskin.

Rolf held up a supplicating hand. “Let’s take it nice and easy : first, what do you do at this place specifically ; and next, just where does Hurley fit in ?”

“This is a research establishment,” answered Newcomb nebulously.

Rolf restrained himself with difficulty. “Research into what ?” he demanded.

The professor spread his hands, fingers apart as if he were running them over an invisible piano keyboard. “Anything and everything—there is no set programme ; all of our staff are free to undertake whatever they wish in the way of projects.”

“But you must have some idea, some control of what’s going on,” probed Rolf.

“Only when a project comes to fruition or is abandoned. The whole *idea* behind this establishment is experimental. We have no regular reports, weekly or otherwise, no time-wasting, bureaucratic paper-chasing . . .”

“And no idea in between times as to what gives,” broke in Rolf, bluntly. “Go on.”

Newcomb flushed. “What we’re trying to do is to let scientists get on with their job—and so far, the results have been most encouraging,” he finished defiantly.

Rolf Anders felt a little envious of the set-up—it was one that he would like to have taken part in himself.

“What was Hurley doing—have you any idea ?”

“ I know he was carrying out some experiments in plasma physics, and that he had a second and related project in the theoretical stages, but what it was exactly, I don't know, although I suspect that it was going successfully because Hurley was more excited lately than I've ever seen him.”

Anders turned to the silent Gaskin. “ When did the Doc blast off, and under what circumstances ?”

Harry Gaskin came straight to the point. “ He went home as usual two nights ago, or at least he left here to go home,” he amended. “ His wife was out at the time when he might have got there, so we're not certain.”

“ Was he seen ?”

“ If he was, we haven't been able to find the witness.”

“ So he just walked out of here, probably after having completed his current project, and disappeared into thin air ?” summed up Anders.

“ That's about the size of it,” agreed Gaskin, gloomily.

“ Has his wife heard from him ?”

“ A letter the next morning : it merely said that he'd gone away for a few days to think something out, and that she wasn't to worry about him.”

“ Postmark ?”

“ The village, eight p.m. the night he vanished.”

“ Didn't she suspect anything when he failed to show up that evening ?”

“ She did ; rang here at ten-thirty p.m. when she arrived home, but by then he'd had about five hours start.”

Rolf turned to Newcomb again. “ Could the work Hurley was doing have been of any use to an enemy power ?”

The professor answered without hesitation for once. “ I've been considering that myself : the short answer is that practically anything could be of use to an enemy.”

Rolf wondered how far away Hurley was now and in what country—no big prizes for the correct answer.

“ Was the Doc politically inclined—even remotely ?”

Both Gaskin and Newcomb shook their heads definitely.

“ Had he ever been ; possibly in h's student days ?”

Again the double negative head shake.

“ Was he in money difficulties or at loggerheads with his wife ?”

“ Absolutely not,” said Gaskin, baffledly. “ They were a devoted pair—I know it sounds hackneyed—but it's the only

phrase that fits. And they had a couple of thousand in the bank."

Rolf struck off tangentially. "And you waited so long before notifying us because you thought he was somewhere around?"

Gaskin inclined his head unhappily.

Rolf stood up and the chair creaked with brittle resilience.

"Photographs and description?"

Gaskin handed over an envelope.

The government security agent leafed through the contents. The face looked back at him from the post-card sized enlargement was not unlike his own, and the description could have been his also. He returned everything to the envelope and stuffed it into his inside breast pocket.

"I'll get back and see what I can stir up," he said.

"Call me if I can help," offered the dejected Gaskin.

"Sure," said Rolf, and left.

t w o

When Rolf got back home it was eight o'clock. He pushed open the door and walked in.

Madge met him in the hall. "About time you were back," she said accusingly.

Anders mentally raised his guard and peered from behind it. His wife was wearing a smart, black cocktail dress. Evidently they were due to go out, but he hadn't a clue to where.

"You're all ready to go, are you?" he ventured, shadow-boxing to gain time.

She looked at him pityingly. "We're due at Bob's and Nancy's right now—you'd better change, and quickly."

"It'll have to be this suit," he said, "unless you want to be later than ever. I've got to make a couple of phone calls before I leave."

"That job of yours will get me ostracized yet," commented Madge, darkly. "Why don't you give it up?"

"I've been thinking about doing just that," answered Rolf. His remark left Madge so shaken with disbelief that he had time to go into the lounge to the phone before she could think of what to say. He made two calls: one to head of security, Hewlett, and the other to the department's leg-men. A prowl

and check on ports and airports would begin immediately, but the odds were that a few hours would pass before any results, one way or the other, would materialise.

The party at Bob's was warming up when Rolf and Madge arrived. Nancy took charge, piloting them willy-nilly around the groups of people they hadn't met before, which didn't do a solitary thing to help Rolf scale the steep slope which led out of his nadir of depression.

"For heaven's sake try and look happy," whispered Madge.

"I'm *not* happy," responded Rolf, "and right now I haven't even got enough energy to be a convincing hypocrite."

Nancy finally left them with a bearded man who she had introduced as Rex Beerbohm.

"Care for a drink?" he said, breaking the crust of conversational ice which had formed when their garrulous hostess had departed.

Rolf raised an interrogative eyebrow at Madge.

"Martini, please," she said.

"Scotch on the rocks for me," added Rolf.

Beerbohm's arm reached into a group of people surrounding a small table and returned with order number one. He dipped in again and handed a tinkling glass to Anders.

"Service with a smile," he said easily.

Before Madge or Rolf could start a conversation going, a well-upholstered matron rushed up to Rex Beerbohm and beamed at him fatuously. "Oh, Rex dear," she gushed, "you were so right, as usual, with my last horoscope—don't forget to prepare my next one soon, will you?"

