COMPACT
SF

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Science Fantasy

JOHN RACKHAM's new novella

THE GOD-BIRDS of GLENTALLACH

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Edited by Kyril Bonfiglioli

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Contents

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Editorial . . . . . by Kyril Bonfiglioli

Here are some extracts from a letter (too long to print this month) by Mr Chris Priest. The bits in italics are me arguing with him.

"I am of the opinion that a letter-column is an absolute necessity in a science-fiction magazine; not, I might add, for reasons of tradition, but simply because it gives readers (the non-letter-writing sort) some kind of sounding-board for their own views."

Absolute necessity? Necessity, for a magazine in the grim world of publishing, is staying alive. Most science-fiction magazines have folded up. We are in excellent health. Sounding-board for the non-letter-writers? Surely they are unlikely to have views similar to the letter-writers or indeed any strong views at all or they would themselves be letter-writers.

"Brian Stableford's attempt to pinpoint the magic of sf is right, but only to a certain extent. Why we all read sf is a very subjective thing. We all *know*; we find out in that eternally-lost golden moment when sf clicks and we're sold for the rest of our life. In that infinite moment there is no need to rationalise the why's and wherefore's; it's like converting to a new religion, you don't need convincing."

Absolutely true, as far as I'm concerned. I've given up trying to explain to people why I read it: if they've never had that "infinite moment" of Mr Priest's then one might as well try and explain colour to a blind baby. (I recently re-read the story that hooked me: alas, it was inexpressibly corny and yet I've spent hundreds of reading hours hoping to recapture its pristine appeal.)

"Ken Slater's letter brings out the diverting contemporary trends in sf: away from and towards a literary standard. . . . NEW WORLDS seems to go along with this literate line, but your policies regarding this seem to be a little uncertain to say the least."

Now wait a minute, Mr Priest. Do you mean literary or literate? Or do you really mean either—or both? If what you're implying is that progressive equals literary equals literate

and, conversely, that traditional equals unliterary equals illiterate, then I can only reply in Sir Winston Churchill's magnificent phrase that "the answer is in the plural—and they bounce." But I'm sure you don't. If you mean that NEW WORLDS *is calculated for the latitude of a progressive group of young writers and fans and attracts contributions of a more daring nature than this magazine, then I agree. If you mean that editor Michael Moorcock has a burning determination to establish sf as a spearhead of modern writing, while I go bumbling along trying to please everybody at once, then I agree again. If you mean that I'm an old square, too pig-headed and too fat to try and fit the new with-it round holes, then I still agree. But steady with those words like "literary" and "literate".*

"On the one hand your magazine has been responsible for two of the finest stories of the year (Pippin Graham's *In Reason's Ear* and Brian Aldiss' *Man In His time*) and on the other it persists in publishing stories that went out of vogue many many years ago."

The point is that I am not alone in my squareness. You would be surprised how many loyal readers like *stories which remind them, however faintly, of "the good old days when sf was sf and there weren't any messages". As for "out-of-vogue"—surely this is an almost meaningless term in literary criticism. Thomas Burnett Swann's stories were out of vogue some two thousand years ago, yet his following is very strong, and increases with every story.*

Perhaps it's rather unfair to dissect your letter in this way without giving you a chance to reply, so I promise to give you a return match if you will write again.

Yours very squarely,

KYRIL BONFIGLIOLI

STORY RATINGS
No. 78

1—DAY OF THE DOOMED KING *by Brian Aldiss*

A natural first, but there were plenty of predictable complaints like "not true science fiction", "not progressive" (Whatever that means) and conversely "not like the old Aldiss touch". As a result it was run surprisingly close by—

2—THE WALL *by Josephine Saxton*

—a strange little allegory by a newcomer which seems to have captured many people's imaginations.

3—BEYOND TIME'S AEGIS *by Brian Craig*

Extravagantly praised and fiercely condemned in roughly equal proportions. Certainly rates third place by virtue of the sheer volume of comment received.

SPECIAL MENTION: Many readers mentioned Keith Roberts' cover—there are more to come from this versatile artist/author and his new series of stories, "Pavane" will be starting very soon.

* * *

POSTSCRIPT ON NO. 77: It is only fair to Philip Wordley to state that we are still receiving letters of warm admiration for his GOODNIGHT SWEET PRINCE. If I recalculated the ratings for No. 77 he would probably now take first place.

Legend, archaeology, paradox and humanity—all the Rackham ingredients are here—but with a difference.

THE GOD-BIRDS OF GLENTALLACH

by John Rackham

The box was two feet six by two feet, its lid leaning back against his knees as he squatted. He held a rectangular sheet of silvery-white metal so that the harsh glare of the lamp over his head could shine on it while he made the final, careful marks. Then he threw aside his improvised tool and sat back, stretching the aching muscles of back and shoulder. A glance through the gaps in his improvised shelter showed him the first grey dilution of dawn, up there over the craggy hill-tops.

"Be daylight in an hour," he said, in his own tongue, and the girl who crouched opposite him smiled and nodded, although she understood not a word. "Pass me a bit more of that glop," he asked, holding out a hand. Comprehending the gesture rather than the words, she dug her hand into another box, broken open by her side, and scooped out a palmful of foul-looking, evil-smelling grease. At his gesture, she dolloped it on to the metal plate, and he began spreading it, carefully, to cover all the surface. The box was already almost full of greased plates. Between them, in dark shadow, was a deep hole, also liberally treated with the grease.

"None of this can make any sense to you," he said, conversationally, "but you're a smart girl, just the same." As she smiled, her white teeth gleamed against her tanned face and her grey eyes were bright, attentive, eager to understand. Her long black hair was drawn back from her face in two heavy braids which hung down her bare back. Now, scraping off the thick of the grease, she began to apply the rest of what clung to her hand to the cosmetic task of making her long tresses beautifully glossy. He shook his head wryly at her action.

"A hot bath and a scrub would do you far more good,"

he told her. "You'd really be a beauty, then. But who am I to talk?" He smiled again as he realised what a weird sight he must be. The strong sunshine had burned and blistered him almost black, and there was a three-week old stubble on his jaw and chin. His once-neat uniform was filthy, thick with dirt and grease, and tattered. She, at least, was neat. A soft sheepskin clung to her loins, and her feet were shod in buskins. For the rest, her smoothly tanned skin was clothing enough. This was her world, not his. Up there, peering from behind every rock and crag, were her brothers, uncles and cousins, by the hundred. Waiting. Although he couldn't see them, he knew they were there, as they had been for three weeks now. This was their world.

Here, piled about him in gutted wreckage, was all that was left to him of his world. Battered and wrecked machines, weapons of war and death, engines of destruction, from another place, another time. He sighed, and pressed the final plate home in its grease-bath. This, a painfully-scratched record, was all he could leave, in the forlorn hope that someone, some day, would find it, and read, and understand. Then, on a whim, he put out his hand to touch and take hold of the long necklace of teeth which she wore.

"Will you give me this?" he asked. Her eyes widened and her hand came to grip his wrist, instinctively. It was a strong grip. But then, in a while, she smiled again, and bowed her head to let him take it. Then she watched as he dropped it in the grease between the stacked metal plates. He pointed, pantomiming, using the only two words they had in common. First to the necklace, saying, "Flanna!" which was her name. She nodded. Then to the metal plates, saying, "Don!" which she knew was his name. And she nodded again, and smiled, repeating after him, "Flanna! Don!" and then some comment of her own. He wondered, not for the first time, what she was thinking.

"You're a good girl," he said. "All I hope is that your chums up there have had a change of heart, or that you have some sort of influence in that quarter, because, like it or not, we're going to call on them, soon." Daylight was bright now, and there was no point in hanging on any

longer. He lowered the lid on the box, snapped the fastenings, slid it along and then let it down into the hole, among the squishy grease. He kicked earth in on top of it until it was completely covered, and spent a few moments tramping it firmly down. Then, reaching up, he unhooked the single glaring light and went to crouch by a little pile of powder. From this point, combustible trains led in several directions. He had used the remains of propulsion-fuel, the contents from broken-open weapon-charges, as much well-mixed iron rust and aluminium dust as he could scrape together, and everything else that would catch and burn.

"A funeral pyre," he muttered. "When this goes up, up goes all there is left of my world," and he shattered the glass of the bulb as a gesture. Then he tore loose the twin wires and held the bared ends close to the pile of powder, praying there would be enough kick left in the storage-battery to give him a good fat spark. There was enough. The powder caught, with a fizz and flare. He got up, hurriedly, and ran, catching her by the arm, urging her with him, until they were well clear. Behind them the flames leaped, and roared and there was a great bright glare, brighter than the newly-risen sun, just for a few moments. Then it was over.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go meet your folks, and pray they're in a friendly mood." They walked away from the glowing mass of bent and burned metal, towards the hillside, leaving the box safely buried, under the ground.

Andrew Malcolm stood in the open french-windows, looking across the terrace and down into the cool green of the valley that was his estate, and decided he would never be able to feel like a "laird". That he was the Laird of Glentallach was a matter of record and inheritance, but it was meaningless, otherwise. He said as much to the tall, quietly attentive man by his side.

"It doesn't feel right, to me. I'm no feudal boss-man!"

"It will come to you, in time," Hamish Macrae assured him, calmly. "I mind it was the same with me, in the army. It felt all wrong for me to be taking orders from a Campbell, even if he was a sergeant. But it came to me, after a while. You'll get the way of it soon enough. And you're the Malcolm, no doubt about that."

Had there been any doubt, it would have been dispelled by one glance at the handsomely-framed portrait, back there in the room, of Hector Malcolm, Andrew's grandfather, the twelfth laird. The resemblance was striking. But the man in the painting wore all the finery of kilt and lace, whereas Andrew shrugged his twenty-three-year-old shoulders in a neat grey suit of Canadian wool. Yesterday, in the late afternoon, he had stepped down from a plane to set foot on British soil for the very first time. So far, he'd barely had time to look over the great house, the Hall (almost a castle, in size) which stood in a position to command the head of the glen.

And he had met Hamish, a lean and unsmiling man, fiftyish, the real master of the place. Hamish Macrae, who was as much part of this glen as the high purple hills which stood guarding it, and who seemed determined that Andrew should acquit himself fittingly as the "Malcolm of Glentallach."

"I only came to look at the place, now the Air Ministry have given it back," he said. "Just to see if it's in good order. I don't think I'd want to live here, permanently. I could never manage an estate like this, what with tenant-farmers, and ancient rights and ceremonies and all that. I'd make a fool of myself for sure."

"I think not," Hamish disagreed, gently. "There's little work to it. All you would be called on for would be to be here, to be seen, to accept the authority."

"To be a figure-head, you mean?"

"Ah well, you could put it like that. But it would be a grand thing for the glen folk, all the same. Ah——" he sighed, "—I was forgetting. There is one small matter." He led the way indoors to the table, and a spread of letters with which he had already dealt. He separated one.

"This came, from a professor body, Harbottle is his name, to say he will be calling on you this morn, wanting your permission to re-open the dig."

"Whatever that means." Andrew put out a hand for the letter and frowned at Harbottle's spiderish script. "What's a dig, and how does one re-open it?" Hamish sighed, patiently.

"In the war," he said, "as you know, they laid a wee

air-field down yonder, and made this house a barrack for the flying men, what with your father and mother away to Canada, and most of the glen-folk gone to be soldiers or to make munitions."

"I know about that part. It took them long enough to hand it back, didn't it? But, so far as I can see, they've restored everything, even the farm lands, all back to normal."

"After a fashion, they have. Well now, it seems that when they were laying down that air-strip they came across some very interesting things in the ground. Archaeological remains." Hamish rolled the polysyllables off his tongue with great care. Andrew snapped his fingers.

"Now I get it. This Harbottle wants to have another go at the old bones and remains. Re-open the dig. I get it, now. For a while there I thought you'd gone off into Gaelic." Hamish made a long face, as will any Scot at the mere suggestion that his speech is anything but crystal clear. But Andrew was thinking. "Surely it's all been covered over by the farm-plots, hasn't it?"

"Not that bit, no. It was marked off and set aside, by the border of Ian Kenna's piece. You can see it from here."

"Well that's fine. No reason why this Harbottle shouldn't go ahead and dig, then."

"You'll not have heard of the legend, and the curse, then?"

"Oh no!" Andrew stared at the inscrutable Hamish. "Not ghoulies and ghosties and things like that, surely?"

"It's not wise to mock, sir. Your grandfather too did not heed the legend, and we have had two world wars since then."

Andrew struggled with a laugh, and was rescued by the distant sight of a rapidly moving vehicle, in a fine cloud of dust, coming up the grey road which bisected the green of the glen. "I wonder," he said, "if that's the Harbottle now?" Within five minutes he was able to see that the vehicle was a Landrover, driven by a small man whose bald pate and glasses gleamed in the morning sun. He was also able to see that there were others in the machine. When they swung in under the terrace where he stood, his estimates were confirmed in a flutter of skirts and dainty

legs. "Come on," he urged. "I never knew archaeology was like this."

On his front step he waited for the small party, with Hamish at his side. The man was, indeed, Professor Harbottle, and said so. He then introduced the grave-faced grey-eyed vision by his side as his secretary and assistant, Miss Duncannon. Andrew shook her hand, her slim cool hand, and missed the fine detail of the next few moments, returning to earth just in time to do the gracious thing and invite them all inside. Vaguely he remembered "Janet" and "Sheila" and something about "students, taking advantage of a holiday period," but Miss Duncannon had shattered all his reason, just by standing there and looking calmly remote, her hair as black as midnight, with starsheen to give it a gloss. A vision who had said, "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Malcolm," just as if she was ordinary flesh and blood.

"I hope you'll pardon our impetuosity," Harbottle pleaded. "I understand you have only just arrived, and it is impertinent of me to trouble you so soon—but, you see, we have such little time, and such a lot to do. This glorious weather is too good to be wasted, and the girls have only two weeks of holiday." Andrew made a great effort to be rational, to drag his mind and eyes away from Miss Duncannon. As she sat, her skirt came nowhere near covering her knees, and he was profoundly grateful for it. But the word "holiday" stirred him to wonder.

"You're no schoolgirl, surely?" he demanded of her, and she smiled. Delight was compounded with dimples, to his ruination.

"I hope to take my degree next term," she said, "and it would help if I could use the material of the Glentallach dig for my thesis. By the few specimens we've seen, it should be a most interesting site."

Andrew found himself in absolute agreement with what she had said, even if his meaning differed slightly from hers. Harbottle added, eagerly,

"It might prove to be pre-Roman. I hope so."

"It might as well be Greek for all the sense it makes to me," Andrew confessed. "But, so far as I'm concerned, you

can start any time. Is that all there is to it, or is there something I have to sign?"

"It is purely a formality," Harbottle explained. "A question of ownership and title. In the unlikely event that we find anything of intrinsic value, it would be as well to have something on paper, but that can wait, so long as we have your approval now."

"You mean, if you find a pot of gold down there, or a treasure chest, it would be mine?"

"You're the Malcolm of Glentallach," Hamish declared, softly. "All the land belongs to you."

"In fact, that's quite right," Harbottle nodded, "although the law regarding treasure-trove is rather complex. Still, it won't come to anything like that, you know."

"Whatever we find," Miss Duncannon said, gently, "if we do find anything, will be eventually mounted, labelled, presented to some museum or other, and will bear a fine plate to say that it was so presented by the Laird of Glentallach. You'll be famous. In a small way." Andrew heard a stifled giggle from the two girls, and felt his face warm up. The grey-eyed vision was mocking him, in her way. No doubt she saw him as an ignorant and misplaced Colonial. The thought spurred him.

"Two weeks, you said. Where will you stay?"

"That's something we have yet to work out," Harbottle confessed. "We were so keen to get started that we left the question of accommodation in the air for a while. We have tents—and—"

"You must stay here," Andrew declared, firmly. "There's all the room in the world, even if it's not very high-class. The Air Ministry have been using it as a barracks, after all, so I'm sure we can find room for all of you. It will be all right, won't it, Hamish?" Now, for the first time, he began to feel like a "laird" in his own house. Hamish nodded, his lean face passive.

"That will be fine," he said. "There's room. I'll pass the word on to Mrs. Dougal to have all ready."

"You're very kind," Harbottle beamed. "That will make a tremendous difference, indeed. Well now, if you'll excuse us, we'd like to go and look over the site right away."

"I'll come with you." Andrew rose with them. "Unless there's some business I ought to be attending to. Hamish?"

"It would be best if you went, sir. If you're seen with the party then all will know fine well that you have given your approval, and that will settle it."

Half an hour later, with the Landrover backed into the hedge on the opposite side of the road, they inspected the narrow strip which had been saved from the plough. It measured some thirty yards by ten, not much in itself, but a tremendous area to be covered by one man and three girls.

"You're never going to dig it all up?" Andrew doubted, and Harbottle chuckled and shook his head.

"Not to begin with, at any rate. No. What we shall do is sink a pit, or trench, here—and another one about there —and go straight down. To get the pattern of the layers, and an approximate time-scale."

"Like taking a core, in oil-prospecting?"

"The same idea, exactly, only we shall have to be much more careful, of course, after we've cleared the first three or four feet. According to the report, they went that far with their machinery when laying the air-strip, so we can write that off as being lost, or spoiled."

Andrew watched as they got busy with stakes and string, compasses and notebooks, thin planking, shovels, trowels, sieves and other things. He tried not to watch Miss Duncannon. He hoped his gesture of hospitality would thaw some of the frost from her manner, and show her that he was not entirely lacking in grace, but she remained so sublimely indifferent to him, and so obviously engrossed in the work, that he soon decided he was achieving nothing. Getting in the way, if anything. He went back to the house, his feelings sadly mixed. Hamish was waiting for him.

"Will you take a bit of advice, Master Andrew?"

"Depends. What have I done wrong? Shouldn't I have invited them to stay here?"

"Oh, that's no trouble, and it's your own house. No, it's not that. You understand, it's fine for you to ask me what to do, when there's but the two of us alone. But when there's guests listening, it is for you to give orders, and not ask the wherefores. Remember, you're the Malcolm!"

"All right, I'll try to remember. It doesn't seem to cut much ice with Miss Duncannon, though, and she's as Scottish as you are."

"She'll be a lowlander, I'm thinking," Hamish declared, "by the sound of her." There was that in his voice which suggested an irremediable fault. Andrew decided not to enquire too deeply, telling himself quite uselessly that he was not really interested in Miss Duncannon. After all—a pretty girl—! He hadn't come home to Glentallach to make entanglements.

The diggers came in to lunch with large appetites. Miss Duncannon and the two schoolgirls had changed, efficiently, into tartan trews and shirts and were obviously happy, but Harbottle looked rueful.

"They disturbed much more than I had expected," he said, meaning the excavators. "Six feet at least. It's a complete shambles."

"Doesn't that mean you'll get down to the ancient stuff just that bit faster?" Andrew asked, and the professor agreed.

"True. But we prefer to work down by stages, you know, and get a proper foundation for the chronology. Otherwise it is like beginning in the middle of a history book without any dates for guidance. For instance, we have cleared one patch of disturbed ground, and come to an interesting layer underneath. There are a few shaped stones, some signs of fire, some broken pot fragments. Now, unless we find something familiar, something we can use as a date-peg, that layer might be anything from a hundred to a thousand years old, and we will never know."

Talk became particular and technical between the two girls, the professor, and Miss Duncannon, and Andrew felt completely out of it. He wished, vaguely, that he had taken archaeology at school, instead of production engineering. He toyed with the idea of taking an interest, of trying to learn—from such a teacher, the idea was tempting—but he did not relish invoking her mild scorn again. Those cool grey eyes of hers had the power to make him feel stumblingly uncouth. For that same reason, he chose to dress conservatively for the dinner which Hamish laid on that evening.

It was an occasion befitting the faded grandeur of the great dining room. Mrs. Dougal had surpassed herself with the meal, and Hamish had spared no pains to trick it out with candlesticks and gleaming silver, with wines and cheeses and biscuits, probably gleaned from the leavings of Air Ministry occupation. The old man waited on them himself, resplendent in full Highland dress. On him, Andrew thought, it looks fine.

"On me," he confessed to Harbottle, over coffee, "it would be a disaster. By ancestry, of course, I'm a Malcolm, but in cold fact I'm just a rather bewildered Canadian, feeling as if I'd slipped back into history. Not your kind, of course, but far enough back to make me feel out of place."

"You can't be out of place here," Miss Duncannon said, from across the table. "What's in the blood must come out, in time. You'll soon get in the way of it." She had changed for the meal into something misty grey with white trimmings and looked very much at home. She sounded more kindly, too. He took heart.

"I never had any intention of getting in the way of it. All I had in mind was to look the place over, see that it was in good shape, and then put it in the hands of some capable manager, and go back home."

"But this is your home," she said, firmly. "One has only to look at that picture on the wall to see that. You'll change your mind."

"I might be persuaded, at that," he said, daringly, and she rewarded him with a smile, but Harbottle, insensitive to atmosphere, raised his voice to Hamish.

"I'm told there are legends about this glen," he said. "If so, are they preserved in any records that you know of? I study local lore," he added, in an aside to Andrew. "It's a hobby, and it often helps to fill in some of the background to the sites I explore. It's astonishing, sometimes, how persistent the old accounts can be."

"The legend of Glentallach is not written down, so far as I know," Hamish said, "but many people, the older ones hereabouts, know it well."

"I don't," Andrew confessed, "and I ought to, I suppose. Will you tell it to us, Hamish?"

"Oh yes, please!" Janet begged, echoed by Sheila. From the corner of his eye Andrew saw Miss Duncannon make a strange gesture, as if to call halt, then her hand fell to the table and she sat still. Hamish moved to stand by the french windows, where the dusk was purpling the world outside.

"If it is your wish, then I will," he said, and his voice was almost a chant as he began. "I will tell it the way my grandfather told it to me, and as it was told to him by his father before him—of the great birds of peace which came to the glen to die—of the way they united the old tribes and taught them the ways of peace—and of the curse that has been on this glen ever since." He paused to collect his thoughts. Harbottle sat back, with a grunt and an odd, frowning look.

"Long ago, when all this land was thick with forest and wild beasts, none were more wild and savage than the people who lived hereabouts. All were in small tribes and families, and all fought, one with the other, and every man was an enemy. And there was much killing, most of all in this glen, where the tribes would meet and fight for who should have the use of it. Then, one day, there came the noise of mighty wings out of the sky and all who heard were feared and stood to watch. And saw a great bird fly out of the clouds and round the glen, three times, the beating of its wings like a great wind. It flew down into the glen and settled, quietly. Then after it came another, and then one more, until there were three great birds, and all the people watched as the three birds settled and were quiet. Then, in a wee while, came another, greater than them all, the great mother-bird, to fly down and settle with her brood, here in the glen.

"But the mother-bird was sick and dying, as the watching people could see. For all their great fear, they were a wicked people and decided, after a while, that they would come down, with their swords and spears, and kill the birds which had settled on their land. So they gathered into a great band, and came charging down the hillsides, many hundreds of them. And then the great birds stirred, and spoke with a great shout and thunder and fire—and the savage people were struck down dead by the hundreds.

And they ran from the place and hid in the hills in great fright.

"After a bit, because the birds kept still and made no move, they grew brave again, and gathered themselves for another charge. This time there was many more of them, for the news had spread through all the hills, and many a man wanted to have a crack at the strange things. So they came charging down again, bent on killing, and again the great birds defended themselves with thunder and fire and many hundreds were struck dead, until all the hillsides were thick with the bodies, and you can find the bones, odd times, to this day, where they fell.

"Some there were who were content to watch and marvel. They saw the old bird die, and begin to shrivel and wither. They saw one of the young birds try to fly away again, and heard the great sound of its wings. But, by the look, they were all helpless and dying, and so the savage people would have another try. And they had many a more, but each time they came charging down, so the birds struck them, killing many. And so it went on for a long time, and the people were badly feared.

"Then there came a woman, the wise and beautiful daughter of a great chief, to call all the people together to take counsel.

" 'The fault is ours,' she told them, 'for that we have tried to kill the birds, and them never harming us at all except to defend themselves. We should now go and offer the hand of friendship, and kindness, and make them welcome.' And the young men—and the old men, too—jeered at her, because they were not fond of being kind to others. But there were some who took the words and thought on them. And she spoke again. 'What have they done?' she asked. 'Why are we trying to destroy them? Quiet they sit, making no trouble, with a great light shining over them by night, and the sunshine by day, and do no harm to us. Why can we not speak friendly to them?'

"Then some of the young men stood and asked her. 'Who will go and tell the birds that we are friendly?' And she shamed them as they stood.

" 'I will go,' she said. 'All alone, with no weapon. I will go. All I ask is that you not betray me by making an attack,

and that when I have promised the hand of friendship to the great ones you will support me, and not betray me. If I am killed, then so be it. But if I am spared, then you must swear to keep the word I shall speak for you.'

"Many were shamed. Many were angry. But, in the end, it was her way. The people came, fearful and staring, to watch Fyanna—for that was her name—go down into the glen and approach the great creatures. But there was no thunder, no anger, no killing, only peace. For two nights and three days the people watched and waited. And then, on the third day, there came a great fire, brighter than the sun, and the birds were gone. Before the people could cry out, they saw Fyanna come, and with her came a strange man, who was the spirit of the birds, transformed into human shape.

"From that day the people were gathered together in peace, taking the bird-man as their Chief and leader, and he taught them many great things, commanded them to cease fighting among themselves, and showed them how to work together and become greatly prosperous. By his command was a great watchtower built, at the head of the glen —where this house now stands—and a wall at the foot, long since gone, so that the resting-place of the birds might not be disturbed. For it is the curse of Glentallach that any disturbance of the resting place, yonder, will bring misfortune to all the glen." Hamish paused, and Harbottle stirred, with a dry chuckle.

"There's almost always some taboo or other connected with a genuine site," he declared. "I don't think I've ever heard one quite as confused as that, but it does suggest, at least, that we have a genuine settlement here."

"What do you make of the story, anyway?" Andrew asked. "If it wasn't ridiculous, I'd say you might almost tie it in with flying saucers and such."

"Pah!" Harbottle snorted. "Nothing so ridiculous. No. It can be quite readily seen as an agglutination of many things. The great bird theme is very common all over the North, and in Scandinavia. Thunderbolts and fiery darts, too, are common enough. The transformation by fire has echoes of the Phoenix legend, sadly mutilated. The chief who preaches goodwill among men is, of course, an infil-

tration of early Christianity. The self-sacrificing daughter of the clan-chief is a very old theme. Almost pure Greek. Her name, Fyanna, is derived, I would say, from the same root as your own, Miss Duncannon. Fiona—Fyanna—they are almost the same."

"You're spoiling it," Janet complained. "I like it just the way it was told. As good as anything I've seen on T.V., anyway." But Andrew was struck by Miss Duncannon's expression, which was one of distress and distaste. There was, also, an odd wariness about Hamish. But Sheila set the train of thought rolling in another direction.

"What about the curse, though," she cried. "We're asking for all sorts of trouble with our digging."

"The damage was done long since," Hamish said, severely. "By old Hector." He nodded to the picture on the wall. "He had no respect at all for the legend, and was a hard man to turn from his path. It was he who first put the glen land under the plough and brought in small farmers. The fortunes of the glen have gone steadily wrong since that day. Good fortune, they say, bides with the Laird, if so be he takes to wife a daughter of a local clan family. But Hector took and married a French-Canadian lady. Then came the first World War, and the lady died when her son was no more than a child of five. That would be your father, Master Andrew. Just after the war, anyway, and all the young men away, it was bad times. So Hector sent the boy away to live with relatives in Canada. He said it was to give the lad a chance to grow in comfort, but the local people didn't like the idea of sending away the heir to the estate to grow up in a foreign land. It was in old Hector's mind for the lad to come back when he was grown, but it never came to pass."

"I know about that part of it," Andrew said, quietly. "I was just a kid at the time, but I remember my father saying he would have to get back to the home of his ancestors, some day, and see how it was getting along. But then we had word that grandfather had died—and the second War had begun—and things were in a terrible mix-up. The Air Ministry took over the estate and the glen, as you know, and my father had to put off the idea of coming here. But he had an itch to get into the fighting. He joined

up in Canada, in the Air Force, got his wings, and came to England just when the Battle of Britain was going full blast. I doubt if he ever got as far as this, but I imagine he tried. His letters home said he wanted to. But then—well—he flew one mission too many, and never came back. My mother never really got over it. She died about five years ago. I should imagine the curse has just about run out by this time."

"I hope so," Miss Duncannon said, sympathetically. "The glen was never the place for such sadness. Perhaps it will all come right again, now that you're here to take charge."

"But I'm no laird, not really," Andrew disclaimed. "I wouldn't even know how to begin managing an estate like this. As for the good fortune that Hamish speaks of, I can't see me marrying the daughter of a clansman just to save the inheritance—that is if there are any clansmen left, after all this time. I've no intention—" the sentence dwindled in his mouth. He had been about to say that he had no great urge to get married as yet, but her lovely face, so close, had done much to shake that idea.

"We can't live our lives by old myths," Harbottle chuckled. "We'd all be in trouble if we did. I'm surprised though, my dear, that you've not heard the story before. I seem to remember you telling me that you came originally from somewhere near here." Miss Duncannon lost all her warm sympathy, suddenly, and her lovely face went ice-cold. Then Hamish spoke up, his voice almost a purr.

"Is that so, now?" he demanded. "It had not occurred to me—would that be the Duncannon of Cranach-Fergus, maybe?"

"You know fine well," Fiona snapped, her voice like chill steel, "that the Duncannon of Cranach-Fergus is my father! How could you not have known a thing like that?"

"Ah no!" Hamish was in great distress. "By your speech I had you taken for being from the South. I'm deeply sorry. Had I known—" but she had risen precipitately from the table, to cross the room and go out by the french windows, into the dusk of the terrace, her head high, her slim back very straight. Hamish turned a regretful eye on Andrew. "I'm a long-tongued fool," he said, sadly. "You have the right to be angered with me."

"Forget it." Andrew got to his feet. "You couldn't help it, at all. It's just one of those things."

"I suggest," Harbottle said, awkwardly, "that we all let the whole matter drop, and go quietly off to bed. We must make an early start in the morning, in any case." Hamish gathered them up and led them away to their rooms, leaving Andrew a prey to his confused thoughts. Through the window he could just discern the white of her dress against the purple dark. It would have been easy for him to leave it as it stood, but he had the feeling that he had been letting matters take their own course too long. Gathering his courage, he went out after her, closing the french windows behind him, isolating the pair of them together in the dark.

"Any apology from me will probably sound meaningless," he said, "but I must make one. And I must exonerate Hamish, too. Truly, he thought you were a lowlander. He said as much to me, only this morning."

"So you've been discussing me already?"

"That's not fair," he said, as evenly as he could manage. "It was no discussion. Look, twenty-four hours ago I set foot on British soil for the first time. Tonight, just now, I heard a legend for the first time. It has no significance for me. I'm the Malcolm of Glentallach, if you insist, but that doesn't mean anything to me, either."

"That's fine and easy to say."

"It happens to be true. I'm not about to be nudged by superstition or persuaded by some old myth. Even if I believed it, which I don't, I'd still want to make up my own mind. The big surprise is that you take any notice of it, that you're superstitious enough to think that it makes any difference. That makes it very difficult for me to say—that Glentallach leaves me utterly cold. There's nothing here for me, or wasn't, until you came in the door there, this morning. I don't expect you to believe it, but it happens, also, to be the truth that you are far and away the loveliest girl I have ever seen. That I have been unable to think of anything else since the moment I first saw you. That I wish, fervently, that this silly business about legends had never come up."

"What do you expect me to do about it?" her voice was

faintly warmer, now. He saw the pale oval of her face turn towards him.

"No need to *do* anything, is there? Just carry on as if nothing had happened. Oh, I know you can't see me, at all, that you're far more interested in whatever you might dig up from that hole down there. That's my hard luck, isn't it? But at least give me the privilege of being plain Andrew Malcolm, Canadian. Tourist, if you like. Fascinated by your beauty, as I am. And willing to be friendly. Can't we start all over? I promise not to be objectionable. That is, unless you find me positively repulsive or something. Do you?" He saw her turn, now.

"I've too much good sense to answer that last question, anyway," she whispered, and there was a smile in her voice. "It's very easy for you to say that none of this makes any difference, but it's none so easy for me to think like that. I was born just a way from here, over the hill. The magic of this place is in my blood, whether I like it or not. It's in yours, too, and on your face. So far from not being able to see you, I've been all of a tremble ever since I set foot in this house. If I had any sense at all, I would pack up and go, at once."

"But you can't do that, please! You've nothing to be afraid of. Certainly not of any old fairy-story. And not of me—I hope!"

He had moved close to her, now, and her hand had somehow found its way into his, to rest cool and still.

"Isn't it ridiculous," he whispered. "In any other circumstances I would know exactly what to do, now."

"I think I know well what you mean," she breathed. As if by some intuitive agreement she swayed forward just as his arm circled her waist. Her mouth came to meet his, softly, willingly, and time halted for a breath. Then she stirred, pushed herself gently free. "You see—" she whispered, "it's not you I'm feared of. It's myself!" And with that she brushed past him, through the doors into the room and away, leaving him shaken and dazed. Slowly he came back to earth and reality, to miserable afterthoughts.

"Oh, damn the legend," he muttered, and took himself away to bed.

Morning came, and breakfast, and the businesslike de-

parture of the diggers, just as if nothing earth-shattering had happened. Andrew watched them go, standing on the terrace where he could see right down the glen to where they were working. He would rather have gone with them, just to be near, and watch Fiona. But he wanted to play fair with her, as he had more or less promised. And if her feelings were anything like as tumultuous as his own, the cause of archaeology was already suffering enough. So he stayed where he was, and yearned. About the middle of the morning, Hamish came with coffee and a massive pair of field-glasses. Andrew was honest enough to thank him warmly, and use the glasses to good effect. By their means he was able to torture himself with the illusion of being able to look over her shoulder, and into her lovely face, as if she had been near enough to touch.

Thus it was that he was as good as present when the excitement began, although, exasperatingly, he couldn't hear a word. They'd found something strange, obviously, but what? Vainly he peered through the glasses at one face and another, wishing he could lip-read, wondering what it could be. It was so maddening that at last he discarded the glasses and hurried to the front door, determined to go and see. He almost bumped into Hamish, who carried a bag containing flasks.

"I was for taking a drop of coffee and a bite for the diggers," he explained. "Was there something you wanted?"

"Just give me the bag. I'll take it. They've found something!" He went off down the road as fast as was consonant with dignity. He found Harbottle sitting by the hole, the picture of gloom. As the two schoolgirls fell on the provisions with ardour, the professor shook his head.

"Ruined!" he groaned. "Absolutely ruined. "A first-class find, all spoiled. A disaster!" Andrew peered down into the hole, which was much deeper than he had expected, and saw Fiona look up at him, wide-eyed.

"Can I come down and see?" he asked, and she nodded, gravely. He made his way carefully down the first four-foot step, taking a cup of coffee from Janet to pass down before him. They had made the trench nine feet long and three feet wide, taking a step down at either end,

presumably to clear the disturbed layers, of four feet. The real dig, however, in the centre section, was deep enough to reach above Fiona's head as she stood. He let himself down, cautiously, bearing in mind that he might disturb or break a precious fragment of some kind. His feet came down on boards, and the hole was cool and rich with the sour-sweet tang of fresh earth.

"What's the disaster?" he asked, feeling an irrelevant thrill at being caught so close to her, and noticing, foolishly, that she had a grey smear of clay across her cheek, dirt stains on her hands and arms, and stray cobwebs of black hair escaping across her fair forehead—all of which merely made her the more lovely in his eyes. But there was no charm in her voice as she pointed down and said,

"There it is, the horrible thing!" At first glance, it didn't look interesting enough to be horrible, being no more than a rectangular prominence in the wall of the trench, just below knee-level. It was black, and, as he touched it gingerly, quite hard, like stone.

"You'll have to explain," he confessed. "In nice easy words, so that I can understand. And there's no hurry." But the last phrase was for his own ears. She smiled a wry smile and raised her finger to point higher up in the wall. He watched, attentively.

"After the first four feet," she said, "we came to settled ground, and layers, see? Nothing very special, but enough to tell us that the ground had not been disturbed for a long time. Further down we began to find small things, a few bronze beads, bits of broken pot, some scrapers and bone tools, good evidence that this was a long-standing site of some kind. Down to here. This level is very rich, and we are almost certainly on the very edge of it, which is great good fortune. We have found flints, scrapers and engraved stones and pot fragments, suggesting a sacred place of some kind. Almost certainly of contemporary date with the Megalith builders."

"Whoa, there," he cautioned. "Who were they, and when?"

"You'll have heard of Stonehenge? There are several other sites, here in Scotland. Loanhead Daviot, in Aber-

deenshire ; Clava Cairns, near Inverness ; the Communion Stone in Dumfriesshire ; Mid Clyth, in Caithness—"

"But where are the big stones, then?"

"I'm not saying there should be any, just that these remains we have found are of the same period. The same type of culture. About three thousand five hundred years ago, roughly."

"That's fair enough. That sounds fine. Isn't it?"

"It might have been, if only we had stopped there," she sighed. "We went down further, chiefly to confirm what we expected, that there would be nothing else below but virgin soil. But also for convenience, because it is far easier to study and make accurate measurements at waist height than to have to get down on your knees, you see?"

"Makes sense," he agreed. "And then—you found that, eh? What is it, one of the great stones If the distance down is anything to go by, it must be seven or eight thousand years old, surely?"

"That—" she said, grimly, "—is just the trouble. It's no stone. It's a box. The end of a box, anyway. A wooden box."

"Oh! I see. Didn't they make wooden boxes, in those days?"

"Not tongued and grooved, with boards and battens, they didn't!" He squatted down, and she beside him, to peer more closely. The grain of the wood was unmistakable, even to the ends of the joints. But when he touched, it was crumble-hard, like weathered stone.

"Petrified?" he wondered, and she sighed again.

"That's another thing. This soil was peat-bog at some time in the remote past. It preserves wood very well, as you see. But that is a modern box, of this century at least. So how can it be in a state which indicates two or three thousand years of petrification? And, what's more—" she straightened up and pointed, "—you can see, quite plainly, by the earth lines, that someone dug a hole here, presumably to bury this box."

"It certainly looks that way."

"Doesn't it? But how—how—did he, without disturb-

ing this series of layers, which I'll swear have not been moved in three thousand years. I'll swear they haven't!"

"I pass," he said, helplessly. "If there's an answer to that one, it beats me." As the enormity of it came to him, he felt a shudder of unease, and threw it off vigorously. "It's a hell of a mess, Fiona—but don't you worry about it. There's got to be some kind of explanation, and we'll find it, somehow!" All at once, to his terrified delight, her self-control gave way to despair and she turned blindly to him, burying her face in his shoulder.

"The horrible thing," she mumbled. "It's spoiled the whole dig, and we've worked so hard—it was going so well—"

"Cheer up," he advised, gently, putting his arm round her shoulder. "It's only a box. Boxes usually have something in them. We'll get this one up and see what's in it, before we give up the project in despair." He held her very gently, feeling the tickle of her hair against his cheek and the faint scent of her in his nostrils. "Who knows," he suggested, "it might be a treasure chest, full of gold and diamonds and jewels of all kinds." He groped for a handkerchief, and she took it, sniffing. "I can see it now," he said, extravagantly. "There'll be a tiara, at least, and masses of jewels, great gold and pearl necklaces—just the stuff to wear with a topless dress—"

"Don't be daft!" she stirred away from him a little. "You'd never get me to wear one of those things."

"More's the pity," he retorted. "It would suit you!"

"Och away!" she giggled and pushed clear of him. "You're just like all men," and he seized the opportunity swiftly.

"That's right. Just like any other man, no better, no worse." Her cheek reddened as she handed him back his handkerchief, but there was a glow in her eye that said she was far from offended.

"What d'you think of it, Malcolm?" the voice of Harbottle came to shatter the precious moment. Andrew craned his neck to look up and strove to be polite, even helpful.

"It's just a box. No telling what it's all about until we can get it out and open it."

"That will be a devil of a job. Lord only knows how big it is, but it will be heavy, that's certain, and we haven't the tackle for a big job."

"I suppose we might as well get out," Andrew sighed. "Come, I'll give you a hoist." By the time they had completed the ascent and were back in the sunshine, he felt valiant enough to have moved mountains single-handed. As he glanced around for inspiration he saw, leaning on a close-by fence, a sun-browned, grave-faced man who watched with passive interest and the quiet patience of a true man of the soil. Andrew dug into his memory for a name, found it, and strode across to the watcher.

"We haven't met," he said, "but I believe you're Ian Kenna, right? And I imagine you know who I am—?"

"I do. You're the Malcolm."

"Right. Now. They've run into some trouble down the hole. There's a box or crate of some kind in the way, and holding up the work."

"Is that a fact?"

"It is." Andrew bore down on his impatience. "I want your help. I have in mind two good stout poles, lashed at one end and hoisted across the hole to form a shear-legs. Then a block and tackle, and plenty of good rope to make a sling. And maybe a tractor, or something with a power-winch."

"That would do it, sure enough," Kenna approved. "That would do it very well."

"Do you have that kind of equipment?" Andrew demanded, and added, on sudden inspiration, "for hire?"

"Ah!" Kenna betrayed stirring interest, casting a glance at the sun. "It will take you all the rest of the day, no doubt. Would half a sovereign be right? And how soon would you be wanting it?"

Andrew did some calculating of his own. "We'll have to loosen and rope the thing, first. That will take a while. After lunch, about one-thirty. All right?"

"I'll bring it myself," Kenna nodded and went away, slowly, up the furrows to his farm-house on the hillside.

"So much for that." Andrew turned back to Harbottle and the others. "Now it's for us to cut away an annular space around the thing, slide it out, mount it on boards and get it all ready. If we're to do that by lunch time, we might as well get started." It was not until he caught Fiona's smile that he realised how unconsciously and easily he had assumed command.

"You'll make a laird, yet," she murmured, and he laughed.

"Maybe. That's to be seen. But this is straightforward engineering, and that's something I do know. You shall have your treasure-chest, I promise you." Of course, once said it had to be done, and the job turned out to be far more demanding than he had imagined. For one thing, the close confines of the trench made for difficulty, and there was the ever-present need for care not to upset the bared strata any more than could be helped. However, by lunch-time the offending object had been freed from its bed and lay on boards and swathed with rope, at the bottom of the trench.

Hamish was aghast at the state of his clothes, but Andrew felt too satisfied to care. Nor did he want to join in the fruitless speculations about the strange box. He was quite prepared to wait until it could be opened, and to that end he instructed Hamish to lay out the floor of the dining-room with newspaper and sacking.

"As soon as it's out of the hole," he said, "we'll bring it up here and deal with it properly."

Kenna came with his tractor, and the hoist was easily made once begun. He had a steady hand on his controls, and no sense of excitement at all as the mysterious black mass settled on to a prepared framework.

"Matteradam to me," he declared, "so long as I get the ten shilling." Harbottle insisted on taking several photographs before they finally took it up the hill and into the Hall.

"We're never going to save the box itself," he said. "It will shatter as soon as ever we try to open it. See—those are undoubtedly the remains of metal hinges and catches. The thing's an incredible nightmare."

He was proved right. No sooner had they scraped a

line of join and inserted a thin chisel edge than the petrified surface cracked and broke away in shards, revealing grey-black surface resembling dried clay. And a most unpleasant stench. Andrew gagged at it.

"Smells as if something died a long time ago. Don't say we're going to be stuck with a body, after all that! What an anti-climax!"

But Hamish nudged him aside, gently, and sniffed. And twisted his dour face into a curious frown. "I've smelled something like that afore," he muttered. "I'm certain of it. Preservative grease, that's what it is, like we used in the Army, to protect guns and spare parts. I'll away get some paraffin and rags."

"It can't be." Harbottle shook his head and went on with the chisel. "This flaky stuff never was grease, not unless it's thousands of years old." By the time Hamish returned the whole top of the box was stripped off in small fragments. Andrew watched as the experts scraped carefully at the grey mass. All at once Harbottle snapped his fingers and requested a soft brush from Janet. He used it, and blew, and stared.

"Metal. And, unless I'm completely wrong, it's aluminium. Or a very similar stuff." Careful blowing and brushing finally revealed a plane surface, grey-white, eighteen inches by twelve. Harbottle dictated the exact details to Janet, who crouched by him with a note book. "And there's another beside it, spaced by about three inches of the flaky powder. Now, let's see how thick they are. I'd say this box is ten inches deep, at least, and I refuse to believe that we have two solid blocks that thick."

"They're inscribed," Fiona said, on her knees and peering. "It looks like writing. Like European script, I mean." Harbottle did delicate work with the chisel edge and was able to lift one plate. It was quite thin, and still strong enough to handle. He passed it to Fiona, who wiped it with the paraffin rag which Hamish supplied, and then held it to catch the light.

" '—She has stayed close by me ever since, very quietly, very patiently, watching everything I do, listening to me, not understanding—' " Fiona paused in her reading to look up, her eyes wide. "What on earth have we found?" She

applied the rag again and moved her gaze to the top of the sheet of metal. "November twenty-first," she read out. "Three days ago something very like a miracle happened—" she paused again. Andrew caught her eye as she looked up.

"There's obviously more," he said. "Better leave it until we have the whole thing in proper sequence. Professor?"

"I agree. Certainly. There appears to be quite a large number of them." Fiona clicked her tongue and scanned the sheet in her hand again.

"I should have thought of that. This one has a number in the top right corner. It's eighty-two!"

"Good Heavens!" Harbottle gasped. "We have a long job ahead of us. Sheila, lend a hand, will you? Fiona, you and—and Malcolm, if you would be so good? And Mr. Macrae—can be cleaning them with the paraffin. Very carefully, please. Not you, Janet. We'll want your hands clean for writing." One by one the thin metal plates were coaxed out of the long-dried grease and sponged clean, to be laid out in orderly array over the paper-covered carpet.

"Sorry about the jewellery," Andrew murmured, as he knelt with Fiona and worked on the crusted powder. "I was looking forward to seeing you in diamonds and pearls."

"Sure it wasn't the topless dress you had in mind?" she mocked, conspiratorially, and he was delighted by the change in her manner. Her cheeks were pink, now, and she was obviously excited by the utterly unexpected discovery. How could he ever have thought of her as cool and remote? The last plate came out as the great Hall clock was striking seven-thirty. Harbottle got up, stretching himself wearily.

"I know it's a strain on the nerves," he said, "but I suggest we all stop now, clean ourselves up, have a meal, and postpone the reading until we can do it in one session, in comfort."

"That's a good idea," Andrew seconded. "I'm just as anxious as anyone, but those plates have waited a long time. A few more minutes won't hurt."

Half-an-hour later, washed and tidy, they sat down to a hurriedly prepared meal of cold meat and pickles, while Hamish busied himself to set out a reading-lamp at one end of the table and gathered the plates in a neat stack, all ready.

"You'd better read, my dear," Harbottle decided. "I think you have the sharpest eyes of us all."

"Certainly the loveliest," Andrew thought, as he sat himself opposite her. She had put on a pastel-blue blouse, low in the neck, so that the bright light from the lamp paid court to the lovely lines of her shoulders and throat. More than ever he regretted there had not been something jewelled to complement that fair sight. She took the first of the plates and began to read.

"It is dated November 14th, 1940. It begins—'Whoever reads this will have to explain it as best he can. All I intend to do is set down the facts as I saw them happen, the way I know they happened, whether I believe them or not. There's nobody left to argue with, or care. I am all alone. My time is running out, along with my water and food. Up there the savages are lurking behind every crest and crag, waiting for me to die. God knows how many of them are left. I've lost count of how many hundreds have been killed, all around. Far too many, anyway. It makes me sick to think of it, of all those bodies lying out there on the hillsides. I know I came to do my part in a war, but I never meant it to be anything like this. Wherever this is.

" 'According to Danny Morris this is a prehistoric land. According to my log-book, we left the land of sanity just fourteen days ago, and the nightmare has gone on ever since. If he was right, then that log-book is not going to be much use as a record, which is why I am scratching these words like this. If he was wrong, well, he'll never know, because he went stark raving mad two days ago, and they got him. But they keep quiet at night times. Perhaps the light scares them. That can't last much longer, either. The batteries are running low. When that light fails it will be all over with me, so I had better stop wasting time and put this record in some kind of coherent order.

" 'Looking back to fourteen days ago, I could laugh, it is almost funny. I would have given anything to be away from where I was. I had been over in Britain only three weeks, fresh from Canada with my wings, to land straight into the thick of the crazy battle with the Jerries over London and the South Coast. I had heard about the green

garden of Kent. I never expected to spend three weeks, all hours of the day and night, chasing ME's and being shot at. No real rest. Scramble any old time at a moment's notice. Killing, and seeing others being shot down in flames all around me. No time to think about it, just keep going and go slowly crazy at the senselessness of it all. There was barely time to scribble a letter, now and then, to Barbara, back home. That's the worst part, to think that she will never know, that I'll never see her or young Andy again.' " Fiona faltered, put down the plate and looked up. Andrew, very quietly, said,

"Please go on." She took up the next, as Hamish handed it to her.

" 'First of November, out of the blue, Squadron Leader Moffat sent for me. "You're a lucky beggar, Malcolm," he said. "I'm sending you home!" Of course, for a mad moment I thought he meant Bear Foot, Ontario, which is my home, and has given the chaps plenty of exercise for wit. They call me the bare-foot boy—or did. But he went on. "There's a Dak-full of small-arms and ammo to be escorted to Scottish command. You, Flying Officer Fox, and Flight Sergeant Wilson will take care of it." It wasn't until I looked at the orders that I saw the name Glentallach. My ancestral home. Of course, he knew I had been trying to wangle my way there, and this was his way of doing me a good turn. I remember I was grateful. It sounded like a piece of cake. It still seemed that way as we got airborne at 0945 hours, into a stiff breeze but no cloud to speak of, unlimited ceiling and, according to the Met boys, fine weather all the way.