"Of course," smiled Rex, "I've never let you down yet, have I?"

"And you'd better not start now," she said, archly, and veered away in search of someone else to annoy.

"Heaven protect me from my friends," said Rex, his face becoming suddenly rueful.

Madge looked at him with new interest. "Are you a professional astrologer?"

Beerbohm looked a bit strained. "Believe it or not, and partly against my will, I am."

"And people actually *pay* you for your prognostications?" queried Rolf, incredulously and somewhat bitterly.

"Yes."

“Some people have all the luck!” expostulated the security man. “I could stand a soft touch like that—feeding the mugs a lot of pap that they want to hear *and* getting paid for it.”

Madge, who was an avid reader of ‘what the stars foretell’ type columns in all publications, and who was longing to take advantage of meeting an astrologer in the flesh for the first time, glared at Rolf fiercely. She could see her chances slipping away.

“That remark was rude and uncalled for,” she said. “You ought to apologise.”

“No need for that,” replied Beerbohm, pouring oil on troubled waters with practised ease, “it’s a common reaction from quite a number of people—and quite understandable—if it were true.”

‘Clever stuff,’ commented Rolf, mentally, ‘you can see that she’s a potential customer, so you’re going to give me the business and then make a double killing.’ Aloud he said, “I didn’t mean to offend, but that doesn’t mean I believe either. I think you’ll agree that most astrological columns are generalised bunk, so vague as to be incapable of checking, and if you’re gullible enough, you can read what you like into them.”

“I’ll agree that they’re generalised,” commented Beerbohm, “but they *have* to be. After all, if the mass of humanity’s to be divided up into twelve broad groups, only the most general influences *can* be quoted.”

Rolf had to admire the logic behind that one, but he remained silent, waiting for the astrologer to slip, then he would pounce.

“Now *I* don’t write for newspaper columns,” went on Beerbohm, “my productions are for individuals, and because they *are* individualised, they *are* specific—and I don’t tell them necessarily what they want to hear, easy though that would be—I give them an interpretation of what the planetary influences show. If they wish it, however, I can relate those influences to specified problems.”

‘Fine and dandy,’ thought Rolf, mentally rubbing his hands, ‘he’s all set up for the chopper.’ He posed a question to Beerbohm in what he hoped was a reasonable tone of voice. “So if I was to give you some details of a person’s birthdate, you could give me some information about that person’s past and immediate future?”

“Subject to certain qualifications.”

“Such as?”

“I would need to know whether the subject is a man or woman—and I might need a little time to make some calculations.”

“Would you need to know the person’s identity?” asked Rolf, slyly.

Beerbohm disarmed the loaded question with a wave of his hand.

“In a test case, no, I could give you an overall picture. It would be up to you to point it up by asking specific questions if you wanted to.”

“Can I try you with one right now?”

“That isn’t fair,” interposed Madge, “you can’t possibly expect Mr. Beerbohm . . .”

“Call me Rex,” urged the bearded subject of her appeal.

“You can’t possibly expect Rex to answer off the cuff like that—surely you must need some equipment?” she finished, addressing herself directly to Beerbohm.

“True enough,” he agreed, “but one must always be prepared; I always carry a little pocket reference which I’ve devised. Fire away,” he challenged to Rolf.

Anders nodded. “The subject is male and born on the first of March, 1924—is that enough?”

Beerbohm smiled with a flash of white teeth between bearded lips. “More than enough; I’m sure I can give you a prognosis for that one.” He rattled straight on, “Your subject will be about your height and build with dark, fine hair, thin on top. He will have had very little illness in his life to date, with one significant exception—within four years of the age of eighteen he will have suffered from appendicitis and had the offending organ removed by the usual operation.

“By now, he will have been married at least ten years, probably nearer twenty, his wife’s christian name will almost certainly begin with ‘M’ and she will be Taurean. They will have had one or two children only.

“He has a good brain, and because he is inclined to disbelieve almost anything without proof, will gravitate naturally towards a scientific education—how he uses it afterwards is difficult to say, because our subject is a versatile type.

“Oh, and one other thing,” he finished, “he’ll be going through a time of mental turmoil right now, but with the right

sort of assistance, he'll come through it all right—is that any good ?”

“ A little too good,” replied Rolf acidly, “ because :

(a) you were far too pat with your answer,

(b) you didn't even consult your index, and,

(c) you've obviously looked me up and had the stuff ready.”

Beerbohm shrugged, tiredly. “ Again, a common type of reaction, but standing on wrong premises. You see, I was swift with my answers because I know this particular type of subject well ; I didn't need my index because the date you quoted happens to be *my* birthday, hence what would generally apply to me would apply to the subject also. And lastly, I didn't *know* you were using yourself as an example, although I'm quite prepared to admit that that could have been expected. And, of course, I didn't gen myself up on everyone in the room on the off-chance that they would ask the sort of thing you did—I think you'll agree that's asking a bit much.”

For the first time since they'd been talking, Rolf noticed that Rex Beerbohm *was* thin on top, as he himself was. “ You mean to tell me that you have the same birthday as I have ?” he demanded. “ And that the other details will match up, too, because we were born on the same day ?”

“ *You tell me,*” countered Rex. “ Physically we're similar—that much is obvious ; *your* wife's name is Madge, *mine* is Mary ; *we* married when I was twenty—how about you ?”

“ Twenty-one,” said Madge drily.

“ I have two children—and you ?”

Again Madge answered. “ We've one, and Rolf *did* have his appendix extracted at twenty-two.”

“ Mine was at sixteen,” concluded Beerbohm. “ Does the mental turmoil ring any bells ?”

“ Yes,” admitted Rolf, “ but if you had a scientific education, as I did, how come you swallow all this guff about astrology ? Surely science is all against it ?”