" 'There was plenty of ribbing, too. I had to promise the rest of the chaps a treat when we got there. Haggis all round. We kept a steady 20,000 feet, the Dakota stooging along nicely, Chuck Wilson to port, Foxie to starboard, and me riding high and back a bit, to keep an eye on things. It was a big relief just to get away from a sky full of Jerries, but we kept a sharp lookout, just the same. All smooth and pleasant until just after we crossed the border, about 1100 hours. Then the fun started. All at once we ran slap into the thickest cloud of mist I've ever seen. Scotch mist, naturally, and I forget who was first to plug that old

gag. But it got less funny as it went on. Those clouds were thick with electricity and gremlins, and I was trailing sparks all over the place. Visibility nil. Instruments jittering like mad. The old kite shuddering like a flat-tyred bus. We could hardly hear each other on the intercom, for static. By dead reckoning I guessed we had reached the place we wanted to be, but still no break in the cloud. There was no time to work out any fancy moves. My tanks were more than half empty, and I knew the others were no better.

" 'We couldn't raise a damn thing on the radio except each other, so I instructed the rest to make a tight circle and stooge around while I went down to see if I could see anything. Down I went, and down some more, and it began to look as if that cloud was all the way down to ground level. My altimeter had walked back to less than 1,000 feet, and I was just giving it a knock to make sure, when I fell out of the clouds into bright clear sky, and levelled off to take a look. There was no air-strip. Nor anything else. Not as far as I could see. Just craggy hills and trees, and more hills and more trees, with a few silver-thread streamlets here and there, and far too many unfriendly-looking cold stone crags poking up. Over the radio I told the others what there was, that we were lost. And we were, too. This place wasn't on any map that I'd ever seen.

" 'Back came a lot of wit about the "wilds of Scotland," but Danny Morris, the Wireless Op in the Dak wouldn't play along. He had flown trips here once or twice before, and he insisted I ought to be able to see something ; roads, villages, houses, something had to be visible. I told him he should come down for himself and show me, and that was no idle crack. Like it or not, there wasn't much else to do. The longer we stooged around, the less fuel we had to spare. So I did a couple more circle sweeps, picked out the best looking bit of terrain, a long green strip between two nasty-looking hills, and prepared to go down. I warned the others, guessed the windage, crossed my fingers, and put the old Spit down as sweetly as I could. If I have to say it myself, I made a fair job of it, only that green stuff was a lot softer than I liked, and I was lucky to end up on even keel. Still, I was down, and all in one piece.

" 'Then I set away to talk Chuck down alongside me. He made a grand job of it. Foxie didn't do quite so well, chewed up the green a bit with his undercart, and damn near stood the kite on its nose, but ended up all safe, pointing the opposite way from us. That was fine, but the Dak didn't do so well. F.O. Ken Savage was handling her and he did the best anybody could have done, but a Dak is a damn sight bigger and heavier than a Spit, and the green moss just wouldn't bear up for it. By the time her crew had scrambled out and clear we knew she would never fly again, not unless we could find a new wing and undercart from somewhere. And there wasn't anywhere. I invited them to take a look, which they had already done on the way down. They were free enough with the guesswork. "South of France," said one, and "Northern Ireland," said another, but we all knew damn well we had landed into something weird, like nothing we had ever seen before. And the weather was all wrong, too. The mysterious clouds had all rolled away, and it was a bright, sunny, hot day. So hot we were sweating in no time at all.

" 'After a lot of aimless arguing, it came down to what we had all known in the first place. There was nothing else for it but to walk. On foot. And find something or somebody. That didn't make anybody happy. It made them even less happy when I took charge. They had been so willing to look at me and say, "What do we do now?" until I told them. "Six of us," I said. "So we split into three parties of two. Chuck and Foxie will set out that way—" which was due East, over the hill. "Ken Savage and Charlie Fowler"—the pilot and navigator of the Dak—"will take the opposite trail, and Danny Morris will stay here with me and keep an eye on the kites." It was funny, at the time, the way they argued and moaned, and eventually took off, unwillingly. It hardly bears thinking about, now. Apart from the queerness of it all, I wasn't too worried. And it was quiet and peaceful, too. All we had to do was sit in the sun and wait. I made up my log, and Danny wasted a bit of time trying to raise something on the radio, but got nothing. We were well down in the hills, which didn't help him. I saw him staring at the trees a time or two, and shaking his head.

" 'Then the nightmare started. Faintly at first, but growing into a tremendous uproar, we heard shouts and screams and yells, and we wondered what the devil our chaps had run into. Then, over the crest of the hill to the east came Chuck and Foxie, running for their lives, and close behind them a horde of half-naked savages. They were screeching and yelling enough to freeze my blood, and waving ugly looking clubs and choppers. For a few mad moments, Danny and I just stood, dumbfounded. Then Chuck fell, all in a heap, and Foxie turned back for him, the screeching swarm just swept over them, and literally tore the poor beggars to bits, right in front of our eyes. I don't remember getting into my Spit. I do remember thinking it was just their rotten luck that it was pointing the way they were coming, and coming they were, for blood. And they got it. I let them gallop down the hillside right into my sights, and then I got my thumb on the button. Eight lovely Brownings hammered away, and they were too damned stupid, and going too hard, to be able to back up for a while. God knows how many were blown to bits, and at that moment I didn't care. I would have followed the remnants of them back up the hill if it had been possible. As I climbed out, Danny was leaning on the side of my kite, being painfully sick. I didn't blame him. But then we remembered the other two chaps, and we struggled like mad to heave the other Spit, Foxie's machine, far enough round to command the slope where Ken and Charlie had gone. We were just in time. The smoke and echoes of the first shambles were still hanging in the air when that damned screeching started again.

" 'It was practically a repeat performance. The cold-blooded slaughter slowed the savages down for a second or two, and I remember Danny howling at me to open fire, but there was nothing I could do until they charged into the right spot. But I did it then, all right. The hillside was like a butcher's back yard by the time they turned and fled out of it. What there was left of them. The rest of that day, Danny and I worked like slaves to be ready for any more of the same. We heaved the Spits round into a "Y" spread, and then we broke open the Dak's cargo of twin-Lewis's and set them up all the way round in a circle,

about a yard apart, with stacks of ammo to hand. The beggars came back, twice, before sunset, only to get a lot more than they could take. It was crazy, on both sides. They couldn't have known what they were running into, and we didn't give a damn who or what they were. We just mowed them down as fast as we could traverse the guns.

" 'Neither of us slept much that night. I managed to rig a light, from the batteries. We had stacks of ammo, and plenty of water and grub, but there seemed to be no end to the savages, and we fully expected to be fighting them off all night. But apparently they don't like night work. They came back in the morning, though, and they have been coming back, at odd and random intervals, ever since. The hillsides all around are littered with the bodies. About the third day, Danny worked up nerve enough to make a dash, after they had been beaten back in a raid, to grab some of their odd weapons. He came back with a spear, and a couple of things I suppose you'd call swords. Later on he got a metal one, which he said was bronze, but the first lot were stone. Flint, according to him. He had some crazy theory that these are stone-age Britons, or Celts, or Picts, or Iberians, or one of those. He said he had read something about them once. My opinion, and I kept it to myself, was that he had gone slightly nuts. I don't feel any too sane myself, now that I'm on my own.

" 'What with the heat, and the dragging days, with nothing to do but wait for the next screaming swarm, I suppose he finally went over the edge. Anyway, two mornings ago, right after we had blasted back another attack, he sprang away from the gun he was handling, grabbed the bronze sword, and went yelling away up the hill after them. I tried to cover him, but it was hopeless. In a way, I envy him. At least, it's all over so far as he's concerned. We had made one try to take off, by scrounging fuel from the other kites and loading mine up, but the undercart wheels were hub down in the moss, and it was a devil of a squeeze to get the two of us in the cockpit, anyway. But she just sat there and roared. Hopeless. I imagine that bit of futility helped to crack him up. Anyway, he's gone, and I just have to sit and wait for it. For what? Nobody

is ever going to come, that's obvious. I've had it. This record is the best I can do, and when it's finished, well, I don't know what will happen. I'm not the suicide type, but I don't know which is worse, making a mad dash for it, and getting it over quick, or just hanging on here for the bitter end. Just for the record, should anybody ever find this, these are ALCLAD sheets from the Dakota's fuselage. I've torn her up rather badly, for what difference it makes now. I shall pack these sheets in grease and stow them in an empty ammo box, which I shall bury. All this is just for something to do, to pass away the last hours. I gave up all real hope, long ago. It's harder to die than I thought.' "

Fiona put the plate aside and shook her head at Hamish. She looked across the table to Andrew, sadly. "I shall have to stop," she said, "I know there's more, but my throat is so dry—and I can't bear to read any more. It's a terrible story. The poor man. That must have been your father."

"That's right," Andrew said, in a voice he hardly recognised as his own. "When he never came back, they must have written it off as enemy action. No one in his right mind would ever have thought of anything like this."

"And nobody within my hearing will ever again make mock of the legend of Glentallach," Hamish declared. "Forbye it's the plain truth, every word of it, after all."

"But my father never knew about the legend."

"Just so," Hamish nodded, impassively. "That's the whole point. Do you not see that? Ah, he would have been a grand and brave man, your father. I'm sorry I never had the pleasure of meeting him. Will you be so kind as to read the rest of it, Miss Fiona. There's only a wee bit more, now." He passed her the last but one plate, and she began again.

"This one is dated November 21st. It reads, 'Three days ago something very like a miracle happened, and I'm not sure, yet, whether I can believe it or not. But the evidence is sitting watching me as I write this. Looking back, I think I must have been partly insane after Danny went. I remember thinking all sorts of wild things about the utter futility of war, and how little humankind has pro-

gressed. If he was right, and these yapping savages are our ancestors, then we haven't gone very far in the long years between, except to devise bigger and better ways of killing people. I had spent some of the time in gathering little heaps of powder from shells, making fire-trains, scraping up all the iron rust I could find and mixing it with aluminium dust to make thermite, and working out all sorts of crafty schemes to see that all these aircraft and guns and everything go up in fire and smoke before I die. A kind of funeral pyre to destroy the last traces of my war-crazy world. And always, from time to time, firing a burst or two into the hills, just to warn the beggars that I was still alive and kicking.

" 'I sweat now, just to think how close I came to killing someone more brave and sensible than the rest, someone who intended me no harm at all. At least, I don't think she does. She came down out of the hills in the grey dawn, all by herself, walking very steadily. I had sights on her and my finger on the trigger before I realised she was all by herself, that she was just a girl, that she wasn't screeching or yelling or anything. And so I waited to see what she would do, suspecting a trap of some kind. But she kept her head up, and marched right up to me, scared as the devil but too proud to show it. And she said a little piece that didn't mean anything to me. And I said, "Hello!" And she's been here ever since. She can't be much more than eighteen or nineteen, and she knows how to smile. She has made me realise just how forlorn I've been for the sight of a friendly face and a human voice. She has stayed close by me ever since, very quietly, very patiently, watching every thing I do, listening to me, not understanding a single word, of course, but bright as a button, just the same. Danny was wrong on one thing.

" 'This girl is no ignorant primitive. She is smart. And a beauty, too. She has on what looks like a sheepskin loincloth, and skin sandals, and nothing much else except a heavy bronze bracelet and a long necklace. That looks to be made of the teeth of some large animal, with little black beads in between each tooth. Her old man, or her boyfriend, must be a really smart hunter. I'd say it's her old man. She's too young to have a boy-friend that good.

Where it's not sunburned, her skin is as fair as mine, her long black hair is braided, and her eyes are like the morning sky over the hills. She could do with a good soap-and-water scrub, but so could I, come to that, so we're about even. And she likes chocolate. Her name, so far as I can make it out, is Flanna. That's what it sounds like. Every so often she has a long jabber at me, and points back up the hillside. It's obvious that she wants to take me home to meet her folks. Or deliver me into their hands, I don't know which. Looking at her face, I find it hard to believe that she is kin to the other screeching horrors. Not that I have much choice.

"'Before dawn I shall close and seal the box and dump it in the hole I have already dug for it. Then I shall set my fire-trains and wipe out all the wreckage of war that belongs to my world, and go with Flanna to meet her people. If God wills, and I am spared, I shall do all that I can to teach these people to live in peace with each other. That's the least I can do. I've seen all the violence and killing I can stand. This is the end, then. To my dear wife, Barbara, may she remember me kindly and not grieve too much. To my small son, Andy, may he grow up into a world where he will not be required to destroy his fellow-man, for any reason whatsoever.' And it is signed," she said, "Donald Malcolm, Flight Lieutenant, R.C.A.F."

"One can only say 'Amen' to that," Harbottle cleared his throat, and sighed. "An amazing document, a testament to courage. It is completely outside my field, naturally. To attempt to publish such a story would be to invite ridicule and instant anathema from every authority in existence. I would strongly advise against it, Malcolm. All the same, I wish your ancestor could have given us just a trifle more detail in the description. Flints and bronzes don't mean much, without details—"

Andrew got up from the table, only half hearing him, and went to kneel by the box. He was trying to imagine himself in the place of the lone and desperate Canadian airman who had buried it, wondering how and what he would have felt in similar circumstances. He put his hand inside, to touch and crumble the thin wall of perished grease between where the two stacks of plates had been.

To be plucked first of all out of the rugged peace of the Canadian countryside and thrown into high-speed deadly combat, day after day, with the German airmen. Then to slip, suddenly and frighteningly, back in time to a savage and remote period, there to be stranded utterly helpeless.

"I wonder," he mused, "if I would have been able to do as well?" For this man, the father he only vaguely recalled, had done very well indeed, all things considered. The powdery stuff crumbled between his fingers as he pondered. Then, there was a hard lump. And another. Several. He stared, and then turned, eagerly.

"Hamish. Bring the paraffin can. I've found something."

Ten delicate minutes later the whole group gazed in wonder and admiration at the find.

"Bear-teeth, beyond a doubt," Harbottle declared. "I've seen one or two like this before, but not quite so fine. The black beads are jet—Whitby jet—and it is strung on a tendon, and still quite strong. Very precious, it must have been, to the owner, and yet she surrendered it to the man who packed that box. This is a treasure, Mr. Malcolm. The museums will go wild over it. This is something I *can* publish!"

"I dare say," Andrew murmured, taking it up in his fingers, "but I would rather give it back to the person best fitted to have it. Fiona—I said there would be jewels of some kind, didn't I? Would you accept it, on behalf of my father? I think that's what he would have wanted."

She blushed and bowed her head so that he could slip it into place, to lie against the fair skin of her bosom.

"Do you believe in the legend, now?" she asked, breathlessly, and he smiled.

"I haven't much choice, have I? I hope the natives will be as kind and friendly to me as they were to my Dad, long ago."

— JOHN RACKHAM

The sage of Hek Belov shows himself in a serious mood. At least, we think he's being serious.

SEALED CAPSULE

by Edward Mackin

Admiral Kerby J. Lockhart, Experimental Base, Lunar, to Secretary for Space and Galactic Exploration, George F. Mertog, U.N. Headquarters, Terra. Reply to Memo, dated 4:3:33:

Assure you every precaution is being taken to ensure no misfits are recruited for project Alpha Centauri. Am confident that no serious friction could develop between crew members onct they have been fully screened and vetted. All pertinent facts gathered by investigators are assessed by computer specially designed for this purpose. We aim to weld crew into a single functioning, and harmonious unit. See Interim Report.

Things had been going from bad to worse. The long voyage had taken its inevitable toll. Six months cooped up in a sealed spaceship (sealed in the sense that there were no portholes or any means of direct viewing), a mere one-hundred-and-seventeen feet from stem to stern, and fifty-two feet through, where you met everyone all the time and got to hate the sight of a fellow you had regarded as amiable and even amusing for the first few weeks of the voyage.

Myer Arenkov didn't hate anybody. He had never liked them in the first place—with the exception of old Doc—but he didn't hate them now. Rather they saddened him. He lay on his bunk and watched Donnelly through the false port, which was a foot round screen fitted to the side of the ship, and attached to a form of video known as a see-through scope, which used z-rays. It didn't require an aperture, and could be set up anywhere.

Myer was quite certain that z-rays were harmful, although the captain had assured him personally that they were not. Having long formed the opinion that the captain was a fool he didn't believe him. However, the damage

had probably been done by now, so one might as well forget about it. One of these days, he supposed, an arm or a leg would fall off, and then they would all know that Myer had been right.

Six months nothing! Myer thought. What about the seven years spent under hibernative sedation? Using the new I.G.S. Superdrive it still took a helluva time to get to Alpha Centauri. *Why did I do it?* he asked himself, knowing full well the answer. It was a chance to do something different, and the money was good—if you survived to collect. You were buying back time, too; or so those eggheads had said. You were away fifteen years; but it would only seem like twelve months because you'd be in a state of suspended animation for fourteen of those years. The rest of the time would be spent slowing down and getting used to shipboard in preparation for the planet hopping on the outward jump, if there were any planets, and the Lunar landing on the return. Yeah, and when you got back you'd be younger than when you started out. That was a kind of bonus.

"Bonus bolonus!" he said aloud.

Myer Arenkov didn't believe the goddamned lying bastards! He'd been conned, and he knew it. Well, as long as you knew it you could shove it out of your mind and think about something else. He turned his attention to Donnelly again.

Donnelly was wearing a space suit. Attached by a line to the mother ship he was busy assembling another one outside. He was supposed to be examining the outer hull for damage or wear or space barnacles or simply anything. Instead, there he was building another spaceship right next to this one.

Presently he came in, sealed the airlock, and operated the combination with a code word known, ostensibly, only to Donnelly and the captain; but that was days ago, and Donnelly had changed it since then. He went through to the heads, and Arenkov sighed and went after him. He found Donnelly, still in his space suit, unbolting one of the cans.

Myer tapped on the side of his facepiece, and Donnelly straightened up. Recognising Arenkov he smiled and nod-

ded. Then he pressed the release button and the visor swung back. "Hello, Myer," he said, cheerfully. "You want something?"

Myer pointed. "Not that," he said. "It's the only one that works properly, and my last retreat in moments of stress."

"I've got to have a lav," Donnelly reasoned. "You can keep the others," he added, magnanimously.

It was useless, reflected Myer, to argue with a man who could blithely take a ship apart while in flight and rebuild it somewhere else. He went back to his bunk and the phony port. The thing was beginning to take shape all right. Donnelly had been working on it now for close on a fortnight. He'd stripped out spars and bracing pieces, and a few of the inner plates from this end of the ship. Then he had carefully bolted and riveted it together again just a little way out from the cannibalized mother ship, *Morning Star*.

Chips Morgan, tall and dark, with a small moustache and almost Mexican features, came in and threw himself on his bunk.

"We've got to turn back," he said. "We're heading for the Coal Sack, and that's the entrance hole to Hell. I'm telling you, Arenkov. We don't turn back we're in trouble. Donnelly's got the right idea. He's building his own ship out there. When he's built it he says he's going to blast off for home." He yawned, prodigiously. "Home, he says; but where's home to a space rat?"

Myer, propped up in his bunk, allowed himself to dream. "Home is any flesh joint you like to name, preferably next door to a good steak house. Those grey cubes we get haunt my guts."

Donnelly came out hugging the can. Myer tapped on his visor again, and Donnelly opened it. "Hello, Myer," he said, grinning all over his big, fat face. "You still here?"

"You'll never do it," Myer told him. "As soon as you tackle the outer skin we'll lose atmosphere."

"It doesn't matter," Donnelly said. "We'll all be wearing space suits by then."

He picked up the porcelain fitting with its alloy base and went out. They were all mad, Myer decided. The

captain as well. He'd taken to locking himself in his cabin since Myer had reported the stowaway.

"Venus," said Morgan, who was lying on his back, with his eyes closed. "Now that's what I call home. I know a place where the dames have two sets of knockers." He laughed and then, his mood changing, glared over at Myer. "Maybe you think that's funny, huh? I'm telling you you never met such wonderful dames. Not ever. You read me, sailor?"

Myer sighed, and went to a small locker. He took out a bottle of tiny, white pills. "Time for your shot," he said, and Morgan obediently opened his mouth. Myer dropped a pill in and when Morgan swallowed he patted him on the head. "Good dog," he said.

Morgan went out like a light, and Myer wondered briefly about Venus, and then gave it up. All the text books said that it was a world of poisonous swamps with an atmosphere that would burn through an ordinary space suit in less than three minutes. But he also knew that Morgan had been there with the original expedition. He had a sudden apocalyptic vision of a lizard-faced belly dancer with four quivering protruberances, and swore at the recumbent Morgan. "Stop wishing them on me, goddamn you!" he snarled, and went out.

Donnelly passed him again on his way in for more spaceship.

Myer went to the recreation room. There were about twenty of the crew there. He looked around. They all seemed normal enough; but Myer knew different. They were zombies to a man. Some were playing cards, or going through the motions. Some were just listening through ear plugs to the library tapes. There was a group around the billiard table, watching the rather desultory play; but the only sound in that room was the occasional click of the balls.

He stood just inside the doorway, and adopted the stance of a theatre doorman. "The greatest show on Earth!" he bellowed. "In peerless solido-vision with full colour! 'Morgan And The Elusive Cow Maiden.' Queueing in all parts."

They left the card tables. They left the tapes. They left

the billiard table, and the comfortable chairs where some of them had been dozing. They queued to right and left of Myer and dug in their pockets for money.

He went out and closed the door on them. His shoulders drooped a bit. He felt sad and lonely. They were all mad except Myer Arenkov and yet the captain had locked himself in his cabin, and only opened it for meals, after ascertaining from the scanner plate that it wasn't Myer in disguise.

It was all because he had reported the presence of the stowaway. He had seen the stowaway a week ago when he was carefully negotiating the starboard catwalk after a session with Doc Brady. Doc had succeeded in making a couple of gallons of hooch from a mixture of pure alcohol, cheap wine, which he had smuggled aboard in a container labelled "Dry Dressings", and some other ingredients the nature of which he refused to divulge.

The penalty for the possession of alcohol aboard ship was not less than three years hard labour on one of the pioneer worlds. Most captains, however, turned a blind eye to it as long as the drinking wasn't carried to excess. If he tripped over a paralytic member of the crew he couldn't very well ignore it. Otherwise, everybody covered for everybody else in this matter.

Doc Brady was small, thin, angular, and Irish. "A drop of the best," he said, with that sly smile of his. "As good as any poteen that ever came out of the hills." He slapped the side of the big ceramic container.

Myer had never tasted poteen ; but Brady's concoction set fire to your guts, and illuminated your ideas, so that those flesh joints seemed more desirable, and further away than ever. All it did to Brady was to make him talk twenty to the dozen.

So now, with the rattle of words in his ears and his worries pickled in alcohol Myer walked into the stowaway. He was a small, brown man in a tight-fitting yellow suit, and he stared at Myer for an instant out of dark, anxious eyes. Myer pulled up short in surprise, blinked, and found that the man had gone.

He turned around again, and went in search of the Duty Officer, who happened to be Senior Space Officer Arthur

Fontwell Spriggs, a confirmed hypochondriac. His biggest item of personal luggage was his medicine chest, which Doc Brady swore contained a more varied assortment of pills and capsules than he, Doc, had ever seen. This may have been the literal truth. There had always been some doubt about Doc's qualifications, and no one understood quite how he had got himself promoted to such an important mission.

"He must take about fifty of those things a day," Doc had said, referring to S.S.O. Spriggs. "The poor man's metabolism is geared to them, I'm afraid. If he forgot to take just one of the right colour at the correct time his whole damned system would seize up. He's a kind of human pin table, with pills rolling all over the place, lights flashing in his duodenum, and his heart keeping score, the poor wretch."

S.S.O. Spriggs had a glass of distilled water in one trembling hand, and nestling in the other two red pills and one yellow tablet. He listened to what Myer had to say; but all that registered was that somewhere aboard was what, for a particular reason, he had always dreaded —a stowaway. He shuddered, and swallowed the pills and the tablet, flushing them down with the water.

"A stowaway!" he said, going white. "That means he hasn't had his jabs. Oh, my God! A source of infection. Quick, man, sound the alarm, and then we'll go and see the captain."

Myer thumped the alarm button, and the penetrating wail of the siren summoned the crew to their posts. He allowed the S.S.O. to precede him through the door, and the unsuspecting officer was immediately knocked to the deck and trodden on as a number of the crew rushed past to take up stations.

Myer Arenkov dragged the officer in again, lifted him up, brushed him down, and helped him select a sedative from the dozen or so he carried in his box.

"I don't know why I don't just cut my throat," the S.S.O. said, feelingly. "This is no place for a civilized human being."

"Why don't you get yourself a nice little number dirt

side, sir?" Myer asked. He had often wondered why Arthur Fontwell Spriggs had entered the Space Service.

The S.S.O. shook his head. "The kind of money they pay down there for the kind of job I could do wouldn't pay my drug bills."

They went along to see the captain. The S.S.O. knocked on the cabin door, and then went in. Captain John Forbes was busy bellowing down the intercom.

"What the hell's going on, Jameson?" Jameson was the second-in-command. "Who sounded the general alarm, and why?" He stuck his heavily bearded chin out and listened attentively, a frown on his over-intense features.

"Perhaps I could explain, sir . . ." began Spriggs, advancing towards the desk.

"Can't you see I'm busy?" shouted the captain, cutting him short. "What do you want anyway? Won't it wait? Why aren't you at your posts? The general alarm has been sounded."

"I know," said the S.S.O., apologetically. "It was sounded on my orders."

The captain switched the set off, and looked at the nervous officer as though he couldn't believe his eyes.

"Oh, it was you, was it?" he said, icily. "Well, Senior Space Officer Spriggs, perhaps you wouldn't mind explaining why it was sounded without the matter being first referred to me."

"There was no time, sir," the officer said excitedly. "You see, there's a stowaway on board. Then when I came out of my cabin, where I have my medicine chest, I was knocked down and . . ."

"Yes, yes," said the captain, impatiently. "And who is supposed to have seen this stowaway?"

"Leading Spacecraftsman Myer Arenkov, sir. This is Arenkov, sir."

"I know damn well who he is!" exploded the captain. "I've had trouble with him before. All right, Arenkov, what's your story?"

Arenkov didn't approach too closely to where the captain was sitting for fear he should smell Doc's brew on him. He explained where he had seen the little man, and what had transpired. It didn't sound convincing, even to himself.

"He was a little brown man, sir, and he was wearing a bright yellow suit. Before I could grab him he, er—kinda vanished."

"Kinda vanished," the captain repeated, nodding to himself. "A remarkable little man, don't you think? He was able to survive the hibernative period, presumably without benefit of suspended animation, and without eating, too. All stores were vac-sealed, and they stayed that way until I opened them."

Very deliberately the captain opened the drawer in front of him, and took out a heavy automatic, which he laid in front of him on the desk. The significance of this wasn't lost on Myer Arenkov. The captain didn't believe him. In fact, the captain thought he was a lunatic, and was prepared to shoot him like a mad dog if he made a wrong move.

"The risk of infection, sir," the S.S.O. was gabbling on. "This man couldn't have received the normal injections. Every minute counts, sir. That's why I took the liberty . . ."

"Shut up!" bellowed the captain.

He had begun to look slightly on edge himself; but it wasn't fear of infection. It was the more imminent fear of Arenkov. The captain didn't like the look of him. The man was obviously insane or drunk, or maybe both. Well, he'd had his suspicions about Arenkov for a long time. The question of illegal imbibing could be solved at least. He distended his nostrils and sniffed. "Come over here, Arenkov," he invited, still with his nostrils dilated, and his brows corrugated in fierce concentration.

Myer Arenkov didn't move.

"Come here, Arenkov," the captain said again, and picked up the gun, just in case the man rushed him.

Myer looked at him in horror. The captain intended to shoot him. He was mad, of course. They were all mad. He turned and fled with a cry like a stricken animal. That was when the captain decided to lock his door.

"That man is mad," he said, with deep conviction. "Don't you agree?"

The S.S.O. hesitated. He didn't see anything mad in reporting the presence of a stowaway. The point about the hibernative period had been lost on him. At the time he

had been wondering about facilities for general inoculation, and if Doc Brady could cope. He hadn't much time for Doc, who was apt to scoff at what he regarded as imaginary ills. He hadn't much faith in the captain either. Letting a stowaway run around spreading heaven knew what dreadful diseases, and pulling a gun on a perfectly innocent member of the crew. No wonder the man had run out. So, he hesitated.

"Well, sir," said the S.S.O., reluctantly. "It's difficult to say. I mean what proof have we?"

To S.S.O. Spriggs' relief the captain put the gun away; but gave his officer a look of disapprobation. "Ample proof, I should think," he said; "but even a dog is allowed one bite. All I can do at this juncture, is make quite sure that I am not the victim."

"What a pity that we don't carry a psychiatrist," the S.S.O. said, in an attempt to placate the captain.

Captain Forbes snorted. "I've no time for nutcrackers," he said. "Get Doc Brady to have a go at him. Did you know that Donnelly came to see me yesterday? He complained that Arenkov had stripped part of the crew's quarters and was hiding it somewhere. You'd better look into it."

"Yes, sir," said the officer, although he had no intention of doing anything of the kind. The stowaway was somewhere down that end of the ship.

"Meanwhile, you can set a guard," the captain told him. "Arenkov is not to be allowed anywhere near my cabin. Also he is to be relieved of duties until further orders."

Relieved of duties, Arenkov spent most of his time watching Donnelly constructing the other ship. S.S.O. Spriggs, who had been bullied by the captain into investigating, tried to interfere; but Donnelly told him that he was acting under Myer's orders. The captain, he explained, had asked him to defer to Myer's eccentricities until something could be done about him. The officer tried to work it out; but gave up, and allowed Donnelly to carry off the billiard table from the recreation room, most of the chairs, and the soft drink bar.

Myer had to admit that Donnelly was doing a marvellous job. Somehow or other he had managed to reconstruct part

of the recreation room out there. Myer didn't mind because he had long since ceased to use the place. He never played billiards or snooker anyway and he preferred Doc's brew to those awful soft drinks.

Donnelly was playing an amazing game of snooker all on his own, with the balls shooting out into space and Donnelly shooting after them. He appeared to be having a fine old time. Myer, tiring of watching, wondered idly if they would make planetfall before Donnelly got down to removing bits of the outer casing. As he saw it this was a race between Donnelly and the legitimate ship. The way things were he was betting on Donnelly.

He decided to go and see Doc, and took a bottle with him. He needed a refill anyway. Doc, who had been looking at a book on psychological medicine, which he had borrowed from S.S.O. Spriggs, was pleased to see him.

"I was going to send for you," he said. "The captain wants me to ask you a few questions."

"What kind of questions?" asked Myer, suspiciously. He put the bottle on the table. "Fill it up, Doc," he directed, "and put it on the bill."

Doc put the book down and smoothed his sparse, greying hair back. "I don't know that I can," he said, regretfully. "I've been hearing some disturbing reports about your behaviour, Arenkov. Could be you're drinking too much, or perhaps your constitution's not up to it. Now which would it be, d'you think?"

"Neither, Doc. Look, I don't like to say this; but I think the captain's off his head, and not only the captain. It seems to be an epidemic."

"Sit yourself down, there's a good fellow," said Doc, soothingly, "and answer these simple questions. Just a minute while I find the page."

Myer sat down, and twisted his head in a futile attempt to read the title. Doc Brady placed his bony hand over the top of the page, and gazed solemnly at Myer over his reading glasses.

"Did you have an unhappy childhood?" he asked. "Did your father ever beat your mother? How were they off, financially?"

"What's that book?" demanded Myer, trying to pry Doc's hand away.

Doc held on tightly. "Answer the questions!" he shouted. "How am I going to know if you can continue as my customer if you don't answer the flaming questions?"

"All right," agreed Arenkov, sulkily. "What were the questions?"

Doc consulted the book, and rephrased the questions so that Myer would understand them better. "Did you have a ball as a kid? Did your old man ever hammer your mother? Did you live well?"

"I can't answer those questions."

"You can't answer?" Doc consulted his book again. "Why can't you answer?"

Tears welled up into Arenkov's eyes. "I was an orphan," he lied. "I never did find out what happened to my mother; but my father came to the orphanage to claim me when I was about thirteen years old. Up to then he hadn't acknowledged my existence. Not even a birthday card. He said he had been far too busy; but now he could do with some help on the farm, and I was just the right age to learn the job. He also said that up to then I'd had it easy, and the time had come for me to learn to be a man."

"What a swine!" Doc Brady said, feelingly. "Did you go with him?"

Arenkov shook his head. "I hit him with a chair."

"Hmmm." Doc looked through the book for a comparable case, examining the chapter headings. Finally, he gave it up, and tossed the book under his bunk. "I didn't think it was going to work out somehow," he admitted, and took his glasses off. "I prefer the more direct approach. So answer me just one question. Now, then, Arenkov, think carefully. Are you crazy?"

"No!" shouted Myer, indignantly.

"Good!" yelled Doc Brady. "Only don't see any more stowaways," he added. "You've got all the old women in this ship worried to death. Now then, how about a drink?"

Myer staggered along the catwalk, singing softly to himself, and clutching his bottle of hooch. He was just outside the door of his quarters when he saw the stowaway again. He wondered uneasily if it could possibly be the drink;

but shrugged it off. Doc drank the same stuff, and *he* didn't see little brown men in yellow suits.

He took a chance and winked at the little man, or where the little fellow had been for he'd disappeared as unaccountably as before. Myer frowned and took a swig from the bottle, rolling it around his mouth to get the full flavour. Finally, he swallowed it and considered, swaying slightly. "Doesn't taste any different," he said, at last. "Could be Doc sees 'em ; but won't admit it." He replaced the stopper and continued on.

Surprisingly, Donnelly was sitting on his bunk, and he wasn't wearing his space suit. He was talking to Chips Morgan, who had the next bunk. Morgan listened with a sardonic smile on his dark, and rather cruel face. These last few days the three of them had had the crew's sleeping quarters to themselves. The rest of the men preferred to bunk down in the recreation room.

"So this little guy said something about a project. He was dead worried. Things weren't working out for him. He wanted to know what I thought I was doing destroying the ship, and I said I wasn't destroying no ship. I was building a new one out of the old one, and who the hell did he think he was anyway . . . Hello, Myer." Donnelly grinned at him as he stood listening in the doorway. "I'm taking the day off. It's my birthday. I'm twenty-nine. What do you think of that, eh? How old are you, Myer? Hundred-and-two?" The two of them laughed heartily at this. "He's sure begun to look his age lately," Donnelly said.

"He looks like a warmed up mummy," said Morgan. "Must be all that embalming fluid he drinks."

The phrase "little guy" had aroused Myer's suspicions. "Who was it you were talking to?" he asked Donnelly. "Who's this little guy you were on about?"

"You know that little brown guy with the yellow outfit. You've seen him. Morgan's seen him, too."

"Both of you? You never said anything. Why didn't you tell the captain?"

"We don't want him to think we're nuts," Morgan said, with his crooked smile.

"Even though we are," added Donnelly, and they both

laughed heartily, as though it were the best joke in the world.

"We got something to tell you about this ship," Donnelly said after they had laughed themselves almost hoarse. "Something special. Something you wouldn't know about."

"What about this little guy? You said something about a project. What project?"

"Aw, that was just a gag. We heard you outside, so we thought we'd pull one on you." Donnelly frowned. "I've forgotten how we meant to follow through on that. This other's on the level, though. Isn't it, Chips? This is really something. You'll laugh when you hear it. The biggest con trick in history, and it had to happen to us. You wanna hear about it?"

Myer took a drink from the bottle. "Yeah," he said. "I wanna hear."

Donnelly held out his hand. "We got mouths, too, Myer. What about passing it round?"

"Mother's milk," said Myer, taking another tantalising drink.

Donnelly heaved himself up and shambled over like a great untidy bear. "Go on, Myer, give us a shot. What you want? Money? I got money. I could tell you something that'd shake you, too."

"Shake me, then."

"We trading?" asked Donnelly, craftily.

"We're trading."

"Tell him to cut me in or it's no deal," said Morgan.

"Cut him in," assented Donnelly.

Myer took another pull, and examined the bottle. It was less than half full. "It's a deal," he agreed.

Donnelly suddenly grabbed the bottle, and had it to his lips before Myer could stop him. He jumped to his feet and grabbed for the bottle; but Donnelly held him off with one hand while he examined the contents. He took another drink and passed it to Morgan.

"You two-timing no-good Indian trader!" shrieked Myer, almost beside himself. "Give me that bottle."

"All right, Myer, calm down," grinned Donnelly. "No need to get all steamed up."

Myer wrenched himself free of Donnelly's grip, leaving

behind a complete coat sleeve, and tore the bottle from Morgan ; but he was too late. It was empty.

He took a swing at Donnelly with it, and missed. "You robbing bastard!" he shouted. "Trade in!"

He took another swipe at the amused Donnelly who couldn't stop laughing, and then Morgan had him round the neck. Donnelly moved in and took the bottle off him, and then dabbed his streaming eyes with Myer's sleeve.

"What'll we do with him," asked Morgan, while Myer almost went blue in the face trying to struggle free.

"Aw, let him go," said Donnelly. "He didn't mean it." His great, round face beamed at Myer. "You wanna lay off that hooch. Where'd you get it, anyway?"

"Let's shove him down the disposal chute," grinned Morgan. "Have you ever seen a man burst, Donnelly? I have. As soon as he hits space he blows up like a balloon, and then he bursts every which way. I never thought a man had so much inside him. All that plumbing, and stuff ; heart, liver, lights, and lungs. A great stew of things. What an obscene conglomeration of bits man is. You never saw anything like it, Donnelly. Very educational."

"Sure, sure," said Donnelly ; "but not this time, huh?" He prised Morgan's arm loose without any seeming effort, and led Myer to his bunk.

"We got something to tell you, Myer," he said, while the latter struggled for breath, and swore with every breath he drew. "You'll laugh when you hear it. Won't he, Chips?"

Morgan nodded. "He'll laugh all right. Like we're laughing." His mood had changed and he was suddenly serious. He came over and looked down at Myer. "You know something? We're not on this trip. That's a laugh for a start."

Donnelly laughed somewhere down in his great chest. "That's right, Myer. We're not here at all. We're still at Moonbase."

"In a ship just like this one," added Morgan, thumping the bulkhead with his closed fist. "A sealed capsule. It was sealed, you see, Arenkov, because of the new drive. The outside had to be of some homogeneous material, and specially stressed. So we couldn't have ports. We had these z-scopes instead. Only on this particular ship they were

fake. They had taped information fed into them from an outside source. You read me, sailor? The ship was just a simulator. It was Admiral Lockhart who came up with this idea when he found that fitting a crew together for this project was a piece of biological engineering beyond even the computers. There were too many imponderables because of the length of the trip, and because of other completely unknown hazards. The answer the computer kept coming up with boiled down to the fact that the only way to select a suitable crew was to let them make the journey out. If they came back you had a good crew. That was when the Admiral decided to use the actual ship as a simulator."

"That's right," said Donnelly. "All he had to do was tell the crew members that they were to be put in a state of suspended animation, and then give them all a jab that would put them to sleep for a few hours. When they awoke they'd find themselves clipped into the take-off couches, and they'd naturally believe that they'd just come out of hibernation, and that they'd been travelling through space for seven years. Why not? There was no way of telling otherwise. Not even any natural way, because everything had been thought of. There were even those auto-depilators to keep the head and face free of hair. After this came the real test. Six months of it—and we were the observers, weren't we, eh, Morgan?"

Myer felt his throat. It was sore, probably bruised. What the hell are they on about? he thought. He wasn't sure that Morgan hadn't meant it about the disposal chute. The crazy swine was capable of anything. "Very ingenious," he croaked, to humour them.

"Yes, wasn't it?" said Donnelly, with a vacant smile on his face. He seemed lost in the contemplation of its ingenuity. "Real ingenious."

"The snag was that we couldn't know the effect of the hibernative period," Morgan said. "Now we do. We've got a crew of zombies and neurotics, although some of them were probably that to begin with. The effect of the suspended animation was to accentuate that side of their characters. In other words something else inside them that had barely shown its ugly snout before took over.

Not so much in our case, maybe," he added, nodding slyly at Donnelly, who stood there with that vacant silly smile on his face, moving his lips slightly as though in prayer.

"Of course not," said Myer, hoping he had said the right thing, and wondering how he was going to get past these two so that he could get some advice about them from Doc. He could at least get another drink, and that he certainly needed. He swallowed, and was delighted to find that his throat functioned without any real difficulty. "What about that Admiral Lockhart?" he said. "The sly dog!"

"Yeah, what about him? We were to be the observers. After six months we'd be let out to feed our reports through his damned computers. Only, as it happens, he only had five years to ge before retirement. As I see it he couldn't afford a major failure. If the simulator hadn't come up with the answers he was back to square one. He was a shrewd one, was the Admiral, so I suppose he knew very well that there wasn't any way of coming up with the perfect crew short of sending them out and waiting for them to get back. I don't think he expected anyone would get back from such a trip. All he had to do, then, was make it look good."

"We were press-ganged," said Donnelly, suddenly coming to. "We got the full treatment. When I first sneaked out of that airlock and saw there was no damned base I couldn't believe it. I nearly jumped off." Little beads of sweat had begun to gather on his brow. He looked serious for once. "Then I thought no, I'll build my own ship. I'll get back. I will, too."

"It was all hush-hush," Morgan said. "So I suppose he'd be able to fake the records and crew reports to make it look good. All he had to do then was sit back and wait for his retirement pension."

Donnelly sat on the bunk beside Myer. He was crying. "The sunavabitch!" he wept. "What d'ya think of that, eh? He only had five years to do. The goddamned sunavabitch!"

Morgan went to the little locker, took out the pills, swallowed one, and went and stretched himself out on his bunk without another word.

Myer stood up, patted Donnelly absently on the shoulder, and went out. The little, brown man with the bright, yellow suit backed away from the door as though he had been listening.

"The way things are going," Myer told him, "we'll be running this ship on our own."

He winked, and this time the little man winked back.

— EDWARD MACKIN

The junk man gets it all in the end. . . .

IN VINO VERITAS

by E. C. Tubb

Meet Claus Heston. Tall, thin, sallow-faced, lank of hair and weak of eyes. His clothes are shabby and so is his room. He is careless about such things as shaving and eating and paring his nails but that doesn't matter because he has no job, no wife, no girl, no one to care a damn. He has a high forehead and long, sensitive fingers, piano player's fingers they used to tell him and that's a laugh because he can't tell a note from a noggin.

Claus Heston, inadequate and knowing it. A man in hell.

He sits at his table, buttocks on the single chair, and he is careful not to move too often because the chair creaks like the bed and his landlady has the mind of a sewer. Before him squats a typewriter, paper rolled into its stomach, the keys below like four rows of battered teeth. The keys bear characters, each one different, and you can hit them and they will print on the paper, single characters joined to make words, words to make sentences, sentences to make stories, stories you can sell for money. Sometimes a lot of money.

If you can only manage to hit the keys in the right order.

Once that had been easy. Then he had been able to sit and uncork his imagination and tap out a money-tune and know that, by God, he had made it, that he was someone, that he had ability and the world was his oyster. The keys had spelt adventure and to hell with a nine to five routine counting pennies and living like a mole. Then he had been adequate.

The paper is still blank and it is wrong that the virgin surface should remain unsullied by the marks of his imagination but what's the good of hitting the keys when there is no direction, no purpose? Sure, he knows the theories, the how-to-do-it advice of the wise guys who've

never had to face up to the fact that theory is one thing, practise another. So he should tap at the keys and write —what? The cat sat on the mat? And who the hell is going to pay him for that?

The chair creaks as he moves but he's got to move, the grinning white face over the rows of battered teeth are more than he can take. It's too much like a conscience sitting there mocking him. He should get rid of the damn thing and call it a day but he can't. The typewriter is his life.

The window is dirty but the street lights are bright and he can see the rush and bustle below. People, mostly, real people, not paper-people, not the tough guys and good guys, the broads and dolls, the faithless husbands and cheating wives, the young old and in-between, all the types and styles he had once used to such good effect. Where had they gone, those people? Why have they left him?

He turns from the window and sits down, not worrying about the creaking of the chair, not stopping to let himself think but sending his hands to the keys and rattling them with the first pattern that comes into his head. He feels elation as he works, a sense of power as he ravages the blank white face before him. The ting of the bell is a sob, the rasp of the carriage a scream, the rattle of the keys the pounding of a passionate heart.

Then the impetus dies and he looks to see what he has done. He has ruined a sheet of paper.

Back at the window he stares blankly into the night communing with the darkness and himself. He's run dry, he has no ideas, he can't keep at it—so what? So he's a little jaded, a little tired, a little off-colour. Maybe he's become too critical—he shouldn't try so hard. There is comfort in the thought, the opium of self-justification, and then comes the other, the most insidious of them all. You need stimulation, he tells himself, and wonders why he didn't think of it before.

There is a store down the street which he knows well. It is filled with bottles, big ones and small, some with square faces, others with pinched waists, tall ones stand-

ing like aristocrats beside squat ones with fancy labels. Like women, he thinks, each filled with promise and mystery, each with its own peculiar flavour and yet, no matter what the shape or price, the end product of each is exactly the same.

There is a bell on the door and it tinkles as he pushes it open and the storekeeper comes forward with a smile, his eyes calculating as they size up the customer. A male madam, thinks Claus dispassionately. A pander. He feels a little unclean as he steps to the counter.

A nice evening, says the storekeeper, and what is his fancy? Something hot and strong? He looks a mite peaked, too much work perhaps, well he knows what will take care of that.

Claus twists his face into a smile, wondering how much the man knows about him via the neighbourhood grapevine. So he coughs a little, so what? So he looks pale, so that's his business. And he doesn't want anything hot and strong and damned expensive, not from you, you fat slob. But he keeps his smile and tries a joke, the old one from the Rubaiyat, and takes his time selecting a big bottle of the cheapest wine in the place—one he knows is kept way down on the floor to the back of the store.

There is method in his choice. The storekeeper grunts as he bends and, in the moment when his back is turned, Claus snakes out a long arm and grabs something, he doesn't know what, from a shelf of miniatures he can just reach. With the loot in his pocket he doesn't mind paying for the wine at all and they grin at each other as the coins change hands but of them both Claus has reason to grin the widest.

Back to his room, up the stairs and past the ever-open door behind which lurks the landlady with ears quivering and a mind which reads sex into every flush of the toilet. He treads softly but not softly enough for the door jerks wider and he stares at a bundle of clothes surmounted by a shapeless face and a tangle of unwashed hair. He manages to beat her to the conversation.

Sure, he admits, he knows the rent is overdue but not to worry. He's got several things out and a couple of cheques are due to arrive anytime. And he's working right

now on a novel which is as good as money in the bank. With her as the heroine, naturally, who else?

The tired old gimmick seems to work despite the fact that she knows of the big manila envelopes which come back to him with sickening regularity and he progresses on his way, the bottle under his jacket and out of sight. Past the bathroom with its stained paint and flaking walls. Past a closed door which houses a cough. Back to his room with the naked bulb, the soiled bed, the shaky table, the typewriter with the ravaged sheet of paper hanging in a forlorn curl.

It annoys him, that paper, and he rips it out and crumples it into a ball then hesitates before reloading the machine. It can wait, he tells himself. He'll put in a fresh sheet when he's ready and not before. No point in putting it in if you're not ready. He'll be with it soon, though, all he needs is a little stimulation.

He always needs stimulation.

The wine is cheap, the cork comes out easy, the sticky sweet stuff gurgles into his mouth and down his throat, filling his stomach with a liquid excuse for food. He takes the little bottle from his pocket and squints at the label. It carries only a single, unfamiliar name. The bottle itself is in the shape of a kneeling negress, a fancy gimmick to set on a mantleshelf. He twists the head, pulls the cork, tips the contents into the big bottle of wine.

He drinks some of the mixture.

The addition has improved the taste, given it more body, more bite, more stimulation. He searches the room and finds the dregs of previous therapy and adds them to the big bottle. He shakes it and drinks again. The chair creaks as he sits down and creaks again as he drinks. The typewriter stares at him and there is something naked about it, like a woman without make-up, or without stockings, or without underclothes, though how the hell you can tell what a woman is wearing underneath without getting real close to her is something he doesn't know.

Finally it comes to him and he reaches for the paper, his arm knocking over the bottle so that it gushes a flood over the table, puddling and dripping on the floor. He snatches up the bottle and wipes at the mess then gets the

stuff on the paper and swears and hits the machine so that the keys leap up and jam. He takes a drink before freeing the keys and sets the bottle on the floor before reaching again for the paper. This time he makes it. He rolls it into the machine then sits there, eyes on the blank sheet, waiting.

He keeps waiting.

And taking the odd drink of stimulation.

And waiting some more.

It doesn't come. He gets up from the table and reels to the window and leans with his head against the dirty panes, eyes unfocused on the lights outside. It has started to rain, a cold, wet, winter rain which will soon turn to sleet and maybe freeze in a sheet of ice. A fine evening, the storekeeper had said and sure, it was a fine evening for those who sold liquid warmth but not so fine for those who didn't own a topcoat, couldn't afford a fire, hadn't eaten for how long?

He didn't know. He didn't know anything any more. He didn't know how to hit the keys to form words, to form stories, to make the paper-people dance and prance to the prods of his imagination. He had known how to do it once, right enough, but now he had forgotten. And yet—how do you forget a thing like that?

How?

He turns and lifts the bottle and takes a long, long drink, not because he likes the taste but because he needs what the stuff can give. The lift. The numbing. The blunting of knowledge.

The knowledge that he was inadequate.

And it helps the pain in his chest too.

He drinks some more and leans, the bottle in his hand, eyes staring out of the window at the lights below, bright lights, all colours in the rain with little haloes and rainbows streaked across the dirty glass. And he wonders. He wonders the most curious things. He wonders about people, not real people, but the paper-people he had once created and sent about their ways.

The little people to fill up background.

The odd types, stock characters really, who had their

place with maybe a line or two of dialogue to help out the action and to pad the wordage. The waiters who stepped into the limelight to take an order, pass a message, call goodnight. The taxi drivers who carried the hero for maybe half a page then to vanish from the scene. The hatcheck girls, doormen, janitors, cops, the storekeepers, postmen, delivery boys, the man-with-the-dog and the woman-with-a-grievance. The girls who lurked in doorways and the men who sat at bars. The list was endless.

What happened to them?

What happened to the injured? The soldiers in war scenes lying wounded for the sake of atmosphere? The accident victims? The hospital cases? The kids who got burned?

Claus stops then and takes another drink. His head feels like a balloon and things seem to be crystal clear and he begins to get just the little bit frightened of where his thoughts are taking him.