“ A lot of present day *scientists* are against it,” corrected the astrologer, “ which is a somewhat different kettle of fish. As for how I came to be interested ; I wrote a thesis on it for my Ph.D., and to do that I did a lot of investigating to be sufficiently well-informed on the subject. I turned up quite a pile of interesting facts. For instance ; some of the best scientific brains the world has ever known were convinced

astrologers ; Tycho Brahe, Newton, Kepler, Galileo, the list is a long one."

"I've heard that argument before," said Rolf, "but surely they must have been fooled."

"Two comments only on that comment," replied Rex. "Firstly ; by whom ? Lastly ; do *you* think *you* could have fooled Newton on *anything* ? And is it likely that he could have reasoned his way through the stuff which he undoubtedly did, and yet have been taken in by some line of phony double-talk ? For instance, you make so bold as to pour scorn on astrology ; yet have *you* made any discoveries equal to Newton's ? Isn't it possible that *he* saw something that *you* haven't even bothered to look for ?"

"All right, all right, I'll pass on that one."

Rolf didn't have a single argument to put up against Beerbohm's flood of facts, yet to him, it sounded as if the astrologer was trying hard to convince himself as well as Rolf. The security man tried another tack, and noticed incidentally, that Madge had departed, realising that a pair of Greeks had met. "Would you like to try explaining to me how bodies thousands, even millions of miles away, can possibly influence us ?"

Beerbohm smiled. "Kid stuff. If you go out in brilliant summer sunshine with your winter-white skin exposed and stay there for an hour, what happens ?" He held up his hand to stop Rolf's objections. "Sunburn, which makes you darned uncomfortable, thus affecting your present and future actions.

"Then again there's gravity and tides, the Aurora Borealis, the Van Allen Belts, sunspots and their effect on weather, crops and hence us. Recently, a lad in America has been using the positions of the major planets to predict when Solar prominences, with their effect on radio communications, will occur, without knowing why the method works—and with 93% accuracy ! And you ask how can distant bodies affect us !"

Rolf felt himself submerged under a sea of facts, yet he just couldn't accept the thesis and the inevitable corollaries.

t h r e e

The security agent stared hard at Rex Beerbohm, scientist cum pseudo-scientist. The astrologer seemed to be expecting a lead of some sort from him. But what? Here he was burdened with his personal mental problems and disquiet, piled above all those the business of Hurley's disappearing act, and finally, to top them all off, being on the losing end of an argument which he had provoked himself. And then he began to see a possible way of shedding some load—it didn't seem as if he could fail to gain on the deal he now had in mind, whichever way it went.

"What would you say if I was to propose a *real* test for your astrology?" he said, quietly, and in the main, seriously and without malice.

"Is this to do with your intellectual mix-up?" queried Beerbohm, shrewdly.

"Partly," admitted Rolf, "and it also gives me a chance to settle this astrology business once and for all—I've never given it any credence up to now, and I still don't, despite all you've said, but if this proposition comes off, well, it'll be a different story. I'll have to face the facts—if there are any to face."

Rex Beerbohm looked interested, intrigued, and pleased.

"What's the deal?"

"I can't give you any names or places, but a certain person is missing; I've got to find him, find out why he left, and bring him back if it's possible. Now, how much else do you need to know?"

"Get me his date of birth, and as near to the hour of birth as you can determine. Also, I'd like the birth details of his mother and father if that's at all possible."

"When do you want this information?" asked Rolf.

"When do you want *your* information?" parried Rex.

"Yesterday!"

"Then you'd better do something pronto about obtaining what I want so that we can make a start."

"O.K." said the security man, shortly, "wait here." He searched around the room until he spotted his host. "Bob, can I use your phone? It's urgent business."

"Help yourself, old man—you know where it is."

Anders casually left the rather crowded room and made his way to the study Bob was rich enough to be able to afford. His luck was in, Gaskin was at home when he rang.

“ Listen Harry ; what was Hurley’s date of birth ?”

“ Hold it a moment while I get my little black book.”

Idly, Rolf took out the envelope which Gaskin had given him earlier that day ; and got his first jolt. Listed among Hurley’s distinguishing marks was an appendectomy scar. Another associate member of the scalpel club ! He got a pencil ready to take down the date which the man at the other end of the telephone line was obtaining for him.

There was a tinkle as Harry Gaskin picked up his phone.

“ Are you there, Rolf ?”

“ I’m here.”

“ The birthday you want is the 1st of March, 1924.”

Anders felt suddenly numbed. He had read somewhere of the odds against meeting a person with the same birth details as yourself, and they were quite high—how much higher were they against knowing of *two*, and in one day ?

“ Repeat that date, will you Harry ?” he said, thickly.

“ First, third, twenty-four,” enunciated the patient voice in the earpiece. “ Got it ?”

Rolf’s brain thawed a little. “ Have a bash at something else for me, would you Harry ?”

“ Try me,” offered his opposite number.

“ Find out the time of Hurley’s birth, and his parents’ birthdays also.”

Gaskin had had some peculiar requests in his time, but this was the best yet. “ I haven’t got any of those in my black book—where d’you suppose I can find them out from ?” His tone was plaintive.

Rolf became abruptly irritable. “ For God’s sake use your imagination—who would be likely to know things like that ?” He answered his own question immediately, “ His wife of course—she’ll have a birthday book or something, try her and see. And ring me back as soon as you’ve struck paydirt.”

Gaskin rang off, and Rolf used the break to put through another call to the department’s leg-men. They only had negative news for him, but in its way it was significant : subject to confirmation, Hurley didn’t appear to have left the country. Or at least, if he had, he hadn’t done it by any of the regular passenger routes.

The phone suddenly jangled almost as soon as he replaced it in the cradle, as if it were protesting at having parted company with his hand.