He's a writer and has killed, maimed and tortured his share of men. Women too, if the truth be known, the public likes its gore. He has maybe created a thousand or more paper-people in his time and only now has he started worrying what happened to them.

Not to the prime characters, they are taken care of. The villain bites the dust, the hero gets the girl, the girl lives happy ever after.

But—the others?

He takes another gulp of wine. The bottle is getting low but it will have to last—he has no more money and he knows better than to ask for credit. And he begins to get a little excited. This is the way it happens. This was how it used to be. A germ of an idea, a query in the imagination, a wonder about something, anything and, presto! There's a story!

He takes another gulp of wine.

No need to hurry now. Take it easy. Give it time to mature. Fill in the details, the background, the action. Decide on atmosphere. Pick a handful of characters. Figure out length—not too long, he didn't have that much paper, but long enough to make the cheque worth getting.

And then to work.

He grins and takes another long swig at the bottle, not worrying about the pain in his chest, the tightness around his heart. The wine would take care of that. The wine and the story he was going to write.

And then it hits him like a kick in the groin.

He didn't have a story—he had an answer. He didn't need characters—he was one. A small character. A bit of background, maybe, a casual acquaintance who wrote for a living. It had been said and it had been so. Had been!

He had stepped into the limelight, spoken his scrap of dialogue and then had been discarded. Only he hadn't known that. He had tried to carry on not knowing that it was a waste of time.

Did anyone?

"Damn you!" he screams at the sky. "Damn you! Why don't you finish the book?"

The stairs are steep and the landlady old but since when did curiosity know the limitations of age? Puffing and groaning she heaves her way up past the bathroom with its flaking paint, past the door which hides the cough and halts outside of the room housing Claus Heston. It is quiet and the light is on though it is bright day. So much she learns from the keyhole.

The rest she discovers when she opens the door.

Heart, say the ambulance men when they finally arrive. They load him up and carry him off to Potters Field.

Alone the landlady prowls the room, nose twitching for anything of value. Glass clinks as she gathers the bottles to dump outside. The one on the table she picks up and peers at the label then sniffs at the contents. Had it been full she might save it to split with a friend, even half-full, but there are only dregs and who knows what you can catch from a bottle?

The junk man gets the typewriter.

He gets it all in the end.

— E. C. TUBB

THE SATYRIAN GAMES

by D. J. Gibbs

I knocked on the door marked "EDITOR" and walked in. Wilson glanced up from his desk, smiling. Always a dangerous sign.

"Aah, Johnny," he said. "Take a seat. I've got something I'd like you to hear." He extended a pudgy hand and flicked a button on his recorder.

The voice, speaking in Otnarepsa, the universal language, began:

"Greetings from Satyrus, Mr. Wilson. King Kopulus here." And then, after a brief pause—"I think your recent suggestion to send two members of your staff to witness our Annual Games is a splendid one. I had no idea their fame had become so widespread. I've always held the deepest admiration for the people of Earth, particularly the Chinese, and would be delighted to entertain two of its representatives, if only for a few brief days. During their stay, your observers will be given our fullest co-operation to make a detailed study of the Games and Satyrus in general.

"I am well aware of the rather unsavoury reputation my planet possesses, but I promise you there is no factual foundation for these ugly rumours. I can't imagine how they originated. No visitor here is detained against their will! It just happens that the vast majority find our humble planet has so much to offer that they express no desire to return home. Due to these unfortunate rumours, however, it will prove extremely difficult for your men to obtain transport direct to Satyrus. But if they could book passage on an Andross-bound vessel, I will arrange for a Satyrian ship to convey them to their final destination. If—"

"There's no time for any more," broke in Wilson, hastily switching off. "Hill has heard the complete message—he'll be going with you, by the way—so any further information you require, ask him."

"Going with me? Where?"

"Satyrus, of course."

"Satyrus? The planet of no return. You must be joking."

"It's no joke. There's tremendous story potential in the Satyrian Games. No other journal, on this world or any other, has ever exploited it. . . ."

"Because they couldn't find anyone stupid enough to go," I cut in.

"We stand to make a fortune," continued Wilson, undeterred. "You'll be famous, Johnny. Read throughout the Galaxy."

"Sorry, I'm not interested."

"Then you'd better *get* interested. And quick! Or you'll be searching for alternative employment."

"Fair enough." I began walking towards the door.

"I thought you'd have jumped at this opportunity. You're turning down a bonus of £500, you know."

"£500? Why didn't you say so before?" I was back in my seat.

"For just two weeks work," he added. "Unlimited expenses."

"I'm very tempted. For £1,000 I'd be even more tempted."

"Too much."

"Look, this could be a one-way trip. Whatever your King Kopulus says to the contrary, these rumours about Satyrus must have started somehow. There's no smoke without fire."

"Johnny, everything's arranged. Two weeks on Satyrus and then straight back to Earth. If there were any question of your being detained, it would be pointless my sending you, wouldn't it?"

"I've no idea, would it?"

He looked deeply hurt. "Don't you trust me, Johnny boy? Have I ever let you down?"

Aware of his capacity for impromptu Thespian performances, I ignored the pained expression registered across his flabby features. "Yes, plenty of times," I told him. "I'm the one who'll be taking the risks, I want to be paid accordingly. It's a thousand or nothing."

For several seconds Wilson remained silent, chewing the

butt of his Havana and eyeing me speculatively over the rims of his glasses. Finally he said: "You drive a hard bargain, son, but I admire a man who's not afraid to ask for what he wants. A thousand it is."

"Fine. There's just one thing . . ."

"What's that?"

"Who did you say was going with me?"

"Hill. To take the pictures."

"You know, that bothers me. Why Randy Hill of all people. He's just about the worst professional photographer in the business."

"Aagh, he's not that bad. Besides, he's the only man available at such short notice. Any more questions?"

"No, I guess not. I'll just get a few things together and—"

"No time. You're going right away. Buy anything you need out of expenses. Now, don't worry. It's all fixed. Hill's got the tickets. He's waiting for you at the spaceport. Usual place. A Satyrus interceptor will meet you at Andross. Okay?"

"I'm on my way," I replied, with more confidence than I felt.

Randy Hill was a wispy little runt with sparse sandy hair, a Cyrano-type nose, bow-legs, and an exasperating habit of constantly photographing the most unlikely subjects from the most ridiculous angles. To separate him from his accursed camera for any length of time would have required a major surgical operation. I had been forced to endure his company on countless previous occasions, and had gradually grown to hate the sight of him. He, on the other hand, seemed to think the sun rose and set on me, and I could see him now, elbowing his way through the dense crowd towards me, his ugly face beaming.

"I'm so glad we're working together again, Johnny," he panted.

"Likewise," I lied.

"We must hurry, Johnny. Our ship's due to leave any minute. We don't want to miss it, do we? This trip carries a bonus of £200."

Two hundred! So that was all Wilson had offered him! I was sorely tempted to inform him how much I was

getting. But it was no concern of mine. Anyway, he was still being grossly overpaid.

"I'll be able to get a new Svenson—they're the best on the market," Randy was saying.

"Don't you know anything but cameras?" I snapped, settling back in my seat. "If you must talk, tell me how the King's message ended."

"Message, Johnny?"

"The one Wilson played through to you in his office."

"He didn't play me any message, Johnny."

"First stop—Andross," came the announcement. The ship began to gently vibrate as the words died away.

The ship grated out of warp, and Andross, the Satyrians' nearest inhabited neighbour, loomed before us.

Randy and I alighted, the sole passengers to do so, and began to glance round for our reception committee. The only person in sight was a 38-21-38, clad in a brief, semi-transparent garment of some unknown material. She began to glide seductively towards us.

"Are you the two Terran newspapermen we have been expecting?" she enquired, huskily.

"We don't exactly work for a newspaper, but you're pretty close," I replied, fighting for breath. Not close enough, I was thinking. No wonder nobody wants to leave Satyrus.

The particular shot Randy was attempting could quite easily have been misconstrued by one ignorant of his unusual technique, and I hastily dragged him to his feet before his action could cause offence.

"Lead the way, sweetheart," I said to our hostess.

"Calla," she breathed.

"I'm Johnny Collins."

"Randolph K. Hill," announced Randy, grasping Calla's lovely arm under my disapproving gaze. "Are all Satyrians as beautiful as you?"

"Wait and see," she teased.

As a representative of Satyrian female beauty, Calla proved to be nothing exceptional. The crew of her ship was all female, and when I say "all female," I mean just that.

"You know something, Randy?" I said, thoughtfully.

"Two weeks isn't very long to make a thorough job of this assignment."

King Kopulus was a tall, tanned, fiercely handsome man in early middle-age. He sported a neat black beard and wore a huge crown of gem-studded gold upon his noble head. And the members of his surrounding harem made Calla appear decidedly undernourished and considerably overdressed. Calla made the introductions and took her leave, followed closely by the King's playmates.

"You're not Chinese, I suppose?" were the King's first words.

"Er—no, we're both from England," I apologised.

"Never mind," he sympathised. "And tell me, what exactly does your friend think he's doing?"

"My friend?" I looked about for Randy in alarm. "Put that camera away, will you? And come down from there!" I turned back to the King. "Please excuse him, Your Majesty. He was just photographing you. He's very keen."

"Oh, I see," replied the King doubtfully. "Now! I suppose you're hungry after your long journey? I have arranged a special banquet in your honour. It is all too seldom we are privileged to entertain such distinguished guests. As soon as my maidens have bathed you we will retire to the Feasting Hall. Before my greedy Nobles decide to dispose of the rare delicacies I have ordered without awaiting our arrival."

"You're too kind, Your Majesty," I said, distinctly puzzled. Why the V.I.P. treatment?

I was enjoying the feast immensely. The excellence of the food and wine more than counteracted the odd remarks passed occasionally by our host. Remarks like: "Eat well. I want you in good shape for your task tomorrow." and "How do you like my crown? I copied the design from illustrations I saw of your country's greatest ruler—King Henry VIII."

At that moment the King was engaged in a rather one-sided conversation with Randy, who, judging by the considerable amount of food clustered about the tip of his outsized olfactory organ, was also enjoying the feast

immensely. Speaking in English the King was saying: "I suppose you are quite surprised to hear your native tongue spoken so far from home?"

"Grrrnnch," replied Randy constructively.

"I learned the major languages of your planet in order to study the exploits of some of Earth's famous heroes, past and present—Solomon, Casanova, Darryl Flint . . ."

"Ymmmmm?" commented Randy.

"Do you realise that of all the thirty known humanoid planets only Earth has produced such rugged, virile specimens of manhood?"

"Sluuurrp?"

"And the Chinese! What a people! The population of China is actually seven times greater than that of this entire planet."

"Well, he who laughs last gathers no moss, as we say back home," contributed Randy.

"Er—quite so," agreed the King. "We possess a similar proverb here on Satyrus."

I let Randy do the talking. I myself was far too busy searching for the elusive connection between Solomon, an ancient Hebrew monarch, and Darryl Flint, latest rage of Earth's teenage set and an accomplished exponent of the electronic melody spoons.

"Mr. Collins?" The King, evidently bored by the lack of intelligent responses emanating from Randy's direction, had decided to focus his royal attentions on me. "I have a little story to unfold. Are you in a listening mood?"

"Fire away, Your Majesty," I invited.

"Over the last few generations," he began, "the population of Satyrus has gradually dwindled to a mere semblance of its former proportions. And this regrettable trend shows every sign of continuing unless some drastic remedy is swiftly found.

"As you have probably noticed, there is absolutely nothing lacking in our females, but the average male has developed an inexplicable complex regarding his ability to fulfil his natural function in the creative act. There is nothing physically wrong with him, you understand; his impotence stems from a far more obscure origin.

"But for the dedicated efforts of we Nobles, the Satyrian

race would already be extinct. But we are a mere handful, decreasing each year, and the strain is beginning to tell. That is why we have embarked upon our present policy: importing recruits from other humanoid worlds to aid us in our giant task. That is why you are here, as a representative from the most virile humanoid race in the Galaxy.

"Tomorrow, in the arena, both you Terrans will be pitted against several especially selected females. You will demonstrate to my subjects what it means to be a real MAN. The observing males will, I predict, be sufficiently encouraged by your display to reconsider their own inadequacies. The whole planet will follow your progress on television. Perhaps, after a five year lapse, we may even see a native Satyrian enter the arena to bid for Noble status. . . ."

"Is that how you won your crown?" I interrupted, my curiosity temporarily conquering my growing dismay.

"Yes, that is how I became King. That is how a Noble is born. I earned my title, it wasn't inherited. I triumphed over 13 lusty females," he added, proudly. "Now, are you willing to participate? Eight females will earn you membership in my Nobility."

"Look here, Your Majesty, I don't know how this misunderstanding arose, but we came here as observers, not performers."

"Your Mr. Wilson and I came to a little arrangement: I agreed to supply him with the illustrated history of the Games, in return for the services of two healthy male Terrans. I intend to keep my part of the bargain, and I suggest you do likewise. I only hope you prove more successful than the last sorry specimen we recruited from your planet. A disgrace to Earth's great name!"

"Wilson! Why that fat, double-crossing rat! When I get back I'll——"

"I hate to disappoint you, Mr. Collins, but the chances of your ever returning home are considerably remote. So why not make the best of it and co-operate?"

"The only way you'll get me in your blasted arena is by killing me first and then dragging me there!" I shouted, jumping to my feet.

"Please yourself. Guards! GUARDS!" Three beautiful

blondes, armed with three ugly disintegrators, immediately answered the King's furious summons. "Take the two Terrans away," he commanded. "Confine them with the Breeders until further notice."

They located Randy beneath the great dining-table, where he had slithered down to join the majority of the drunken Nobles, and dragged us both off to destination unknown.

The dungeons were situated beneath the arena itself and were packed tight with prisoners of every description, ranging from eight-foot titans to four-foot dwarfs, and midnight black to albino white, but all human, or closely allied. There were about 20 of us in my particular cell, but despite my persistent enquiries, none of them could, or would, tell me anything more about my probable fate than I had already learned.

Then, asleep in the far corner, I thought I spotted a familiar figure. I walked over for a closer look. Amazing! It really was him! But he had changed for the worst. "Harrigan!" I shouted. "Wake up, you old devil!" I shook him eagerly.

One eye rolled slowly open and viewed me suspiciously. Then: "Johnny! Johnny Collins! What the hell are you doing here?" He scrambled awkwardly to his feet.

George Harrigan was a lone-wolf trader who roamed the Galaxy in a battered old wreck and traded with the natives of the more backward planets, supplying them with gaudy but worthless trinkets and illicit alcohol in return for valuable minerals, precious furs, almost anything which could be later disposed of at a reasonable profit. He was over 70, and worth a small fortune.

I first made his acquaintance in a seedy bar on Japetus during my free-lance days. He introduced himself when he overheard me mention my occupation to the barman. He proposed a partnership, telling me some of his fascinating experiences on several virtually unexplored planets he had encountered, and adding he thought they might make interesting reading. Would I like to copy them down, supplying a little professional polish, and submit them to any magazines who might be interested? Any remuneration was to be split fifty-fifty.

We did pretty well for a while, and his store of tales seemed to be inexhaustible and highly commercial. Then, one day, his old wanderlust returned and he disappeared from my life with scarcely a word. I had since lost all trace of him until now.

"You don't look as if you've been treated too well, George," I said. "You've lost your paunch."

"Pigs!" he spat. "Do you know what my life here consists of? Nothing but mating with the blasted, insatiable females! I'm 73, Johnny. I just can't take it. What have I ever done to deserve such a punishment? A little slave-trading, mebbe, but nothing—"

"That's a punishment?" It was Randy, back to the land of the living.

"Hour after hour, day after day, week after week?" muttered George. "How would you like it?"

"Don't you ever get a tea-break?" asked Randy innocently.

"Who is this big-nosed joker, Johnny?" snapped George.

"Randolph Hill. We're working for the same outfit."

"Well tell him to get the hell out of it. And if he pokes that blasted camera in my face just once more, I'll ram it straight—"

"Would you mind, Randy?" I cut in hastily. The ace photographer sauntered off to annoy the other prisoners, and I turned back to George. "Well, George," I said, "what's the story?"

"Been here almost since I last saw you," he replied. "Came out of warp nearby to make some repairs to the ship, and two interceptors spotted me and forced me down. It wasn't too bad at first—when they found out I was a Terran they treated me like royalty. Then this Kopulus feller casually informs me I'm gonna be the star of the next Games. So I tried to make a break for the old ship, but they headed me off. Shut me up down here. And that's about it! How about you?"

I briefly explained about Wilson's little deal with the King, and then asked him about the rest of the prisoners.

"They're from various planets, Johnny, and mostly unsuccessful competitors from previous Games. That big black one threatening your pal over there, actually made the

Nobility once, but he was thrown out for insufficient output."

"Is he entered for this year's Games?" I asked.

"No, two cracks is the most you get, and he's had 'em. I only got the one. If you put up a good showing the first time, they allow you this second try; but it's seldom anyone improves on their first go, 'spite all the practice they get between times."

"Well, they don't seem a very friendly bunch," I said. "They weren't too helpful when I tried to find out what goes on here."

"They're okay. Probably pegged you for a spy. We get 'em from time to time—looking for troublemakers. But anything you wanna know, I'll tell you. Fact I'll do better'n that—I'll get you a real expert. Hey, Slab! Could you spare a bit?"

A tall figure, dressed in the costume of the Satyrian Nobility, stepped towards us. George made the introductions: "This is Slab, late of the Nobility. Slab, meet an old pal from Earth—Johnny."

"Delighted to know you," smiled the Satyrian.

"Same here," I replied. "Did George say 'ex-Noble'?"

"I'm afraid so; I had several slight differences of opinion with our King. And tomorrow my death will provide the climax to opening day, with Kopulus himself as executioner. We're to settle our differences by the traditional method of physical combat in the arena. The main obstacle to a personal victory is the choice of weapons, the King being armed with a disintegrator, while I must make do with a hurling trident. Royal prerogative," he added.

"But that's murder!" I protested.

"Kopulus isn't very partial to people who choose to oppose him. I said things about his idiot policies that he doesn't want publicised. I'm only surprised that he risked confining me in a communal cell."

"What sort of things?" I asked.

"Instead of answering you directly, I'll draw a brief outline of the Games and their history and let you form your own conclusions."

"Suits me. Go ahead."

"King Tsyze, a direct ancestor of the present ruler,

originally organised them, claiming that the Nobility should prove its fitness to rule by public demonstration. So he had the arena constructed and volunteered to be the first contestant himself.

"In just one day, he proved his strength and courage by defeating 10 warriors consecutively in single combat, his wisdom by correctly answering five riddles set by the leading philosophers of the day, and his virility by mastering 15 spirited young females. Then he strode to the middle of the arena and hurled forth this challenge: 'Let any man who believes he can better my display come forward. And if the people deem him successful, I will abdicate in his favour. And, furthermore, I will cut off my right hand as tribute to his strength and courage, put out my eyes and tear out my tongue as tribute to his wisdom, and sever the symbol of my manhood as tribute to his virility! Who will be the first?'

"Many tried to emulate the King's performance, and the original Games lasted for ages. The vast majority were of course, hopelessly unsuccessful. But a few managed to win public approval, so becoming the new Nobility, irrespective of previous rank. Conversely, many old Nobles, after inept displays, were relegated to the basest levels of society, some actually becoming servants of men who had once served them.

"King Tsyze's performance was never equalled during his lifetime, and on his death the throne was declared available to the worthiest contestant at the next Games. As yet, no reigning monarch has been required to defend his crown, though his displacement can now be accomplished by any challenger merely proving himself more virile. Over the years, strength, courage and wisdom have lost their meaning. The average male, himself impotent, has grown to regard virility as virtually the only true indication of manhood, even godhood."

"Hmmmm. There's definitely a connection between the Games and this widespread impotence problem, isn't there?" I said.

"Of course," replied Slab. "Every Satyrian youth, no matter how high born, is fully aware that he can attain Noble status only by undergoing this barbaric ordeal in the

arena. He also knows that most contenders fail miserably and inevitably finish up as objects of public ridicule."

"So he forgets the whole thing," I put in.

"Which is even worse for him sexually than making the attempt and failing," concluded Slab. "He becomes so obsessed with this failure to prove his manhood that he is content to leave the business of the creative-act completely in the hands of the Nobles and the alien prisoners specifically retained for that purpose."

"Your people certainly give up easily," I said.

"It might seem so to an Outsider, but consider the tremendous stress exerted on them by tradition, environment and upbringing."

"I suppose I was a bit hasty," I conceded.

"And then there's this latest idea of importing alien stock to supplement the Nobility. Apart from the Nobles, almost every male person here capable of reproduction is an Outsider. And if things carry on as they have been, the next generation will find even the Nobility itself composed entirely of foreign recruits."

"So the true Satyrian race is swiftly bound for extinction."

"But try telling that to Kopulus. If only he could be persuaded to stop the Games and remove this unhealthy emphasis on virility, I'm sure our males would soon regain their natural urges. But if he did agree to scrap them, having only his performance in the arena to justify his position, he would immediately raise doubts about the legitimacy of his accession and his fitness to rule. And our King is too fond of his divine image and luxurious life to consider taking such a risk. So he compromises by forcibly recruiting Outsiders."

"Well, he won't get me in his blasted arena!" I yelled.

"Give it a try, Johnny," cut in George. "It's the only way you can join the Nobility. Do you want to stay here as a Breeder for the rest of your life?"

"Breeder or Noble, what the hell's the difference?" I argued. "They both serve the same purpose, don't they?"

"There's all the difference in the world, my friend," corrected Slab. "The Nobles live in the lap of luxury, enjoying the fairest women, feasting, drinking—"

"While us Breeders are left to rot in these stinking dungeons!" interrupted George. "Starved, beaten up, spied on, and forced to mate with the Nobles' rejects. Some of the hags I've been partnered with in the Mating Room have been well past child-bearing age. Old enough to be my granny!" He spat on the floor. "And they still keep coming back for more."

"The females I've met haven't exactly been hags," I insisted.

"A well-chosen bait for the unsuspecting fish," observed Slab.

"You would be wise to heed your friend."

"I'll sleep on it," I replied.

The afternoon of opening day brought with it a distinguished visitor: none other than King Kopulus himself. Surrounded by a bevy of his beautiful bodyguards, he walked over to me and gave me a broad smile. "Not long now, Mr. Collins," he said.

"For what?"

"Your performance, Mr. Collins."

"I've told you before, your offer doesn't interest me."

"It wasn't exactly an offer."

"Go to hell."

The King, still smiling, motioned to the guards, and Slab, Randy and I were instantly seized and transported hurriedly through the massive doorway and up a stone staircase leading to the arena. We emerged suddenly into brilliant sunlight and were forced to close our eyes before the dazzling glare. The murmur of the expectant assemblage assailed our ears, and I felt Randy stiffen against me.

"What are they going to do, Johnny?" he wailed. "Throw us to the lions or something?"

"Or something," I replied, ominously.

"Ignore your friend, Mr. Hill," interrupted the King, overhearing our little conversation. "Nothing unpleasant will befall you if you co-operate. Guards! Strip both Terrans and give them each the traditional glass of *swilk*." And so saying, he spun on his heel and strode majestically across the sandy floor of the arena, graciously acknowledging the wild cheering of the crowd.

"Off with your clothes then," ordered a buxom brunette,

with a strident voice and a disconcerting habit of waving her disintegrator about in my general direction with her chubby thumb resting on the firing button.

"I'm perfectly comfortable as I am, thank you," I assured her.

"All right, we'll do it the hard way. Girls!"

A little later, Randy and I, stark naked, and Slab, fully dressed, stood in the arena entrance watching the preliminary events of the afternoon. These, Slab explained, had no connection with the true purpose of the Games, but were merely to whet the crowd's appetite.

"What was that obnoxious brown liquid they forced down our throats just now?" I asked the ex-Noble.

"The *swilk*? It's just an old custom."

"Apropos to what?"

"There's no official explanation for its continued use, but I suspect it's a powerful and fast-working sexual stimulant."

"An aphrodisiac? Does it really work?"

"I believe so. It would certainly account for the startling success enjoyed by some previous contestants, royalty included."

The first item on the agenda was a battle to the death between a gigantic, undulating blob of protoplasm from the dread Mevascan Rain Forest and a pack of tusked, snarling, six-legged wolf-like creatures. Before long the blob had swollen to twice its original proportions and its opponents had vanished completely. Five guards then rushed to assist in the victor's removal. This feat was complicated by the blob's apparent desire to remain perfectly stationary. It was finally accomplished, however, but not before two brave women had succumbed to the glutinous embrace of the blob's pseudopods—much to the amusement of the onlookers.

The next contest involved a twenty-headed Swamp-Crawler and a sort of giant lobster. It terminated with the former losing nineteen heads, and the latter resembling finely chopped mincemeat.

Then it was my turn!!!

They cleared the arena and marched me to the centre. An excited hush descended on the crowd. The deep,

resonant tones of the King then came over the loudspeaker system:

"Today, for our education and entertainment, we are privileged to have the services of two members of that most admired and venerated race—the Terrans!" Wild applause. "May I present, with confident expectation of a brilliant performance, Mr. Johnny Collins!!!" More applause.

The guards slipped unobtrusively from my side, and I was alone. A gate at the far end of the arena was lifted, releasing my chosen adversaries. Eyes flashing, teeth bared, they slunk menacingly towards me. . . .