“Hello Rolf,” said Gaskin’s voice. “I’ve got the griff a bit quicker than I’d bargained for. Moira kept a book—just like you suggested.”

Another point was rung up on Rolf’s mental scoreboard—Hurley had a wife whose christian name started with ‘M’!

Gaskin went on eagerly. “Ray Hurley’s father’s birthday was July 20th, 1899, and his mother’s September the 5th, 1900. And this’ll shake you : Moira was quite definite about the time of their happy event. It appears that Hurley just missed being born on February the 29th by an hour or so—he’s often kidded her that if things had happened a bit sooner, he’d have had only nine birthdays up to date and that she’d have been kidnapping by marrying him.

“But tell me ; what gives with this birthday lark ?”

“If I told you, you wouldn’t believe me, Harry,” said Anders, cryptically. “Thanks for breaking an arm for me tonight—you’ve been a great help.”

“I wish I knew how,” complained Gaskin.

“I’ll tell you about it one day,” promised Rolf, and broke the connection. He went back to where he’d left Beerbohm with his drink. The astrologer was staring at the bulbous bowl of a glass as if it were a gypsy’s crystal with all the secrets of the Universe writ large within. Rolf handed over the piece of paper upon which he’d scribbled Gaskin’s findings.

“Three in a row,” mumbled Rex, “that’s a bit of a turn-up for the book.”

“He’s had his appendix extracted, and his wife’s initial is ‘M’,” supplemented Rolf, “just to extend the string of coincidences way beyond breaking point.”

“If what I’ve explained to you is correct, they’re not coincidences but related facts, consider : three men born on the same day, *all* have the same christian name initial, *all* have had appendix trouble, *all* have a wife whose christian name begins with M ; you’re facing some sort of mental conundrum, so, it appears, is Hurley . . .”

“You’re one of the clan, too,” reminded Rolf, “*have you got a problem ?*”

Beerbohm seemed abruptly taken off-balance by the question and his face looked strained. “I’ve got one all right—I won’t tell you what it is right now, but tackling Hurley’s horoscope will solve my dilemma for me—and I’m damned if I know which way I want it to come out !” Instead of his previous confident

manner, the astrologer looked more like a man without a guide-book who had arrived at a cross-roads and didn't know in which direction to go next.

Rolf Anders' personal see-saw, however, had started on an upswing. "First things first," he said briskly. "We need your forecast for my lost sheep ; supposing we start there and leave the rest in the lap of the Gods."

Rex brightened ; for once he was enjoying being led instead of blazing a trail for others to follow. "O.K.," he said, "from here on in we'll play it by ear."

"Now you're talking—how about that prognostication then ?"

"I'll nip off right away," offered Rex, "and set all the figures up for the computer—it's only a small, relatively slow-speed model, but I'll have the dope for you first thing in the morning. How's that ?"

"The ham and eggs are served at eight-thirty in our place," stated Rolf.

"Then eight-thirty it shall be," promised his companion.

f o u r

Rolf's sleep that night was plagued by strange dreams. His subconscious mind, its fetters loosened by the few drinks which he'd had, ran riot with a welter of hitherto suppressed speculation. He saw the planets, slowly gyrating in their orbits, spinning an everchanging, three-dimensional spider's web consisting of myriads of fine threads, and at the end of each, a human being hopped, skipped, jumped, or died, according to the dictates of the monstrous puppet masters.

The demon dreams dissolved in the bright light of morning, however, and his current mood became one of amazement at his gullibility of the night before. He still felt a sense of purpose about himself, though, almost as if he were in a railway carriage travelling along its parallel lines through a night of mystery towards an unknown but fixed destination.

He checked in with Hewlett at the department : either Ray Hurley had been spirited out of the country by some unknown method, or he was still in it. Since the first alternative gave him nothing to work with, Rolf opted for the second one as a working proposition. He had got that far in his deliberations,

when, accurate to the minute, Rex Beerbohm made his promised report by telephone.

“ Good morning, Rolf,” he opened, “ I’m willing to bet that by now you’ve reverted to scepticism—correct ?” On occasion Beerbohm could be disconcertingly blunt.

Due to his improved frame of mind, however, Rolf was able to take the remark in his stride with the diplomatic answer : “ Let’s say I’m still open to being convinced.”

“ I know just how you feel—it’s a bit difficult to change your spots in mid-stream, if I can mix a couple of metaphors,” said Rex with evident appreciation of the security man’s frame of mind.

“ It *does* mean throwing a lot of long-held convictions overboard,” admitted Anders. “ Still, this won’t help either of us one way or the other—what news have you got for me ?”

“ Well,” answered the astrologer, opening in the time honoured manner, “ I fed all the data into my little electronic intellect, and this is a translation of what came out :

“ (a) The man you are seeking, like us, *is* in a dilemma—the main difference is that *his* is a good deal more profound—more deep-rooted and disturbing if you like. He appears to have found the answer to a problem, only to discover that this itself poses what seems to him to be an even bigger difficulty.

“ (b) He’s departed for some point unknown to think the things through in peace and quiet, but there is a danger. Left alone, he is likely to make the wrong decision, because surprisingly in a man so brilliant, he has a number of mental blind spots. The upshot is that he needs help ; or he just might disappear into obscurity forever.”

Rolf considered Beerbohm’s findings in silence for the moment : *were* they the end-product of an old but newly-refined esoteric and exact science—or were they intelligent, educated guesses backed up by mumbo-jumbo ?

“ You see no possibility of treachery ? You know the sort I mean,” he asked at last.

Rex was emphatic in his verdict. “ No. Although, you and I were born only a few hours later than our subject, there are some points of difference between you and I on one hand, and him on the other. We two are basically honest individuals, but we have our price ; a high one admittedly, but nevertheless,

very real. Your missing friend, on the other hand, is almost incredibly honest. It would never occur to him to be otherwise."

"Have you any idea what the character of the discovery might be?"

Again Beerbohm's answer was unequivocal. "It's in the scientific field, and it's important."

God, thought Rolf, if this is guess-work, it's pretty shrewd. Why not follow it up; give it a whirl? He had no red-hot leads from the department, so Beerbohm's advice was as good as any.

"Thanks, Rex," he went on, "I'll see what I can do about putting your verdict into use."

"You'll let me know how you make out? Remember, my own problem is linked with this."

"If this does work out, I'll owe you more than that—if it doesn't, I'll be back anyway, if only to say 'I told you so'."

"Fair enough," agreed Beerbohm, and the conversation ended.

Rolf had had it in his mind to visit Hurley's wife, Moira, and the astrological hypothesis in no way invalidated his opinion, so he set off shortly after doing justice to the ham and eggs.

Moira Hurley was a tall, slim blonde, whose golden fair hair looked as if it owed some of its distinctive appearance to the assistance of peroxide or a colour rinse, but in fact, was completely natural in origin. Her complexion was a dairy-maid peaches and cream, and above her slenderly-boned chin, small, even white teeth showed in a pleasant smile when Anders introduced himself.

"Have you heard any more from your husband?" he asked.

Moira Hurley shook her head, and seemed surprised at the question, tiny creases at the corners of her eyes betraying her puzzlement.

"And you're not worried?"

She hesitated. "I'm concerned, yes, but not worried—why should I be?"

Rolf didn't answer her question directly. "You have complete faith in your husband, haven't you." His words were a statement, and two thoughts coursed rapidly through his mind: was her confidence justified, and did Madge have the same high opinion of him?

“It’s often the case with childhood sweethearts, and it’s reciprocal,” a faint blush accompanied her words.

“So you’ve been married for a long time?”

“Since Ray was twenty and I was nineteen.”

“Have you any children?”

“A daughter of ten—she’s currently spending a holiday with her grandparents. Then she comes home and we’re due for a trip abroad.”

Two more points of correlation rang up on Rolf’s scoreboard but a warning bell clanged as well. *They were all due to take a trip out of the country—to what destination?* The pragmatic part of his mind ran rampant over the portion which had half-believed in Beerbohm’s astrological verdict on Hurley’s absolute honesty. It looked like a hell of a coincidence for the scientist to have come to the end of a series of experiments, disappear without trace, and then to find out that he and his family were scheduled to leave shortly. And yet there was the amazing correlation of similarities between Beerbohm, Hurley and himself. While he was still trying to fit the obstinate pieces of the jig-saw together, Moira Hurley broke in on his thoughts.

“I was rather surprised when you called,” she said.

“Why?” asked Rolf, dully, still seventy-five per cent preoccupied with the facts to date.

“Well, one hardly expects to find two people from the same place calling on the same day about the same matter; or does one?”

Rolf snapped to full awareness immediately. “How long ago was he here?” he asked, sharply.

“An hour or so ago,” she stammered, taken aback by his abruptness. “Does it matter?”

He nodded. “It matters! Now can you remember, what did he talk about?”

Moira wrinkled her brow. “Something about where our daughter is now, where we usually went on holiday, just general things.”

“Where do you usually go on holiday?”

She smiled faintly. “I can’t say we’ve been terribly adventurous in previous years—the last seven we’ve spent our time in a caravan we rent on the Gower coast of South Wales.”

“You like it there?”

“Very much,” she confirmed.

“Does your husband like it too?”

“It was his idea to start going there originally—he finds it so restful, good beaches completely unspoiled, first-class swimming, and usually good weather.” She stopped suddenly, then went on after a slight pause with more animation. “Oh, I see! You think that Ray’s gone there.”

“I think it’s a pretty fair bet. Now, have you a phone?”

She pointed to a little table in an alcove.

“Good, we’ve got two calls to make; I’ll take care of the first one, you can organise the second.” He estimated rapidly as he moved across the room: roughly 120 miles to where Ray Hurley might be, and *somebody* was most likely on his way there now—and he had an hour or more start. The Lagonda was a pretty nippy bus, but she couldn’t make up over an hour in three. He picked the phone up and asked for an ex-directory number.

Hewlett answered immediately.

“Can you get a chopper to me double-quick?” began Rolf, without preamble. “And a couple of trigger-men in case I need them.”

“Can do,” confirmed Hewlett without argument. “Where are you now?”

Rolf told him.

“They’ll be there in fifteen minutes,” promised his chief.

Rolf put the phone down and called over Moira Hurley. “Ring your parents and tell them to get your daughter home if she’s out, and if she’s already there, keep her in. They are not to listen to anyone or any excuse. Tell them to ring the police if there’s any argument—understand?”

“What are you expecting?” she asked, fear beginning to show itself in her voice. “Kidnapping?”

“Yes,” he answered, baldly. “Maybe not with guns or hoodlums, rather with persuasion and smooth lies—but a snatch nevertheless.”

Moira dialled feverishly, and relief spread across her face after she had spoken for a few moments. She covered the telephone microphone with her hand. “She’s in the house next door playing with the children there, it’s a policeman’s house.”

“Is he there himself?”

Moira nodded.

“Then see that he gets my message,” ordered Anders.

f i v e

A dot in the sky moved nearer and became recognisably a helicopter. Its dragonfly form tilted horizontally and the tail swung through a quarter turn, then it began to descend down a tube of invisible semi-vacuum created by the whirling blades above. Dust quivered and danced with ever greater energy as the chopper, with its high-speed, short-radius rotor, dropped nearer to the ground.

Rolf came to a decision. "I think you'd better come with me," he said to Moira. "It would be more than stupid to have made sure of your daughter's safety and then left you open to being seized."