The *swilk* lived up to its unofficial reputation. But, alas, having the desire to attempt a certain task and the physical ability to complete it are two vastly different things. Six females and several eternities later I was dragged exhausted, amid the furious, indignant jeers of the cheated spectators, from the field of battle.

"Mr. Collins is, of course, not Chinese," apologised the King.

I retrieved my clothing from the guards and dressed tiredly before their contemptuous gaze. Randy, bent double, was indulging in a bout of hysterical laughter.

"What's the matter with you?" I shouted at him.

"You were great, Johnny," he sniggered, tears streaming from his eyes.

"You won't be laughing in a minute," I snarled.

"And now," announced the embarrassed King, "to erase from our memories the bitterly disappointing display we have just witnessed, Mr. Randolph K. Hill!!!" Faint applause.

Naked as the day he was born, save for the inevitable camera suspended about his neck, Randy began to waddle unassisted to the arena centre.

"Hey, Randy, the camera!" I yelled.

Retracing his steps, he handed me the prize possession. "Look after it, Johnny," he pleaded.

Randy was nothing short of sensational. During his performance I suddenly discovered my feelings toward him had undergone a considerable transformation: I no longer

detested him, I was lost in admiration. He was all heart! The crowd was delirious. What a man! What a trouper! He had already attained double figures in less time than it had taken me to reach half a dozen, and he still showed no sign of tiring.

One female later, and pandemonium erupted. The crowd went berserk. Randy looked bewildered. The King was struggling unsuccessfully to make himself heard above the uproar.

"What's up?" I asked Slab.

"Your friend has equalled the King's own total," he answered excitedly.

"But he's only made eleven, Kopulus told me he scored thirteen."

"Arithmetic and modesty were never his strongpoints," he sneered.

"What now then?"

"It all depends on . . ."

The tumult intensified, reaching a deafening crescendo. Randy was actually signalling for more!!!

He just made it. But that was good enough.

"Hail to the Terran! Hail to our new King!" roared the crowd.

"He's done it, Slab," I gasped. "He's gone and done it!"

". . . and although his was an unforgettable performance, I'm afraid that Mr. Hill, being an Outsider, is not eligible to wear the Satyrian crown." King Kopulus at last managed to make himself heard during a sudden lull in the proceedings.

"Boooo," came the unanimous response. "Abdicate! Abdicate! Hail to our new King! Hail to the three-legged one!"

Seizing a hand microphone, Kopulus rushed down the steps from the Royal Box. "He is not a native!" he screamed. "I am still King!"

Slab and I headed him off before he could effectively employ the ceremonial sword he had drawn on his bewildered successor. "You are no longer King," said Slab, grimly. "Hand over the crown to King Randolph."

"Never," roared Kopulus. "I claim the right to defend."

"Defend!" shrilled the crowd. "Defend or sacrifice."

"Bring the *swilk*," commanded Kopulus, swiftly disrobing.

"I'll get it," volunteered Slab, presenting me with a knowing wink.

Kopulus accepted the drink and downed it in one gulp, immediately ordering the clearance of the arena.

"This shouldn't take long," predicted Slab, as we returned to the entrance. "I watered down his *swilk*."

He was correct, although Kopulus still managed to equal my own total, even with the diluted aphrodisiac.

We re-entered the arena, and Slab picked up the discarded crown and placed it on Randy's head. The crowd voiced its approval.

"I'm not beaten yet," panted Kopulus, retrieving the microphone. "I now claim the right to defend by physical combat. Guards, bring on the traditional weapons."

As soon as the disintegrator and the trident appeared, Kopulus made a dive for the former, but Slab forestalled him. "The trident is yours, ex-King," he corrected. Then, grabbing the microphone, he cried: "As the new King is unfamiliar with our weapons, I crave your permission to act as his representative."

The audience agreed to a man.

The two combatants backed away till they were separated by some 20 paces. "Give the signal," ordered Slab, to no one in particular.

"Er— Ready . . . Steady . . . GO!" I yelled, hoping I was handling the situation according to custom.

Kopulus drew back a muscular arm and launched the trident at the grinning ex-Noble's chest. Slab calmly disintegrated the missile in full flight and laughed mockingly. Then he turned the gun on his helpless opponent. "As I am not a vengeful man, I will spare your miserable life," he declared.

But the broken ex-King knew well that this gesture was merely symbolic: he still had the traditional act of self-sacrifice to perform. He stumbled over to where the ceremonial sword lay gleaming amid the blood and sand of the arena and retrieved it, hesitantly. Glancing down at his battered the body, he raised the keen blade to chest height and commenced the dreaded downward stroke.

"Stop!" commanded Slab. "I crave mercy for this man, King Randolph."

Randy shrugged his shoulders and looked at me.

"Granted," I said for him.

"We need men of your prowess to assist in the great task created for us by you and other corrupt rulers," Slab informed the thankful Kopulus. "You are of no use to your planet as only half a man. For that reason alone your life has been spared."

Kopulus needed no further urging. With a loud clatter, the sword dropped from his trembling fingers.

"Speech!" roared the audience. "Speech from our new King."

"Do they mean me, Johnny? I'm not making any speech."

"I would be honoured to act as your spokesman," volunteered Slab.

"Please yourself," said Randy disinterestedly.

"Still breathless after his tremendous display, our new King has invited me to address you on his behalf," began Slab. "He wishes to thank you for approving his accession, and make known some of the major changes in royal policy his rule will introduce."

"Hail to our new King."

"Firstly, the alien Breeders will be immediately freed and returned home, although those wishing to stay and assist our drive will be welcome to do so as honoured guests. They will be replaced by the ex-King and his Nobles—men who have deprived you of your natural rights and offered you nothing in return."

"Hail to our new King!"

"Secondly, the Games will be discontinued as of now. . . ."

"NOOOOOOO! BOOOOO!"

"It's in your own interests, you fools. Can't you see that?"

But the crowd couldn't see it! Mouldy fruit and vegetables, usually reserved for the discomfort of those contestants scoring under five, were tossed down on us, one projectile bursting on Slab's shoulder, and another dislodging the crown from Randy's balding dome.

"Cancel that last bit," I urged. "Before they bring out the heavy artillery."

"As you see," yelled Slab, "our new King possesses quite a sense of humour. But as you don't seem to appreciate his little joke—"

"Hyeeeah! Hail to our new King!"

Slab duly completed the speech and turned to me, smiling sadly. "They just don't know what's good for them," he said.

"People don't always want what's good for them," I replied.

"True. We'll have to introduce our new measures more gradually."

King Randolph the First, with Slab as his chief adviser, has been in power a week now, and seems very content with his new station, apart from one minor detail—his crown appears to have vanished. This valuable item actually disappeared at the same time as a Satyrian interceptor, 50 cases of *swilk*, and George Harrigan, so chances of its recovery are rather debatable.

As for me, I'm pretty satisfied, too. I've got the only official contract to sell *swilk* throughout the Galaxy, and though George apparently has a head start, there should be enough interested tired businessmen to make us both rich. The shots I took of Randy's performance should also prove popular attractions to that same market. And, at my inspired suggestion, all male Satyrians are now receiving, free, a daily ration of *swilk*, with encouraging results.

So it's back home for me, though I'll probably return to Satyrus every year for my holidays. Could you think of a better place?

My first job on Earth will be to contact a very surprised editor. At one time, I was a little annoyed with Wilson and planned several nasty ways of exacting vengeance on him, but, as things have turned out, perhaps he deserves a break. And I'll personally ensure that he gets it—in the region of his neck.

— D. J. GIBBS.

The greatest box of secrets ever was locked up in the body of a little child.

FOR ONE OF THESE

by Daphne Castell

Anna sat up in bed, shaken suddenly wide awake by the clang of the roll-up doors, as her mother garaged the car. She looked at the tiny clock by her bed-side—it was after one o'clock. The bridge game must have gone on a good deal longer than usual. She and her mother had shared the house, since the death of Brad, Anna's husband, had left Anna with barely enough money to keep herself, three-year-old Robbie, and the baby Juliet.

Anna and her mother were both placid easy women, with the same generosity of nature, and the same warmly shared excitement in life. At a stage when many mother-and-daughter relationships are bickered into rags, theirs thrived and discovered new richness of humour and companionship. Their arrangement suited them well; they went their own ways, and made no unreasonable demands on one another.

Anna slipped into a housecoat and went downstairs. Her mother was in the kitchen, lighting the gas-stove, moving from table to sink, filling kettles and arranging crockery.

"Hello!" said Anna amiably. "That tea you're making? I wouldn't mind a cup either." Her mother turned sharply, brows contracted, then threw out her hands, sighed, and sat down wearily at the table.

"I hoped I wouldn't have to wake you. Anna, there's been a very bad accident on the main road—about five miles from the village. Three cars and a long-distance lorry; one car crushed to pieces, and the couple in it—three other people seriously injured. There were three survivors—and one of them was a baby."

"A baby!" breathed Anna.

"It was thrown from the crushed car—it only escaped by a miracle. Anna, my dear, I'm sorry, but I simply had to bring that child back with me. Hicks is there, he's at

his wits' end. I couldn't let him take it to the police station, and the ambulance hadn't got there when I left." Hicks was the local policeman. "Hicks said he'd send someone over when they get everything cleared up—I don't know who they'll be—welfare, I'd think, not police, wouldn't you? Oh, Anna, it's been the most dreadful business—I can't get it out of my mind."

Anna's nose wrinkled in distress, as she picked up the boiling kettle and began to make tea.

"Don't apologize about the baby, Mother, you were quite right. You couldn't have done anything else. You're quite sure its parents are dead, I suppose? Where is it now?"

"In the sitting-room, on the couch. Are you sure you don't mind, dear? It'll mean a lot of work, with Juliet as well, I know, but there are the two of us, and it's only until we trace the poor little thing's relatives. The father and mother were—well, at least they couldn't have known a thing, not even realised what was happening, Hicks says. They must have died immediately." Anna carried the tray of tea-things into the sitting-room, and Mrs. Waybridge followed her.

The baby lay on the couch, gazing placidly at them. It seemed a little dazed, but untroubled. About ten to twelve months old, Anna thought. She looked at it thoughtfully. An attractive child, but in some ways, certainly odd-looking. That hair was the most incredible yellow. The curl and sheen of it were almost metallic. The enormous eyes were pale blue, and slightly protuberant. The baby stared solemnly back at Anna. A sort of flicker and ripple slid over its face, and then it broke into the most enchanting grin.

"I wonder what his name is?" Mrs. Waybridge picked up the baby and turned back the collar of the zipper suit, looking for a name-tab.

"He's rather nice. Hi, there!" said Anna, moved suddenly and inexplicably almost to tears by the baby's accepting grin. She held out her arms, and Mrs. Waybridge put the child into them. He wriggled and dipped his head, then yawned, tilted it against her shoulder, and dropped his eyelids.

"He's very tired, and maybe a little shocked," Anna diagnosed. "I wonder if she—she'd fed him?" Her voice shook a little.

"I'll warm some milk up for him." Mrs. Waybridge seemed to have recovered herself, and to be anxious for activity of any sort.

Anna put the baby down on the couch, and went upstairs for nappies, and one of Robbie's outgrown sleeping-suits. When she came down again, the baby was still awake and staring round him. As she picked him up, the odd flicker and ripple came over his face again, but this time he did not smile. The corners of the wide mouth drooped, and tears spilled out of the pale blue eyes and ran down the cheeks. He did not make any sound at all. Anna had never heard a baby cry so silently.

Mrs. Waybridge had brought in warm, sweetened milk. The baby drank some, and fell instantly so fast asleep that he did not wake when they undressed him and put him into Robbie's old night clothes, and laid him to sleep in the carrycot that Juliet used sometimes during the day.

The night of the accident was a Friday, and no one came to enquire after the baby on Saturday or Sunday. Anna became a little worried about him. He seemed drowsy and disinclined to move much. He could crawl a little, but not walk, which made him younger than she had thought, unless he was a backward child. He soon grew tired, and then he would lie and weep, that silent, heartbreaking flow of tears, which moved Anna unbearably, until she had to pick him up and hold him closely. He would snuggle his face into her neck and remain very still, but afterwards, when she put him down, he seemed livelier, and would allow Robbie, who was fascinated by him, to play with him for a while. She wondered anxiously if there was some internal injury, or whether the shock had been worse than they had realized.

During the weekend, she grew very tired, with the strain of caring for the four-month-old Juliet, and worrying about the strange baby. Robbie liked him, and she found herself growing very fond of him, but she would be glad, she thought, when the welfare people or the child's relatives

arrived and took the burden from her. The difficulty of feeding him was her chief worry.

"Anna," said Mrs. Waybridge on the Saturday morning, as they sat over the breakfast table, surrounded by the debris that goes with feeding very small children—sticky crusts, dabs of cereal, pools of spilt egg-yolk and overturned milk—"I can't get this child to touch bread-and-butter. Old enough for it, isn't he? He won't eat egg either, apparently. He swallowed one mouthful and it came right back. All he'll take is warm milk and water, and not very much of that."

Anna was giving Juliet a bottle. She put the baby down to wriggle on the rug, and came over to her mother, ignoring Robbie, who was banging his spoon on the table and announcing that *he* would eat boiled egg, lots and lots of boiled egg.

She took the baby, and tried to coax morsels of food into his mouth, but after a few sips of milk, he refused everything, and lay quietly with his face in the hollow of her neck.

Throughout the day, they tried him with everything they thought he could possibly eat, only to be faced with the astonishing fact that a baby of perhaps ten or twelve months old was apparently used to subsisting on nothing but milk, and not very much of it.

By Monday morning, Anna was feeling quietly frantic. Suppose something had gone wrong with the arrangements after the accident, and Hicks had forgotten all about them? It seemed unlikely. But why hadn't they come for the baby yet? She would have to do something about him, take him to the doctor, certainly, if he continued to refuse food. She would not have worried so much about this if he had seemed normally happy and healthy, but the drowsy look and the occasional quiet flow of tears went on. When he was for the time being in a contented frame of mind, he was such an endearing creature, she thought, looking down at the baby, quiet always, and yet oddly demonstrative for a child of his age, with that rare delightful grin of response.

She was standing in the kitchen, holding him snuggled against her neck, while Juliet demonstrated deep dissatisfaction from the other room, when the door bell rang. The

sound startled the baby, and he jerked away from her, as Mrs. Waybridge went to open the door.

There was a sharp strange feeling at Anna's neck ; when she put up her free hand to it, her fingers came away a little sticky. She stared unbelievingly at the blood on their tips.

Then she looked down at the child.

"He—he must have bitten me," she said aloud wonderingly, and felt herself sway suddenly, with a slight feeling of nausea. The baby's eyes were sleepily on hers. There was that flicker of movement over his face—and Anna found herself staring down into a second pair of eyes. They were set at a diagonal slant, rather higher than the ordinary pair, and much further back on the side of the face, almost under the thatch of bright yellow hair. Now they flickered shut again. The lids drawn over them were tight and smooth. There were no lashes, and the eyeball was evidently flat, not rounded. They were quite invisible when closed. The baby sighed, closed both pairs of eyes, and slept.

"He's—he's not—" she whispered. She did not finish the sentence. The kitchen was suddenly full of people. Her mother was swept aside by an inrush of them, some in uniform, of a very distinctly military type, some quietly nondescript, ordinarily dressed.

"Mrs. Hallam?" said an elderly man, with heavy brows, and an exceedingly deep soft voice.

Anna nodded dumbly.

"Mrs. Hallam, I am extremely sorry that we should have to break in upon you like this, but the matter is very urgent indeed. I am from Military Intelligence. The autopsy on the parents of this baby was somewhat delayed. It has now been performed however, and there is no doubt that, whatever else they may have been, they were not human. Extremely fine plastic surgery, of a type none of our people could even dream of duplicating, hid the slight external differences ; but many of the internal organs are as far removed, structurally speaking, from those of human beings as they well could be."

Anna said faintly, "I know. I've just seen—he just opened another pair of eyes. And I think—I think he bit me."

The floor suddenly seemed a very long way off, and she was floating on warm billowing clouds; then the floor came a lot closer, and a singing began in her ears, and her eyes were suddenly closing upon a purple darkness.

When she opened them again, she was lying on the couch in the other room. The baby was no longer in her arms, and she struggled up with a little cry of alarm. A hand pushed her back, gently but firmly, and then she saw her mother, standing at the end of the couch, white-faced, with the sleeping baby in her arms. Anna sighed in relief, and the man who had pushed her back upon the cushions came round the couch and stood looking down at her.

"Mrs. Hallam, my name is Whitney, Bill Whitney," he began, "and I am a specialist in physiology—only human, up to date, but it looks as if your nursling is going to change all that." He smiled at her, rather anxiously, Anna thought. She liked him at once. He was perhaps forty, with thick brown hair, and a very direct clear grey stare. She turned her head, and saw that the man from Military Intelligence was whispering to two or three other uniformed men at one end of the room, and that a tall thin man she had not seen before was crouched uncomfortably on a ridiculously small chair. She wished he would move to something larger—it distracted her from what Bill Whitney was saying. "You'll realise how enormously important this child is to us. He and his parents must be of extra-terrestrial origin—there isn't anything else for it. They couldn't possibly have evolved on this planet, though, with surgical changes, they were obviously able to adapt enough to live on it. We have to find out as much as possible about them, and try to make a guess as to where they came from. And so we must examine the baby with the greatest care. Did you say he bit you?"

Anna looked at the small alien thing her mother was holding and wanted desperately to clutch it and keep it from these scientists. Thoughts of laboratory tests, white rats threading their way through mazes, sections of living tissue rushed at her, and she screwed up her eyes as some defence against the horrific images that besieged her mind. But it was a baby, this creature from, perhaps, the stars; they surely couldn't, wouldn't do anything to harm it?

Extra-terrestrial or not, it was ill, and desperately in need, as any being so small would be, of tenderness and care.

Bill Whitney had been watching her closely and anxiously. He said gently, "We're not going to hurt him, Mrs. Hallam. We're not even going to try and take him away from you, unless it seems better for him that way. But we must know more about him, not only for the sake of our world, but for his sake. We want to keep him alive, partly for our own benefit, of course, and to do that, we must find out exactly how he functions, his metabolic and respiratory processes, and so on."

The tall thin man on the small chair stirred and mumbled, "Not monsters you know, fairly humane lot of people. Married myself, three ghastly little creatures of my own. Much more unnatural than this one. Martian changelings, all of them."

Anna found a small surprised giggle rising to her lips. She sat up on the couch, and this time Bill Whitney did not prevent her. Mrs. Waybridge, in response to the unspoken beseeching in her daughter's eyes, came over and handed the baby to her.

"Sidney Behrens, doctor, psychiatrist, and a fairly handy chemist, in a slapdash way," Whitney introduced the thin man, who ducked his head awkwardly.

Mrs. Waybridge, who belonged to a generation in whose view the words "psychiatry, mumbo-jumbo, quackery, fake miracles" were more or less synonymous, eyed Dr. Behrens with intense misgiving.

"He bit you, eh—or not?" Sidney Behrens insisted mildly.

Anna said faintly, "I don't know. I saw—he just opened another pair of eyes. And then my neck hurt. I think he bit me—there was the blood, you see. But I don't really know." She held the child loosely in her lap. She felt that she did not dare now to hold him closer—not because she feared for herself, but because since the world had turned upside down and he was no longer human, she did not know of anything definite that she could do or not do for him. It was best, she felt, to be as inactive as she could with him, until she knew more, or was told more by these experts.

Bill Whitney and the elderly man from Military Intelli-

gence conferred together in whispers for a moment. Then Whitney nodded and turned back towards Anna. Quietly and magically the room emptied, until only Anna and the baby, her mother, Whitney and Behrens were left.

Whitney asked Anna to hold up her chin, and examined her neck carefully. He murmured, "There's a small rough patch there—looks as if a plaster had been peeled off. Let me have the baby, will you, Mrs. Hallam?" He turned the sleeping child's face gently towards the light. Then he lifted the top lip, and peered at the underside of it. The baby shook itself, uttering an irritated cry. It twitched in annoyance, and Whitney drew in his breath sharply, as the extra pair of eyes opened and gazed at him.

The next few hours were a small nightmare. A large furniture van drew up before the house, and a squad of unobtrusive men who might or might not have been furniture removers in their spare time, but were certainly detectives at the moment, transferred everything that Anna and her family might conceivably need in the way of personal belongings, from the house to the van. The telephone was temporarily disconnected. Various tradesmen were informed by Mrs. Waybridge, acting under polite supervision from Colonel Mason, the elderly soldier, that Mrs. Hallam and the children were to be away on holiday for an indefinite period, and that she herself was only staying to attend to unfinished business, and to close the house up before she followed them. Friends the next morning received polite notes, regretting this or that function which would not now be attended; and finally, with a swiftess that appalled Anna, the whole family, apart from her mother, was uprooted and carried off to a large discreet house, in beautiful rolling country, the property, Anna was given to understand, of the Department of Mines.

"Officially," said Bill Whitney gravely, "a sort of rest-home for exhausted engineers—and, of course, their families." Anna, still dazed by her contact with top-brass and top-secrets, was rather numbly unpacking her belongings in the huge and ornate Georgian bedroom which had been allotted to her and Juliet, who had slept peacefully through the whole proceedings. Robby had a sort of

powder-closet annexe to one side of her, and Mrs. Waybridge, when she arrived in a few days, was to have an equally sumptuous room almost opposite. The baby—

"The baby—" said Whitney. "Well, we think he ought to sleep in your room, if it won't worry you and Juliet, at any rate to begin with." Anna shook her head. She would have asked for this if he had not suggested it. Bill Whitney went on, "But we have to face it, we don't know yet whether he may not need a special atmosphere, special methods of feeding that can only be provided artificially. We don't know yet how his parents managed for him. But we're going to try to find out. Now, Mrs. Hallam, when you're ready, if you'll come downstairs, we feel you should be present at least during the first series of tests we're going to make; and if it seems to make the baby more relaxed to have you with him, as I'm pretty certain it does, we'll want to have you in on all the lab. procedure as well —if you won't mind?"

Anna shook her head mutely. She felt now that she had known and liked both Whitney and Behrens for a long time; and as if she herself had aged a good many years in one week-end. But she was sure now that they would do nothing to hurt or frighten the baby, and she was beginning to be intensely and humanly curious to know what made her little foundling tick.

"Good!" said Bill Whitney, pleased. He liked this woman's calm acceptance of the fantastic situation. He liked her warm sense of humour, the air of responsibility and knowledge, and the strength that had fought against the overwhelming loss written in the lines round her eyes and mouth. "At least you'll know that way that we aren't teaching him to ring a bell for his lunch, or anything like that!"

There was not a great deal of Monday left, in which to conduct their researches, but more was crammed into it than Anna would have thought possible. By comparing the baby's intake of food with the waste products excreted by him, Bill, Sidney, and two visiting experts apparently came to some sort of conclusion on the compounds which would be chiefly employed in his metabolism. On the Tuesday, the testing really began, and by Tuesday night, in spite of

frequent breaks for rest, the baby was fretful and ill, Anna worried, and Bill and Sidney (they were all, by now, on first-name terms) exhausted, but hopeful.

Bill gulped down a cup of tea, and sat back to summarize.

"Anna, we've only begun, and we don't yet know a great deal, but we have made a good start, and at least we know some of the important things. Briefly, we've been exploring as far as we can his respiratory and circulatory system—"

"Impossible to be sure about them, without internal exploration," interjected one of the visiting experts rather gloomily.

Bill nodded impatiently and continued.

"We know that he has, for instance, two hearts, probably with four chambers to each instead of merely a right and left ventricle. We don't know the function all these extra items fulfil, and his parents were pretty badly smashed up—" he glanced apologetically at Anna, "—they didn't help us a great deal either. But I should say that an adult of his species has one of the most perfectly adequate circulations it is possible to imagine. Ill-health, shortness of breath, imperfect blood-supply, they must be almost unknown—these people must be able to run for miles very fast indeed; and probably live to extreme old age. There are other duplicate muscles, which are always standing ready to take over a function, if anything does by chance go wrong. They seem to be a sort of double man, a highly improved version of the original product." He grinned, then sobered again. "We know that his intake of proteins, carbohydrates, and so on is roughly similar to ours, but higher, to keep all these extra muscles in gear. We know that he uses oxygen, that he expels carbon dioxide, that he forms lactic and other acids, some of which we have never met before. We know that his bodily mechanism is capable of internal oxydization processes at a much greater rate and for much longer periods than ours. Now, from our observations on his physical qualities, we believe that at his age, he still suckles—probably this life-form takes a much longer time to arrive at adult-hood than ours. He may be the equivalent of, say, a four-month-old human baby."

Four months! Anna's eyes grew shadowed at the thought and she pressed the baby tightly to her. Juliet's age, no more. Juliet, alone and comfortless, on a cold strange planet—Anna shivered.