Moira didn't quibble. "I've been trying to think of some way to ask you in any case," she said. "I'd like to see Ray."

"Fine," he replied, "you can help in several ways, too."

The chopper's undercarriage touched down on the quiet road outside the house and contracted slightly under the weight they now had to bear.

"Let's go," said Rolf, and together they hurried out.

"Nice of you to pick a spot without telegraph wires etc.," greeted the pilot, as Rolf helped Moira into the bulbous cabin. "Which way?"

"I've always been a considerate type," answered the security man. "Head West," he continued in the same breath, "and sling the anchors overboard for this trip."

The pilot moved one hand and maybe his feet, and the copter leapt skywards like a cat from hot bricks. They climbed to a thousand feet then accelerated forward. At a hundred and fifty miles an hour the machine droned westwards with five human beings in its metal and plastic womb, and the ground unrolled below on the conveyor belt of relative motion.

Rolf turned to the two department squad-men whom Hewlett had sent along as requested. "All tooled up, boys?"

The taller of the two nodded silently, while his partner patted a bulge on his upper left chest meaningfully.

Moira suddenly felt as if she had accidentally dropped into the middle of the action of a 'cops and robbers' T.V. drama being filmed on location. Any inclination which she may have developed towards being amused evaporated, however, when the man who had patted his jacket spoke.

"D'you think we'll have any need to use them?"

Rolf considered for a moment. "How many were there?" he quizzed Moira.

"Only one came into the house," she said, "but I'm almost sure there was one more in the car outside."

"What type of car was it?"

"A red Volkswagen."

The pilot spoke. "Newport ahead," his tone implied that he wanted confirmation of direction.

"Follow the coast," commented Rolf.

The town crept below and Cardiff loomed up quite quickly, to be cast astern contemptuously by the speeding machine. Resort towns were next to be displayed by the moving, ever-changing panorama, and then finally, the ports and smoky industrial area around Swansea. Probing out into the Atlantic ahead and to their left, was the Gower peninsula.

The stream of coast road traffic thinned markedly as the helicopter veered sharply to port. It was a dry but overcast day in mid-week, and not many motorists were driving into the Gower with its miles of bays and beaches, and complete absence of fish and chips and fairy-floss.

A poppy-red, beetle of a car was making good time along the twisting road inside the indented coastline. It was about four miles from the bay which Moira had pointed out as being the Hurleys' holiday haunt. No other car of that distinctive colour could be seen on the remainder of the road.

"Better stop that chap on suspicion," said Rolf, pointing.

Abruptly, they felt the sinking sensation of reduced gravity in the pits of their stomachs as the copter fell like a manned bomb. About half a minute later, they grounded squarely in the middle of the road facing the scarlet car racing towards them. It showed no signs of reducing speed until the pilot played his trump card. Skilfully he manipulated controls, lifting the copter's tapering tail so that the nose pointed groundwards; then he speeded up the rotor blades so that they became slicing lances of metal waiting to cut the top off the car like that of an egg. Like two monsters from Mechanistria, the machine prepared for the trial of strength; the speeding red beetle, and the crouching metal dragonfly with its scything fangs.

The pilot tilted his craft even more, so that the rotor blades swung their glittering tips within two feet of the metallised road

surface—and the driver of the car, realising that the copter's crew meant business and that he didn't have a hope of penetrating the shining disc of death, rammed on his brakes so viciously that smoke and dust spouted from his tyre tips and the car slewed its way across the road to a stop.

Rolf's two gun-toting pals were out of the cabin and over to the car before its occupants had gathered their scattered wits sufficiently to even plan an effective opposition, let alone start it.

The pilot raised a laconic eyebrow at Rolf. "Ready for the last hop?"

The situation at the car was evidently well enough in hand that they need fear no interlopers, so Anders nodded his confirmation.

And Moira's heart, which seemed to have frozen in mid-beat while the short, sharp conflict had been in progress, started moving again with rapid pulsations as if anxious to make up for lost time.

Once again the chopper lurched into the air, but this time its ascent was at a more reasonable pace and they drifted along at a lower altitude barely fifty feet up.

"This'll do, Jeff," said Anders, "no need to go right up to the 'van."

Obediently, the machine slanted towards the road again and grounded. Rolf got out and helped Moira down.

"How long will you be?" queried the pilot.

"Not too long, I hope," answered Rolf. "Stooge around for a bit."

They started walking along the road towards the bend, beyond which, a branch led down to the beach. The last strip of hard surface slanted steeply downwards between rocky edges and faded away gradually into sand which looked like a frozen, golden sea.

Hurley's caravan was about sixty yards away, standing on a concrete raft above the high water mark, and a man who Rolf recognised as the missing scientist himself was sitting on the steps at the open door smoking a pipe. He looked up as they approached, his face becoming animated as he saw his wife. "What on Earth are you doing here," he said, addressing Moira, "and how did you know I was here?"

“It wasn’t too hard to guess,” she replied. “By the way, this is Mr. Anders.”

Rolf shook hands with the man who looked enough like him to have been a close relative and said: “Shall we go inside for a moment, Doctor?”

Ray Hurley led the way and they sat down facing each other across the narrow table inside the caravan.

“Now, Doctor,” continued Anders, bluntly, “why did you leave so suddenly? You’ve caused your colleagues and us quite a bit of worry you know.”

“Us?” queried Hurley, glancing at them both in turn.

“Security,” elaborated Rolf.

“What has security to do with my personal problems?”

“We are concerned with *all* of your problems—personal and otherwise.”

The scientist looked stubborn. “Nevertheless, I’ve got to solve this one on my own—I want no spoon-fed platitudes from politicians or security types.”

“But you don’t mind being spoon-fed with money and research facilities, eh?” snapped Rolf.

“What do you know of research?” scoffed Hurley. “And the trials and tribulations it can bring in its wake?”

“And the satisfaction and rewards, don’t forget them,” flashed Rolf, feeling some of the bitterness of the day before returning. “Here you are with a place to work in which I’d give my right arm to belong to and you adopt a ‘holier than thou’ attitude. Don’t you think you have some obligations to the people who finance it all?”

“Yes,” replied Hurley, in a surprisingly quiet tone of voice.

“That’s what made me want to stop and think before I disclosed what I had discovered.”

* * *

s i x

Moira spoke. "Did you have to make the decision all on your own?"

Hurley smiled at her gently. "Who else could I ask? You would be unbiassed, yes, but would you have the scientific knowledge to understand the implications?"

Rolf answered before she could. "I might."

She glanced at him gratefully. "Give Mr. Anders a chance Ray, you owe him that. But for him, Jill might have been kidnapped today, and *you* certainly would have been." Swiftly she described the sequence of events to date.

"But why?" gasped the amazed scientist.

"Other people would like the information you have," said Rolf, simply, "and they're not too fussy about the methods they adopt to get it."

"But I still don't understand how they could have known," prevaricated Hurley.

"There's such a thing as the 'grape-vine' and putting two and two together," explained Anders, patiently. "Somebody talked and somebody else listened—it's as simple as that."

The scientist all but capitulated. "If I tell you, will you promise to keep it to yourself?"

Rolf looked him straight in the eye and told a deliberate lie, hoping that it wouldn't show and that Beerbohm's opinion of Hurley's honesty also extended to his faith in others. "Yes."

The scientist nodded, satisfied, and unburdened himself. "My own opinion was that since I'd discovered something, the responsibility for suppressing or disclosing it was mine and mine alone."

"Finders are keepers," stated Rolf softly.

Hurley didn't appear to have heard the comment. "However, presumably, once you share the knowledge, you also share the responsibility—do you want that?"

"Is it a weapon?"

Hurley shook his head. "But it could cause as much misery as one."

"I'll take a chance, then," said the security man, and wondered what he was on the verge of hearing.

"It's a battery," said Hurley, abruptly taking the plunge.

"A battery!" repeated Rolf stupidly, the inane thought running through his mind that he had been mad for pursuing Hurley now that the scientist had flipped his lid anyway.

Sensing his feelings, Hurley hurried on. "But with a difference—its storage capacity is away beyond anything we have right now."

"That just isn't possible," contradicted Rolf flatly, dogmatism underlining his every word. "The electro-chemical constants don't allow it."

"It isn't chemical in any way."

"Then it's a super capacitor of some sort?"

"Not really—we haven't got a word for it yet, and I haven't bothered to think of one," stated Ray Hurley. "Suppose you tell me what a current of electricity is—assume that I'm a layman and you're trying to give me a mental picture of it."

Rolf looked at him narrowly, then complied, feeling more than a bit self-conscious about giving an eminent physicist a lecturette in basics. "The atom has a number of different particles comprising the nucleus, and overall, their nett electrical charge is positive. Around the nucleus are a number of 'shells' of electrons in fixed orbits. These are difficult to disturb except for the outermost ones, usually called 'fringe electrons.' The electronic charge is negative, and, in aggregate in the normal atom, just balances the positive charge on the nucleus, so that the structure as a whole is electrically neutral."

"Concise and accurate," commended Hurley. "Go on."

"Well, by various means we can start the fringe electrons drifting from atom to atom, and this stream of particles is called an electric current—electronic current would be more apt I suppose."

Hurley took over smoothly. "Now suppose you were able to remove all the fringe electrons from say a mass of metal—what would its charge be?"

"Positive," said Rolf, "and stray electrons would rush in to restore the balance."

Again Hurley stepped in with a leading question. "And suppose you could insulate the mass to prevent equilibrium being restored and only allow it as and when required?"

"Then you'd have a . . . generator . . . battery . . . capacitor," Rolf fumbled with words and failed to find the right one. "Anyway," he amended, "you'd have a means of producing a current of electricity."

The scientist nodded. "That's it in a nutshell."

"But why are you worried? You've got a fortune in your grasp." Rolf's imagination boggled at the applications for

such a device. "Why, we could have electrically propelled cars, scrap our power stations and distribution systems, and . . ."

"And throw millions of people out of work and wreck the financial system generally," finished Hurley. "That's my problem, immediate chaos for ultimate benefit—have I the right to cause it?"

Rolf stopped in his mental tracks for a moment, appalled by the picture Hurley was trying to paint, and then he saw the fallacy in the scientist's reasoning. Beerbohm had been right: Hurley *did* have blind spots—gaps in his knowledge, and damned big ones at that.

"How much do you know about the electricity supply system in this country?" he asked the scientist.

"Enough to know that there's thousands of millions sunk in it," retorted Hurley.

"But have you any detailed knowledge?"

"No."

"Well I have. It isn't widely known as yet, but the demand for electricity for all purposes is rocketing, probably beyond the speed at which generating stations and super-grid lines to cope with it can be built. *Your device isn't going to put anybody on the scrap heap, it'll more likely save our bacon and help to maintain a progressive improvement in the standard of living otherwise difficult to achieve.* How big are they and how many of your gadgets could be produced per year?"

Hurley looked nonplussed. "I hadn't gone into that—I don't know," he stammered.

"But they couldn't be made like shelling peas, I suppose?"

"Hardly," smiled Hurley, amused at the comparison.

"Have you *still* got a problem?" demanded Rolf.

"I think not."

Rolf Anders stood up, suddenly pleased with his day's work; he felt at peace with the world and was conscious that his job wasn't so useless, profit-less or soul-destroying as some people believed. He went outside and flagged down the patiently circling copter.