"We think now," Bill went on, "that he takes his nourishment directly from the mother, but in the form of her blood, not as our babies do, transformed to milk. He is obviously accustomed to applying his lip as a sort of stimulator to a patch of skin, probably naturally porous, on his mother's breast or neck. Afterwards some secretion from his mouth probably seals the skin. It is obvious that he has tried to feed from you—and has perhaps succeeded two or three times during the week-end, just enough to keep him alive, though not particularly healthy. You wouldn't have noticed anything, until he was accidentally moved sharply away from you, or startled. You say you have been feeling faint and tired and depressed—this drain upon you would have already made itself felt, even if he only fed occasionally, in the same way that a mother breast-feeding her baby may become anaemic if she does not have the right types and quantities of food. In your case, of course, the physiological changes which normally prepare a woman to accept this kind of drain were absent, too, as you were not even breast-feeding your own baby. But you are probably in a better condition for this child to feed from, as you have recently borne a child, than a woman who has never had a baby. We can't yet imagine how his species manages to feed a child in this way, and remain quite healthy. His direct intake of blood must be at least a pint a day, and this is much more exhausting for the mother than the drawing off of the supplies stored in her breasts. Perhaps she eats a great deal more than we do, or more probably, from what we have already observed of the circulation and metabolism, her internal processes are far more efficient at converting food into energy than ours, with far less accumulation of waste products."

Anna said, "You mean he feeds on blood and nothing else? But the milk?"

"An extra, I suspect," said Whitney. "Something pleasant and thirst-quenching, but nothing more. The sort of unexpected luxury you might find on a strange planet, even if

nothing else suited your stomach. He'll die, you know, Anna, unless we can feed him."

The baby sat quietly on Sidney Behrens' knee, bubbling a little to itself and making sudden small noises, very like the ones that Juliet would be making upstairs, thought Anna.

Whitney went on, "We don't know whether he will take any other blood-group—or even whether any other woman of the same group can feed him. It may be that, by an odd combination of factors, your physical composition resembles that of his mother very closely. We shall have to try to find out, by experimenting with volunteers—if we can find them—but we shall have to go very carefully. He's too young for us to run the risk of introducing any inimical substance into him. So, Anna, at the moment he can only feed in perfect safety from you—if you will let him. We could replace the blood you lose. We have several ways of doing that; and we can care for you in every possible way, far more easily than we can at the moment help him. You are the only one who can do that."

Anna could not speak. The primeval instinctive fear of a blood drinker crawled in her veins.

But this was a baby. This was a living being, whom some alien mother had loved, as she loved Juliet and Robbie; and this being, unhuman or not, would die if she did not help it. She went over and picked up the baby from Behrens' knee, and held it to her, nursing it consciously and deliberately for the first time.

"They don't only need food, you know," she said, half to herself and half to Whitney, "they need to know that you want to give it to them." The baby's eyelids drooped contentedly, and closed, as he fed at last, half-asleep.

"Poor little Dracula." Behrens rose to his feet. "Incredible series of chances he's been through, eh? Bill, I'm off back citywards—pick up some volunteers among our technical people, maybe? Don't forget the accumulative effect, will you?" He nodded and left the room. Anna raised alarmed eyes to Bill. "Accumulative effect?" Bill nodded. "Even now, we can't be sure that what he's taking from you isn't accumulating a quantity of poisonous by-products in his system. But it's a risk we've got to take—

he'll have every test we can think of for it, every day. And frankly, I think it's a fairly distant possibility."

The next few days were to prove him right. The most exhaustive tests made on little Dracula—Drac, most of them were calling him—now exhibited him as a thriving child, his listlessness vanished, becoming rosy and lively, even naughty. Anna wondered how extra-terrestrial mothers disciplined their children—a smack on the bottom seemed to work wonders, even for a visitor from the stars. It was impossible to think of Drac as a four-month-old; various physical attributes of his bore out Bill's estimate of his age, or whatever its equivalent might be in the alien calendar; but his quickly adapting intelligence sparkled inhumanly at times, and acquired sophistications from adult company far in advance of the progress any ordinary child might make. Human replacements for Anna were extremely difficult to find, especially since the whole project was surrounded with a thick mist of security precautions. The reproduction of the exact characteristics of Anna's blood proved possible; but the difficulty of finding or creating an artificial substance which would exactly simulate the texture of her skin to Drac's sensitive lips seemed insuperable. The fluid always came through the substitute fabrics too slowly or too freely, and Drac choked, or fretted and whined alternately. So human replacements, willing to spell Anna, whenever the medical team thought it necessary, were an absolute essential. But the uncontrollable inborn repulsion for a creature that lived on blood ruled out most of the women that Behrens managed to collect from various secret establishments whose personnel had passed the necessary security tests. Of those who found the sight of Drac sufficiently appealing to make them even consider the idea, one fainted at the touch of the strange little mouth; one, a confidential secretary, recently widowed, with young children whom she worked to support, said, "It's no good, Mr. Whitney." White and shaking, she put the baby down. "I want to try, I really want to; but I can't stand it." Bill nodded; the girl left the room. The search for substitutes continued, and in the end, besides Anna, Drac had two nurses. One was Joan, a distant cousin of Bill's, a placid girl, brown-haired and brown-

eyed, a research chemist of considerable ability and a large family; the other was a woman of thirty-five or so, who had just had her fourth illegitimate child. She was ideally healthy but mentally subnormal.

Anna by now had become almost accustomed to the dreamlike world in which a house was run for her, her family fed and cared for, while she spent her time eating and sleeping and having her blood-supply restored by transfusions, injections, and doses of various substances.

"Like a cow kept perpetually in milk," she said once to Joan.

Joan looked at her sideways.

"Bill wanted to become a vet at one time," she remarked. "He's always been rather fond of cows." And Anna unaccountably felt herself blushing a ridiculous crimson.

The household in the country seat of the Department of Mines settled down into a peaceful enough routine, shaken from time to time by the comings and goings of various highly placed naval, military, and government personages from unnamed but obviously majestic institutions.

Bill was depressed.

"It's so frustrating," he complained to Anna one day, "here we are with the biggest box of secrets ever, all locked up in the person of one small child who can't communicate them. If his race are advanced enough to have achieved interstellar flight, they can obviously come and fetch him. Question is, will they know about him? I don't imagine there can be hundreds of surgically altered adult Dracs about on our planet, but it's something that has to be borne in mind, and, boy, are those military types bearing it in mind! If they have a sort of colony on Earth, they would have an extremely effective way of keeping tabs on one another, obviously, and it's almost certain that some 'aunt' or 'uncle' would have turned up to collect Drac before now. There's been a constant watch on your house, Anna, and no one has visited there, except acquaintances of yours we could check on, or tradesmen. No, the odds are that the dead pair of aliens and Drac were landed here on their own, for some reason. Unlikely they'd use a couple with a child as spies, for hostile purposes, but we know nothing about their logic, and it's possible. They might be

merely research workers. Sidney likes that one—me too."

"Studying for a degree in the culture of a backward planet," Anna laughed, looking out across the green peacefulness of the wide lawns. They were sitting on a grey stone seat in the garden, in the very early morning. The sky was as blue and clear as bottomless water, and the scented sting of woodsmoke rose nostalgically to them from a clearing in the woods below.

"Or maybe, Bill, just a holiday? Because this is really rather a lovely Earth, and it's worth a bit of plastic surgery to spend a while there."

"And of course that exotic Earth food," Bill grinned back. "Unmatchable cuisine."

"That reminds me, Drac is getting much too fat, and he has a very definite tendency to wind. Sidney said that they've run enough tests to think about introducing one of two solids into him in a little while. He brought up the most enormous burp you ever heard yesterday, and Robbie said, 'Mum, if he do that more he burst!' "

Bill, in a sudden fit of resolution, put an arm about her shoulder; a discreet cough from behind him revealed Sidney Behrens looking meditatively at the view of distant blue hills. Anna, her face flaming, jumped to her feet, and Bill, scowling at Behrens, began to follow her example, but Behrens waved them both down again, and sat down himself. He looked old and tired, as he bent his face over the pipe he was filling.

"Something new about the baby," he grunted, puffing out evil-smelling clouds. "Accident, really. Might never have discovered it before they turned up. Not the sort of thing we should ever have tested for."

"What are you gabbling about?" demanded Bill impatiently. "Before who turned up?"

Behrens did not answer him directly. At last he said, "The local police have been setting up radar traps for motorists in this area."

Bill and Anna stared blankly at him.

"They found," went on Behrens, "that they were getting quite a respectable signal on the set, before they even started transmitting. They turned the set around for maximum; then they took a couple more bearings; and the

upshot was that next day we had a sergeant and a constable on our doorstep, enquiring politely if we kept our radar set on day and night, and if we'd mind turning it off for a bit so that they could get on with their trapping. Our head security man was very worried; he pulled strings with their chief inspector, and then got in touch with Military Security and asked them to bring along a directional receiver. He didn't like the idea of anyone having a private radar set he didn't know about. They came during the night. We found that Drac is transmitting radar frequency signals. As far as we can see, there's some sort of sub-miniaturized transmitter, artificially implanted in the flesh of Drac's right buttock—aerial probably lying along the spine. Frequency of about 1500 Mc. They're getting a re-examination of those bodies—kept 'em preserved."

Anna shuddered, and Bill put his arm firmly back round her. She found it enormously comforting.

"Pity they didn't find it before—of course, they don't slice into every fragment of a specimen. Well, Bill, what's your guess? Signals to the moon?"

"Too far of course," said Bill slowly. "About—what? About 200 miles or more, Sidney? To a scout-ship, or a colony-ship, just up there, out of reach of our satellites? Ideal way of keeping tabs on people you've dropped on Earth, isn't it? I wonder if the signal stops automatically with death—there'd be some way of finding out if disaster had overtaken them. They may know that the baby is the only one alive—that he's being cared for—and loved." He glanced at Anna.

"They may only check once in a while," said Behrens contemplatively. "Think they've been keeping out of our way, because they're afraid of what we may do? Not likely, really, with all the power they have. Don't want interference with whatever they're doing. If they are enemies—well, they could have taken over the earth before. From the technique of it all, they've been doing this for years. Perhaps we've met them, centuries back—it might account for some of the vampire legends, and they're not risking more misunderstanding and hate and fear. But this—this nursing of a child of theirs by a woman of our race, it may make a difference—" he broke off and made a gesture

of impatience. "Oh, what's the use of speculating—we haven't a grain of knowledge to go on."

"So now," murmured Anna, leaning back into the firmness of Bill's hold, "we wait."

"We wait," echoed Bill.

The hollow bowl of the sky beyond the hills suddenly rang and resounded to a soft, unimaginably vast thunder, too mighty for immediate belief, too majestic to bring with it fear.

— DAPHNE CASTELL

PLAGUE FROM SPACE

by Harry Harrison

The story so far:

When the spaceship PERICLES returns from Jupiter and lands in New York City it bears an unexpected and unwanted cargo—a disease as deadly and terrible as it is alien. Dr. Sam Bertolli, who was there when the first victim of the plague emerged from the ship, is deeply involved in the fight against the disease aided by Dr. Nita Mendel, a pathologist. The battle is desperate—and useless—for the alien infection reacts to no known treatment. With the disease (spread with deadly speed by birds) travelling at an intimidating rate and the population getting out of control, the first glimmer of hope comes from a doctor up-state who reports that he has effected a cure. Sam Bertolli leaves Bellevue Hospital to contact the doctor. . . .

SEVEN

The green and white police copter had landed on the copter port on the twenty-fifth floor setback and the door was open, waiting for Sam when he came out of the elevator. A police sergeant, a negro with skin almost as dark as his uniform, an old New Yorker, stood in the doorway. He jumped down and helped Sam load in his medical kit, then slammed the door. The jets at the tips of the long copter blades began to whistle and the floor shuddered with their acceleration as the machine hauled itself into the air, swung in a tight arc and headed north. Once they were airborne the sergeant dropped into a seat and watched the rooftops of Manhattan stream by below. The vertical slabs of the midtown business section gave way to the grass and tree-dotted residential areas, then the blue of the big lake in Harlem Park that had been blasted out of the heart of the old slum area. Just north of the park the silvery threads of the east and west side monorail

lines met and crossed. When the copter swung out in a wide arc over the Hudson River the sergeant turned away from the window and looked at Sam.

"You're Dr. Bertolli," he said, "and the commissioner, himself, told me I was to take you up to this spot in Orange county and bring you back in one piece. He didn't say why—is it still Top Secret?"

"No," Sam said, "I imagine he was just afraid of rumours getting started before we found out the truth. But there is supposed to be a patient up there, the local doctor says he has cured him of Rand's disease . . ."

"The plague from space?" the pilot said, half turning his head to listen. "You catch it you're dead, every time, that's what I heard?"

Sam caught the sergeant's eye and the big policeman smiled and shrugged. "The pilot's name is Forson, and in addition to having big ears he has a big mouth and he is a lousy pilot, but I understand he was born back there in the sticks where we are going so we'll need him."

"For a city slicker you got a lot to learn, sarge," the pilot said, lifting the copter as they passed above the towers of the George Washington Bridge. "That's just my country-boy curiosity that made me listen in on your top-level conversation. Someday I'll be a sergeant and chew out the help too. Is that straight, Doc, about there being a guy that was cured?"

"That's what we're going there to find out." Sam looked at the two policemen, doing their job with quiet efficiency, and decided that telling the truth was the wisest course. "So far there is no cure for Rand's disease, if someone gets it they die. So you can realize the importance of this. We have to find the right place and bring the patient and the doctor out."

"Know that country like the back of my hand," the pilot said, his face immobile, his eyes invisible behind the large sunglasses. "I come from Stony Point, great historical spot where we licked the British, and I've been all over those woods up there. I'll drop you right into the centre of Stonebridge."

"Don't drop us, land us," the sergeant said coldly.

"A figure of speech, Sarge, that's all it was. I'll take

you to the town, then all we have to do is find the right house."

At Haverstraw they turned away from the river and flew over the tree-covered slopes and the holiday lakes, all deserted now.

"Coming up," Forson said. "That's 17A below and the next turnoff leads up to Stonebridge, the farmhouse could be anywhere along the road here."

Dropping lower the copter swung into a course above the narrow side road and followed it towards a cluster of buildings that was visible ahead. There were no cars on the road, and even the sidewalks in the centre of town were empty. They passed over it and when they reached the outskirts, on the far side, they saw a thread of smoke rising from beyond a grove of trees.

"That could be it," the pilot said, tapping the typewritten message taped above the control panel. "Says here farm near Stonebridge and a fire will be burning so we can find it by the smoke . . ."

As they cleared the stand of silver birches they had a clear view of the smoking remains of a farmhouse and barn. A few cows and chickens ran wildly when the copter appeared, but there were no human figures.

"I don't like the looks of this," the sergeant said. "That house is still smouldering and there's no one around. I wonder if it's the one we want?"

"No way of telling from up here," Forson said, tilting the machine into a tight circle. "Want to go down or swing around the town first?"

The animals had fled and the clearing around the farmhouse was still deserted.

"Around the town first, nothing much moving here and we can always come back. All right with you, doctor?"

"Of course. There doesn't seem to be anything that we can do here and there is no indication that it is the house we are looking for."

"Up ahead, more smoke," the pilot said as they passed west of the settlement. He followed a rutted farm road to a clearing where a white, frame house stood. A man was in the yard waving up at them and a trickle of smoke rose from the chimney.

"This looks more like it," the sergeant said. He squinted into the sun as they turned and automatically loosened his recoilless .50 in its holster. "Is there enough room to set down there?"

"Enough room to put down five of these jobs. Here we go."

The man below took shelter in the doorway of the farm as the copter settled straight down, a billowing circle of dust and weeds blowing out from below it. They touched gently and rocked on the wheels: Sam reached for the door handle but the sergeant put his hand on his shoulder.

"I think I'll go out first, doctor. The town was too quiet, and that house that burned down—there's just the smell of trouble around here. Stay here and keep an eye on the bus, Forson."

The pilot clicked off the jets and nodded. "You're just not used to the country, Sarge. It's always quiet like this." He grunted. "Why do you think I came to the city?"

The sergeant jumped down and walked slowly towards the man who came out of the farmhouse and waved again, a grey haired man who wore old-fashioned suspenders over a white shirt.

"Come in," he called out. "I'm Dr. Stissing, I'm the one who called up, the patient is inside."

The sergeant gave him a quick look in passing and just nodded, then went into the house. He came out a few moments later and called across to the copter.

"This is the right place, there's a man in bed here."

Sam was waiting with his black bag and climbed down. Stissing looked a little bewildered, rubbing at the white stubble on his jaw. In his late seventies Sam guessed. He shook hands.

"I'm Dr. Bertolli, Bellevue Hospital. I'd like to see your patient if I may."

"Yes, doctor, of course. Right through there. I'm very glad to see you, very glad indeed. I've been up two days and a night and I'm not used to doing that any more. But Hadley in there phoned me, very frightened and he should have been, because I recognized Rand's disease when I walked in and he knew himself that he had it.

I've been treating him, here alone ever since, and I have the fever licked and he's on the mend . . ."

"Do you mind if I have that curtain opened?" Sam asked. The room was dark and the man on the bed only a dim outline.

"Surely, of course, just resting Hadley's eyes."

The sergeant pulled up the curtain and Sam stood next to the bed looking down at the middle-aged man with the red boils on his face: he put the telltale against his wrist.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Hadley?" he asked.

"Hadley's my first name. And I felt a whole lot better in my time, I tell you. Felt worse until the doc came."

Sam opened Hadley's pyjama jacket, there were one or two boils scattered on his chest, then palpated his armpits: the lymph nodes were swollen.

"That hurts," Hadley said.

"Don't worry, you'll be all right."

"Then he is cured," Dr. Stissing said, his words tumbling one over the other. "I know it, I told him, these new antibiotics. The plague, I mean Rand's disease . . ."

"Hadley's a lucky man," Sam said tiredly, "he never had Rand's disease. This is common furunculosis complicated by a lymphatic infection which the antibiotics have brought under control."

"But Rand's disease, the symptoms, the fever, all the same. I've been practising long enough . . ."

"How long have you been ill, Hadley?" Sam asked.

"Couple of days. Fever hit me right after the rocket landed, like I told the doc. Felt like I was dying."

"That was the fever part—but how long have you had the boils?"

"Came at the same time. Of course I felt them coming on a few days earlier. Then the fever hit and I knew I had the plague . . ."

"Not the plague from space, Hadley," Dr. Stissing said, sitting down heavily on the wooden kitchen chair by the head of the bed. "Just a bad case of the boils. Boils and a fever. I'm . . . sorry, doctor, about getting you up here from the city—"

The sudden crackle of small arms fire sounded from outside the house, from the front, broken by the heavy boom of a recoilless handgun. The sergeant ran from the room, drawing his pistol as he went. Sam was right behind him.

"Stay here!" Sam shouted over his shoulder to the bewildered doctor. He reached the parlour just as the sergeant threw open the front door. A hail of small arms fire splintered the door frame and punched holes in the floor. Sam had been under fire before, often enough to have developed all the correct instincts: he dived and rolled at the same time, out of the line of fire through the door. The sergeant lay crumpled in the doorway, his fingers still outstretched towards the bulk of the recoilless pistol which lay on the porch outside. A few more shots splattered around the door as Sam grabbed him by the legs and pulled him away from the opening. The right shoulder of his uniform was spotted with blood and Sam tore it open: there was the entrance hole where a small calibre bullet had penetrated. It must have been a magnum because the hydrostatic shock had knocked the sergeant out and, as Sam rolled him over to look at the exit wound, also small and bleeding only slightly, the sergeant opened his eyes and tried to sit up. Sam pressed him back.

"Take it easy—you've been hit."

"The hell you say!" The sergeant pushed Sam's hand away and struggled to a sitting position. "What's happening out there?"

Sam looked quickly from the side of the window, shielded by a curtain, and pulled his head back before the shots crashed through the glass. It was long enough for him to see the dark forms of the men who were running towards the copter, and to see the body of the pilot hanging halfway out of the doorway.

"Don't try nothing!" A voice called from outside. "You don't shoot at us and we're not going to shoot at you." Sam rose behind the curtain and the sergeant struggled up next to him. The men had pushed the limp pilot to the ground and were climbing in. One of them, the one who had been talking, held a young girl by the arm, shielding himself behind her body. She was in her twenties and

the way her head hung and the way her clothing was torn left no doubt as to what had happened to her.

"Try anything and I'll shoot the girl," the man shouted. "So help me I'll kill her. We don't want no more trouble, we just want to get away from the plague. Andy here can fly your whirly, learned in the army, and we're going to take it and get out. Be smart and no one's going to get hurt."

He walked backwards towards the door, dragging the girl with him. The jets whistled to life and the big blades began to move, faster and faster. When the copter began to rock on its landing gear the man in the doorway hurled the girl from him and climbed quickly inside. Sam and the sergeant jumped back as a hail of shots tore through the window. They had taken the pilot's recoilless .50: a foot wide piece of wood was blasted from the frame.

Slowly, ignoring the bullets that crashed into the wooden planking around him, the sergeant walked out on the porch and reached down with his left hand to pick up his pistol. The rain of fire stopped as the copter rose straight up.

Carefully, in no hurry, the sergeant walked clear of the porch, flicked off the safety and raised the pistol straight-armed before him. He waited until the copter swung away and was no longer over the girl who still lay face down in the yard, then dropped the pistol sights onto the target and pulled the trigger.

Three times the recoilless .50 boomed, coughing out its small tangent flames, and the half-inch steel-cored slugs tore chunks of aluminium from the copter's body. The whistle of the jets died and the blades slowed. Two more shots boomed out as it slanted sideways and fell into the maple grove behind the house and burst into flames. No one came out of the wreck.

"They were trying to leave the plague area," the sergeant said, as he struggled to get the gun back into his holster on his right hip with his left hand. "So it meant I had to get the copter too." He looked unsmilingly at the dead policeman. "And Forson was a good cop." His expression changed suddenly to a mirthless smile as he tapped an enamel and gold decoration that he wore above

his shield. "First place in the pistol tournament—firing with *either* hand." He started to sag and Sam caught him, led him towards the porch.

"Sit down and shut up while I put something on that hole."

Legs sprawled before him, the sergeant sat silently while Sam sprinkled sulpha on the bullet wounds then slapped on self-adhesive bandages. Dr. Stissing came hesitantly onto the porch.

"Finish this dressing, will you, doctor," Sam said, climbing to his feet. "I want to look at the others."

The pilot was dead, the back of his skull torn away by a rifle bullet. The tanks on the copter blew up just then with a muffled thud and no one had emerged from the crumpled cabin: the men inside were beyond his help. Sam went over to the girl who was still lying face in the dirt and sobbing painfully.

"I'm a doctor—" he said, but when he touched her shoulder she shivered away from him and only sobbed harder. Sam wanted to move her into the house and examine her, but without using force: perhaps Stissing might be able to help.

"Doctor," he called, "do you know this girl?"

Stissing, blinking nearsightedly, came down from the porch and bent to look at the girl's face.

"Looks like the Leslie girl—" he moved her hands away from in front of her face. "Come on Katy, stand up and let's go into the house, there's no sense in lying out here."

With the doctor's gentle urging she climbed to her feet and pulled her torn cotton dress about her, then let him help her inside. They passed the sergeant, sitting on the steps and scowling fiercely at the wreck of the copter, and into the parlour where Katy dropped onto the couch. Sam went to find some blankets while Stissing made an examination.

"Nothing serious, physical that is," Stissing said afterwards, out of the girl's hearing. "Scratches, contusions, what you might expect in a rape and assault, I've had them before. That's not my big worry. The girl saw her father killed, he's a widower and they live alone, the other side of town. These men broke into the house, looters she

said, from somewhere in Jersey, drunk and nasty and when they started to fool around with her, her father swung on them. Killed him, right in front of her, set fire to the house, probably burnt, I never saw or heard of anything like this before, not around here . . ."

"We saw the house on the way in, levelled to the ground. Something will have to be done about these patients of yours."

"Phone's out," the sergeant said, coming out of the house. "Not the wire either, I checked that. We better be going."

"You're in no condition to go anywhere . . ."

"It'll take more than that little bullet hole to strand me up here in the woods."

"You can take my car," Stissing said, "it's in the barn. I'll stay here with Hadley and the girl until you can get some help from the county hospital. They can bring the car back."

"Sorry, doctor," the sergeant said. "But those bowbs got to your car first. Pulled out the ignition. Only way out of here is by walking."

Sam thought about it for a moment. "You're probably right. There can't be many of these looting gangs around or we would have heard about it, so we shouldn't run into any more. You'll be safe enough here, Dr. Stissing, just keep the windows and doors locked and we'll get some help to you as soon as we have contacted the local police. Let me get my bag, sergeant, then we can go."

"One thing first, doctor—if you don't mind. Could you undo my belt and slip my holster around to the left side so I can get at it easier? Be a big help."

They walked in the centre of the road, going back towards the town. The first house they passed had all the shades pulled down and was sealed up: no one came to the door, even when they knocked loudly. At the next farm, a red brick building set back from the road, they had a response even before they knocked—a gun barrel protruded from the partly open window on the porch.

"Just stop there," the unseen man behind the gun called out.

"I'm a police officer," the sergeant said with cold anger. "Now put that weapon away before you get into trouble."

"How do I know you are? You got a city cop's uniform on, but I never seen you before. You could of stolen it. Move on—I don't want trouble."

"We want to use your phone, that's all," Sam said.

"Phone's out, trouble at the exchange."

"Do you have a car?"

"I got a car and it's staying right here in case I need it, now get moving! You may have the plague from space for all that I know and I'm not talking any more—move!" The gun barrel wiggled up and down.