"Rex Beerbohm speaking," said the voice in the telephone earpiece.

"Rolf Anders this end—how's life?"

“Poised in mid-swing and not certain of which way to go,” answered the astrologer. “But you haven’t rung up to enquire about my state of health—what gives?”

“On the contrary I’m *very* concerned about your well-being,” said Rolf. “I want some lessons from you.”

“In what?” said a suspicious voice.

“Astrology! What else?”

The line stayed silent while Beerbohm tried unsuccessfully to sort the wheat from the chaff. At last he said: “Let’s get down to cases. Did my predictions work, or not?”

“Like a bomb,” confirmed Rolf, enthusiastically, “that’s why I want in. But tell me, what the hell was *your* problem?”

Again there was a short silence before the astrologer spoke.

“Don’t tell this to a soul, but in spite of everything, I was having my doubts about astrology—the prognosis I gave to you was in the nature of a test case. Now that it’s worked out, I’ve no doubts about astrology’s validity . . .” Beerbohm’s voice trailed away.

“But,” prompted Anders.

“But I’m not sure that I like the idea of everything being laid out ahead of us, like a . . . like the shooting script for a film,” Beerbohm finished.

“Look,” said Rolf, “you can drive a car along a road without a map or with one—which way would you prefer if the country was unknown to you?”

“The second alternative, naturally, but . . .”

“But nothing,” said Rolf, firmly. “The map doesn’t show you the scenery or the scent of a rose or a woman’s beauty—you have to experience those for yourself. It merely points the way, and that’s something worth having.”

“You’ve certainly changed,” commented Beerbohm. “Who is the teacher and who the taught? Is that a quotation?”

“I don’t know, but it sounds pretty good. When can I start my course?”

“As soon as you like.” The astrologer was his old, confident self again.

“See you ten sharp in the morning,” said Rolf. He put the phone down and mused happily on just how Hewlett would take to the idea of having an astrological section in the department, with Rolf Anders, one-time electrical engineer, firmly entrenched on the ground floor.

—Steve Hall

Film Review

Jason and the Argonauts

A Morningside-Worldwide Film released through Columbia Pictures

The right 'atmosphere' is essential for the enjoyment of a good book or film and the Charles H. Schneer production of Jason's great adventurous search for the Golden Fleece strikes just that right family note which will make it successful entertainment. Just as author Moorcock has built fine mental imagery and magic into his currently successful "Elric" stories in this magazine, so, too, has director Don Chaffey produced a similar *visual* imagery into this very exciting Technicolour film (aided considerably by the 'Dynamation 90' magic of assistant producer Ray Harryhausen, whose name may echo down the years for those pre-war fans who knew of him when he was a member of the Los Angeles science fiction group at a time when Ray Bradbury was also a young member).

The origin of the legend of Jason and the Golden Fleece is unknown, but it certainly dates before 1200 B.C. Homer made a passing reference to the *Argo*, the ship in which Jason carried out his search in the 12th book of the *Odyssey*, and Herodotus, in the fifth century, opens his book with a reference to the voyage and the siege of Troy. The film of "Jason and the Argonauts" parallels closely the legend. The events, names, places and characterisations are faithfully produced.

As the gods ordained, Jason (capably played by Todd Armstrong), returns to Thessaly to claim his rightful kingdom twenty years after his father's murder at the hands of Pelias (played by Douglas Wilmer). To forestall the will of the gods, Pelias encourages Jason to find the famed Golden Fleece, through whose magical powers Jason hopes to bring an end to the famine and plague caused by Pelias' rule. With the counsel of the gods, Jason builds his ship the *Argo* (the film version cost \$224,000, probably the most expensive sailing ship Hollywood has ever put to sea) selects a crew of the bravest and strongest Greek warriors, the Argonauts, and sails for

the land of Colchis where the Golden Fleece will be found hanging on the branch of a tree.

Acustus, Pelias' son, (Gary Raymond) is sent on the dangerous voyage to foil Jason's plans and seize the fleece for his father. On the long and arduous voyage, the Argonauts overcome many obstacles with the help of Hera, Queen of the Gods (played by Honor Blackman). They are set upon by the bronze colossus Talos, attacked by Harpies and their boat is nearly destroyed by crashing rocks.

With the aid of Medea (Nancy Kovack), Jason reaches Colchis. He asks Aeetes, Medea's father, for the Golden Fleece, but Aeetes, fore-warned by Acustus, condemns Jason and his men to death. Torn between love for Jason and loyalty to her father, Medea frees Jason and leads him to the glade of the Golden Fleece, which is guarded by a seven-headed Hydra. (Our cover photograph shows the original sketch drawn by Ray Harryhausen for this exceptionally fine film scene).

Acastus is killed by the Hydra, while attempting to steal the Fleece. Jason destroys the creature, takes the Fleece and flees with Medea and his men to the *Argo* as Aeetes conjures up sword-wielding skeletons from the earth. In a grotesque battle, several of his men are killed and Jason narrowly escapes by leaping into the sea. Medea and Jason return to Thessaly with the Fleece.

One of the most interesting scenes from our viewpoint (as fantasy devotees) is when Jason meets Phineas (excellently played by Patrick Troughton) the blind man trapped by the Harpies and neatly reverses the situation so that Phineas becomes their jailor. The Harpy scene like the final battle with the children of the Hydra—the skeletons raised by sowing the Hydra's teeth—is a memorable epic containing much of the 'atmosphere' so necessary to make motion pictures as authentic as possible.

Producer Charles H. Schneer's previous films of myth and legend have been *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*, *The Three Worlds of Gulliver* and *Mysterious Island*. He also produced the Werner von Braun story, *I Aim at the Stars*. *Jason and the Argonauts* is a fitting successor.

—John Carnell

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