"Strategic retreat," Sam said, taking the angry sergeant by the arm and pulling him away. "There's nothing here worth getting shot for."

"Rubes!" the sergeant grumbled.

The town of Stonebridge was sealed as tight as the farmhouses and there were no cars in sight. They continued through it and towards the highway just a mile down the road. They heard the sound at the same time, coming from somewhere ahead, and they stopped, the sergeant with his hand on his gun.

"I've done enough duck hunting to recognize that—it's a shotgun."

"Two of them—sounds like a private war."

"If you don't mind, doctor, I'll walk in front since I've got the only weapon."

They went along the shoulder of the road, close to the trees, as silently as they could. There was another farm ahead, half seen through the trunks of the oak trees, and running figures. A woman screamed and another shot sounded. The sergeant had his gun out and a cold smile on his face as he slipped forward.

"Looks like this time we're here when the trouble is just starting . . ." He raised his gun.

There was a truck parked by the side of the road, it's outline through the leaves strangely familiar to Sam. He ran forward and deflected the sergeant's gun arm.

"What are you doing? Those are looters . . ."

"I don't think so—isn't that an army half-track over there?"

Once around the bend they could see the olive drab truck clearly, with the leafy branch framed globe insignia of the UN stencilled on its armoured side. They passed it and turned into the farmyard where the screams had turned into a gasping sob. A burly corporal was embarrassedly holding a woman by the shoulders while she cried into the apron raised before her face. A lieutenant was supervising two soldiers who were spreading poison grain in the chicken run behind the house. Next to it was another wire enclosure with an open gate and on the ground outside the scattered bodies of a number of turkeys, while another of the birds was perched on the branch of the oak tree to which the ropes of a children's swing were tied. A soldier below the tree raised and fired a repeating shotgun and the pellets tore the bird from its perch. The shot echoed away into silence among the trees until the woman's muffled sobbing was the only sound. The officer turned around when they approached: like the other soldiers he had a New Zealand flash on his shoulder. His eyes jumped quickly from the bandaged police sergeant to Sam's white clothes and black bag.

"If you are a physician I should say your arrival is well timed. The farm wife here—" the lieutenant pointed to the woman who was still sobbing uncontrollably.

"Has she been injured?" Sam asked.

"No, not physically, but she's been hysterical, bit of a shock or whatever you call it. We've been running into this sort of trouble all along the line, these rural people take a very dim view of our killing off their stock. This woman opened the run and released those turkeys, then tried to stop my men. At least the farmer here is being reasonable, some of them have attempted to stop us with guns, he's in the house with the children."

Sam looked at the woman and while the soldier was still holding her he swabbed her shoulder and administered an intramuscular injection of Denilin, the quick-acting sedative. By the time he had led her into the house she was staggering and, with her grim faced husband's aid, put her to bed.

"She'll sleep at least twelve hours," he said. "If she is still bad when she wakes up give her one of these,

one pill will keep her calmed down for twenty-four hours." He put a small bottle of psychotropic tablets by the bed.

"They killing all our chickens and turkeys, doctor, they got no right."

"It's not a matter of right—it's a matter of necessity. Those birds carry the disease that could kill your entire family. And you've been given a receipt, they'll be payed for or replaced after the emergency."

"Just a piece of paper," the farmer muttered.

Sam started to say something, then thought better of it. He went out and found the police sergeant and the army officer in conversation, bent over a map.

"The sergeant has been telling me about your troubles," the lieutenant said. "I wish I could provide you with transportation back to the city, but I'm afraid I can't, I have only this single vehicle. But there is a compromise possible. The farms here are close together and I can take my men to the next one or two of them on foot while the driver runs you over to this spot," he pointed to the map. "Your Dewey Thruway passes right here at Southfields and there should be a number of convoys going south and you can flag down one of the lorries. Will that suit you?"

"Yes, that will be fine. One other thing, I want to send a message back to my hospital, and I'm sure the sergeant wants to contact his squad too, but the phones aren't operating. Do you have a radio in your truck?"

"We have, but it can only send and receive on the army command channels. You can't talk directly but I could have the messages relayed for you."

"Suits me," the sergeant said, opening his notebook. He tore a sheet out and handed it to Sam, then carefully printed a message of his own with his left hand. Sam thought for a moment, this would be read by a lot of people and he did not want to be too specific about the reasons for the report. He wrote:

Dr. McKay Bellevue Hospital New York City—Results negative case of common furunculosis. Bertolli.

It was dusk when they reached the thruway and the UN corporal used his flashlight to signal a convoy of food

trucks. A command car stopped with guns ready since there had been more than one attempted looting—and then drove them back slowly to the city. It was after nine before Sam reached the hospital and checked back in.

"There's a message for you doctor," the girl said, flipping rapidly through her file until she found the envelope with his name on it. He tore it open and found a single slip of paper inside with a rapid scrawl in thick marking pencil on it.

CALL ME AT ONCE EXT. 782 89 NITA

There was an air of urgency in the handwriting that struck a warning note. He went to one of the booths in the hall and quickly dialled the number.

"Hello," he said when the image cleared, "I have your message . . ."

"Sam, are you alone?" she asked, and he couldn't help noticing that her eyes were wider open than normal and that there was a thin shrill to the edges of her words.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Can you come here at once? It's laboratory 1242."

"I'm on my way—but what is it about?"

"I—I can't tell you on the phone, it's too terrible!"

She broke the connection and her features swam, melted and disappeared.

EIGHT

Nita was waiting in the open door of the lab when he came out of the elevator and she let him in without saying a word, then locked the door securely behind him.

"You're being very secretive—can you tell me now what is going on?"

"I'll show you, Sam, everything that I have been doing and what the results have been, then let you decide for yourself."

"You said on the phone that there was something terrible, what did you mean?"

"Please," she asked, and Sam saw that when she clamped her lips shut they were so tight they were white. "Just look first and make your own mind up, without asking me any more questions." She pointed to the racked test tubes and specimens. "I've been doing graded tests for the team on

the resistance of the Rand virus, just getting empirical results that can be fed to the computers so that they might be useful to the other researchers. This has left me with some spare time and I have been doing some tests on my own, consecutive isolation passages and repeated transfers to tissue cultures."

"There must be other teams doing this?"

"There are, I didn't mind duplicating somebody else's work since I was doing this outside of the assigned tests. I guess, what I was really hoping, was that after repeated transfers the virus might be weakened or changed and we could treat it successfully, but it stays just as deadly as ever. But I did find out something else . . ."

"What?"

"Just check the results first." Close-lipped, she handed him a folder and waited patiently while he flipped through the sheets.

"Everything looks in order, as you said—wait a moment, this is an interesting series. You were alternating tissues, first bird, then human?"

"Yes, I used the laboratory birds, pigeons, and Detroit-6 human tissue culture, first one and then the other. I made seven transfers in all and ended up with Rand-beta virus from the bird, still just as deadly as ever, only it had one factor changed, something I had not counted on and only discovered by accident. In there—"

Nita pointed to a sealed isolation cage and Sam pulled the covering cloth away and looked inside. A dog lay on its side on the floor of the cage, panting heavily. Through the thin fur covering its belly could be seen round, reddened swellings. He dropped the cover and looked back to Nita, his face drained of blood.

"You've made the tests—?" she nodded. "Then, this dog, it has Rand's disease."

"Yes, Rand-gamma I suppose we should call it, something new. None of the other strains of Rand, neither alpha nor beta will infect canine, not even after six transfers from human to bird. But here, on the seventh transfer, something new. Something incredible . . ."

"I've never heard of anything like it!" Sam was pacing the floor, angrily, burning with frustration at this last de-

velopment. Rand's disease was an alien plague, inhuman —was there no way to stop it?

"Have you tried to find out susceptibility of other organisms to this Rand-gamma? Does McKay know what you have found out?"

She shook her head. "No, I've gone just this far and—then I was frightened. I left the message for you, if you weren't back soon I was going to call Dr. McKay. What shall we do, Sam?"

"See McKay as soon as possible, tell him what you've done. He's not going to like it—do you realize what this will mean?"

"Yes," she said so faintly he could barely hear her. She dropped into a chair.

"If we stop the spread of the disease in birds we should have it licked—but what if we can't stop it before it turns into Rand-gamma? Then it will be the dogs, and what after that? These mutations and changes are incredible, they're like nothing we have ever heard of before —they don't follow any earthly pattern. But, is it possible there is an alien pattern they conform to? If we can find it, find its rules, then we can stop it."

"But it's not an alien disease, Sam—it's human, or earthly, whatever you want to call it."

"Now it is, but it came on the ship from Jupiter, it must be a disease from that planet—"

"No, that's been determined already." She riffled through a thick stack of duplicated reports until she found one which she handed to Sam. "You can see for yourself, this is still a preliminary report but it is indicative. They simply cannot get the virus to live under anything resembling Jupiter conditions. When the temperature drops and the pressure is raised the virus dies, long before it reaches the range of the Jupiter atmosphere."

"That's impossible!"

"Everything about this virus is impossible—but it is here. We can't escape that fact. What can we do, Sam, I feel defeated at every turn . . ."

"There's not very much we can do by ourselves—but that's what McKay's team is for. They'll find out the significance of these changes." He took her hands to

help her to her feet, and was aware of how cold they were, while her face was pale under the makeup and her eyes red-rimmed with fatigue. "We'll turn all the results over to him, then you'll get some rest. When was the last time you slept?"

"I've been dozing on the couch here, it's enough—" she looked at herself and bit her lip, then laughed, searching through her purse for a comb. "You're right—it's not enough. I look like a refugee from a horror film. Give me a moment to repair some of the ravages and then we'll go see McKay."

"I'll call and find out if he is in his office."

There was difficulty in getting Dr. McKay's number and Sam hung up and tried again. Twice after this he got busy signals before he finally got through. The call signal buzzed a number of times before the secretary answered it.

"I'm sorry, it is impossible to talk to Dr. McKay, he cannot be disturbed—" she disconnected before Sam had a chance to say a word. She was distraught and seemed to be on the point of tears.

"I wonder what the trouble can be," Sam said, looking at the dark screen. "She seemed very upset about something."

"We'll have to go down and find out," Nita said, putting her notes into a folder. "Though I don't wonder at her cracking a bit, the strain has been simply awful here and it doesn't show any signs of letting up."

The elevator boosted them with a silent rush to the thirty-ninth floor but when the doors opened a murmur of voices pushed in, a chilling novelty in the normally silent hospital. They stepped out just in time to see a stretcher with a white-covered figure being wheeled into the service elevator further down the hall. A small crowd had gathered around the open door of McKay's office and Sam recognized one of the nurses who had shared the same tour with him in the emergency room: he touched her shoulder.

"What happened, Ann?"

"It's Dr. McKay," she looked worried—as well as tired like everyone else in the giant hospital. "He's been overworking, you know—it was so sudden, a coronary thrombosis they think, he just collapsed."

Sam pushed through the crowd at the door and Nita followed him. There were fewer people inside and the secretary was gone, the door to McKay's private office was partly open and Sam could see Eddie Perkins inside, talking on the phone. He knocked quietly and Eddie glanced up and waved them in, signalling them to shut the door at the same time.

"Yes, of course," Perkins said into the phone, "we'll keep going here and I'll keep you informed of Dr. McKay's condition. Right then, good-bye." He disconnected and scratched a cigarette out of the open package on the desk before him. "It's a mess, Sam, everyone acts like it is the end of the world with McKay out of the battle, they think he is going to lick Rand's disease all by himself and the team is just sort of a Greek chorus to cheer him on." The phone whirred and he gave it a distasteful look and put his cigarette out. It was the Governor of New York State and Eddie gave him three minutes of solid reassurance before pleading the rush of business and hanging up.

"Do you see what I mean?" he asked, relighting the bent cigarette.

"You can't blame them," Sam said. "After all McKay did find the answer to Topholm's pachyacria and they expect him to pull another cat out of the same bag. Who is going to take over for him?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. I've been his acting assistant the last few days, so I'm holding on to the strings until something is decided, Chabel and the team heads will be here for a meeting in an hour."

"Well until they decide something you're top man, Eddie."

"Yes," Perkins said thoughtfully, a double stream of smoke coming slowly from his nose, "I imagine I am. In which case—what can I do for you?"

Nita opened the file and passed the sheets across the desk, outlining briefly what she had discovered. Perkins flipped through them while she talked, looking up sharply when she mentioned the dog that had been affected.

"You make it sound pretty bad, Nita." He closed the file and pushed it away from him. "In the morning I'll let one

of the pathologists have a look at this, see what they think. Meantime, thanks for the homework, we'll see if we can put it to some use."

"Eddie, you don't seem to get the importance of this," Sam said, smiling to take the edge off his words. "If Rand's disease can be passed on to dogs we're in for some bad trouble. Birds as vectors are bad enough——"

"I told you I'd take care of it, Sam, now relax." There was an edge to Perkins' voice now.

"There's nothing to relax about, dogs are going to get this disease and if they are then now is the time to take some measures."

"Like starting to kill all the dogs around—birds aren't bad enough? Do you know the trouble we've been running into with that?"

"The trouble isn't important. If we have to kill the dogs we'll kill them—better now than after they've been infected."

"Dr. Bertolli, let's not forget one thing." Perkins' voice was empty of tone, his long face cold and drawn. "You are an intern in this hospital and not one who makes decisions. This will be taken care of—"

"Come off it, Eddie, when we were both students—"

"That will be *enough*!" Perkins crashed his hand down on the desk.

Sam took a long breath and let it out slowly, keeping his temper in check, then climbed to his feet. "Let's go, Nita," he said.

"Just a minute," Perkins said, he was also standing now and leaning forward on his arms, his fists planted squarely on his desk. "You don't know everything that is going on. There are two factors that you happen to be ignorant of, firstly, we have had some success today with a vaccine that may have arrested some early cases of Rand's. Secondly, we are not going to allow this disease seven passages through different hosts as Dr. Mendel has done. That's a lab exercise and we're working with the real world. We're controlling the spread of the disease and wiping out the vectors. If things keep going as they are and—even if all the cases we now have die—we'll still

lick it by wiping out the reservoirs of infection. So don't rock the boat."

"Is that all, Dr. Perkins?" Sam asked, no sign of his anger showing.

"That's all. You stick to your job and I'll stick to mine." The phone whirred and he sat down to answer it. They left.

They said nothing until they had gone down the hall and were waiting for the elevator. Nita looked worriedly at his tightly clenched jaw and could feel the knotted muscles in the forearm when she touched it.

"Sam—please, don't let it bother you so. The others will see . . ."

"The others will see nothing if he doesn't show the report to them! He's playing politics again, don't you realize that? Don't rock the damned boat—what a wonderful way to practise medicine!"

"Yet he's right in a way, as long as things are going smoothly outside and they're bringing the cases under control . . ."

"But they're not going smoothly, I've seen enough of what's going on to realize that. And that's not the point, smooth or not, we must take the right measures or this plague will spread to every corner of the world. Nita, don't wait for him to make up his mind—send a copy of your findings to Prof. Chabel at World Health."

"I couldn't, that would be going over his head!"

"Try not to be so sweet and civilized, that's a luxury we are going to have to forego for a while. Let Chabel know."

He turned as the elevator doors opened before him, but before he could enter an orderly stepped out with a white-wrapped bundle.

"Dr. Mendel," he said, "I've been looking for you. They asked me to give this to you special."

"What is it?" she asked.

"A dog. Dead dog, that's all I know."

A chilling premonition sent Sam's hand out to pull back a concealing fold of cloth, to look at the body only dimly seen through the many layers of sealed polythene.

But it was not so well concealed that he couldn't see the raw, ugly, red boils that covered its skin.

NINE

Darkness filled the laboratory, pierced only by the blue-green light from the TV screen that glowed above the work bench, throwing its ghostly illumination over Sam's face and accenting even more the lines of fatigue and the dark shadows under his eyes. He looked at the image on the screen and hated it. The jumbled and fearfully twisted rods of Rand's virus sprawled across the face of the tube, transmitted from the main virology lab, glowing in room after room of the great hospital like some duplicated and demonic icon. Sam yawned and forced his eyes away from it: he should sleep, he was tired enough surely, but sleep would not come. Outside the window a greyness was beginning to seep through the rain that had been falling most of the night. He should have slept. Nita had leaned her head forward onto her arm while they had been talking and just that easily and quickly had been asleep, the wealth of her hair spread out on the table. She breathed lightly, her half-turned face lovely in its composure.

An announcing signal pinged and the scene on the screen shifted and changed, yet did not change. The latticework of thin rods still stretched from edge to edge: the speaker hummed.

"Identification is positive, the furuncles of the specimen, the dog, sent in from Connecticut, contain the virus of Rand's disease, it's on the screen now. Until further tests have been run on the viability of this virus in other mediums and hosts we are tentatively assigning it the title of Rand-gamma . . ."

Nita sat back in her chair, straightening her hair while she listened intently to the voice, blinking a bit with her sleep-filled eyes at the image on the screen.

"It came too fast," Sam said, his fists clenched in impotent anger. "There should have been more time before the change took place, before the disease passed through seven different hosts. It's been less than a week now."

"Yet it is happening, we can't escape the fact—"

"There are a lot of facts we can't escape, right out there in the city." Sam was on his feet, pacing the length of the room, tired but too angry to sit still. "The entire plague

area is falling apart, sliding back to savagery, I've been watching it happen. I've never realized before what a thin veneer civilization is—it has taken us centuries to develop but only days to lose."

"Aren't you being unfair, Sam, people are just afraid?"

"Of course I know they're afraid, I'm afraid myself and I have more to fear because I know just how easily Rand's disease is spread and how helpless we are against it. But I also know what they seem to have forgotten, that not our strongest but *only* hope is our brains, our ability to think before acting. Yet out there people are acting without thinking and in doing it they are condemning themselves to certain death and trying to drag the rest of the world down with them. They riot and they get killed. They ignore the sound advice given to them and shelter their miserable chickens and parakeets. Wait until we try and kill their dogs? Not my old Rex, my dear old friend!— when Rex is really the damned enemy now who is going to catch a disease that will kill him and his idiot master. But before they die they are going to panic, I've been watching it and it's a disgusting sight because there are no people on a mob, just animals. I've watched them rape and kill and try to get away and eventually someone will escape, we won't be able to stop it. Someone will break out of the quarantine zone, or an infected dog will get through and the disease will keep spreading. People!"

Her voice was as quiet as his had been booming.

"You can't blame people for having emotions, Sam—it's only human——"

"I'm as human as the next man," he said, stopping in front of her, "and I have just as many emotions. I know how those people out there feel, because I hear the same little lost simian screaming in my own heart. But what do we have intelligence for if we can't use it to control or guide the emotions?"

"Just like a man to talk about guiding emotions while your stamping up and down the floor in a rage."

He opened his mouth to answer, then stopped and smiled instead.

"You're right of course. All my raging isn't going to accomplish a thing. It's the times I suppose, with all our

emotions layed bare and exposed like a raw nerve. The next thing you know I'll be telling you how lovely you look sitting there in the blue light of Rand's virus with your hair all in a tangle."

"Does it look awful?" she asked worriedly, trying to pat it back into position.

"No, leave it," he said and reached out to take her hand away. When his skin touched hers something changed and she glanced up at him quickly and he saw a reflection of what he was feeling mirrored in her eyes. When he pulled at her hand to draw her to her feet he found that she was already rising.

When he lowered his face he found her lips waiting.

A kiss is a contact, a union, an exchange. It is unknown to certain races and tribes, while others know it and consider it with disgust. They all suffer a loss. A kiss can be a cold formula, or a token of familiar relationship or a prelude to the act of love. It can also be a revelation in an unspoken, secret language of feelings that have never been expressed in words.

She lowered her face against his chest afterwards and he knew that she was smiling while he spoke because he traced the contours of her lips with his fingers.

"I suppose—all our emotions are closer to the surface now and we say and do things just as we feel them. I have to laugh at myself—"

"Please don't, Sam!"

"—Well I should laugh at myself. If you only knew how I loathe starry-eyed and out of focus TV love scenes of young things wallowing in a treacly embrace of love at first sight. I think they have demeaned something unaccountably precious by using it for common coinage. I want to be able to say that I love you, Nita, and have you understand it is something vitally different and important."

"But I love you too, so I know exactly how you feel. I suppose it is terrible to say, but I'm almost grateful for Rand's disease and what has happened. Women are selfish, darling. I have the feeling that without the pressure you would just have gone on being one of those silent, busy men, who use their lives up on important things and never

have a moment to consider the frivolous unimportance of women."

"Unimportance!" Her body was alive and vital under his hands.

The phone cut a clear signal through the darkness of the room.

"Damn!" he said angrily, and Nita laughed as she pulled gently away from him.

"I know how you feel," she said, "but I still must answer it."

He smiled back and reluctantly let go as she turned on the lights and went to the phone. The rain had let up a bit, but occasional gusts of wind sent it thrumming against the window as he looked out at the moist greyness of the city seemingly empty of all life. From the twelfth floor here he could see far up First Avenue and the only thing moving was a green and white police car: it slipped into a side street and vanished. There was a mumble of voices behind him, cut off as Nita hung up. When he turned back she was standing and stretching, an enjoyable sight that cheered him a good deal.

"I'm going to wash up and change and find some breakfast," she said. "There's going to be a meeting in an hour, probably another of those council of war things, even Prof. Chabel will be there she said."

"She?"

"Dr. McKay's secretary, though I guess she's Perkins' now."

"Did she mention me, locator knows I'm here?"

"No, she just asked me to come—but of course you're supposed to be there."

"Am I? Just another intern—isn't that what Eddie Perkins called me? at a policy meeting."

"But you must be there, Sam!"

He smiled, a little crookedly. "Oh, I'll be there all right."

It was one of the large meeting rooms, more than ample to hold the people assembled there, roughly thirty in all. Sam recognized most of them, heads of departments, researchers who had been drafted to work on the team, even two uniformed officers of the Public Health Service. Com-

ing through the door he had a sudden feeling of inadequacy at his presumption in coming here, but Nita must have sensed this because she pressed his hand firmly in hers as he helped her into a chair and this kept his mind on the proceedings until he was securely seated. Then it was too late to retreat, nor was it necessary. The people who knew him and happened to catch his eye just nodded or lifted a hand in greeting, while the others took no notice of him at all.

"You are Dr. Bertolli?" a rumbling, accented voice asked from behind him and he rose quickly. The scowling man with the full, black beard and broken nose was familiar to Sam, though he had never met him.

"Yes, I am, Dr. Hattyár, what can I . . ."

"How do you feel?" Hattyár leaned forward until his face was only a few inches from Sam's. In someone else it might have been annoying, but Sam had heard the hospital stories about the Hungarian immunologist; it was generally agreed that he was a genius—his radioactive differentiator had already replaced Ouchterlony's gel precipitation in laboratory procedure—but he was known almost as well for his severe myopia and vanity. He needed corrective lenses badly but refused to admit it or to wear them. His nearsightedness was only a minor handicap in the laboratory, but it did tend to make his social life difficult. "How do you feel?" he repeated, looking at Sam closely.

"Just fatigued, doctor, I've missed a lot of sleep—but nothing else. No symptoms at all of Rand's disease."

"Not so good, a small fever would have helped. You are sure there was no small fever?"

"None, I'm afraid."

"Still, there is some hope. I want some of your serum, I have sera, too much of it, but always from someone who later has died. Perhaps with yours we can isolate antigens . . ."

"Sam—I thought you were on ambulance duty?" The interrupting words were matter-of-fact and cold, but Sam was aware of the enmity behind them. It was Eddie Perkins. He kept his own voice just as noncommittal as he turned.

"Yes, still on ambulance. I was out almost twenty hours last tour. Things aren't any better in the city."

"I see. Yes. Were you asked here?" They faced each other and the only sign of Perkins' real feelings was the cold anger in his eyes.

"No," Sam said, and caught the fleeting edge of a grin of victory.

"Well, then I'm sorry then, Sam, I'm afraid you'll have to—"

"Who the devils are you?" Hattyár boomed, leaning closer and scowling in concentration as he tried to make out the intruder's face.

"I'm Perkins, Dr. Hattyár, Dr. McKay's assistant, I'm taking over for him until . . ."

"Then go take over please, we are busy."

Hattyár wrapped his large hand around Sam's arm and pulled him away from the suddenly red-faced Perkins. Sam felt a fleeting emotion of victory, replaced instantly by the knowledge that this would only magnify his trouble with Perkins.

Prof. Chabel tapped with the gavel and standing groups broke up and found seats around the long table. He sat and stared at the papers before him, squaring them into a neat stack, before he spoke in a voice heavy with the weariness they all felt.

"Firstly, I wish you all to know that this is a World Health meeting, I asked Dr. Perkins, who is seconding for Dr. McKay at the moment, to call you all together to give me an up-to-the-moment briefing. I have been receiving your reports and I must thank you all for keeping me so well informed and up to date. At World Health we have been occupied mostly with controlling the disease vectors and establishing a quarantine area and have left treatment up to local hospital authorities aided by some army teams. But we're reaching the point where we have some major policy decisions to make, and before we do that we want to know exactly where we stand, what you are doing and what you hope to do to control this disease, everything."

When he finished speaking the entire room was silent. Finally Eddie Perkins cleared his throat and looked around.

"Perhaps it might be best if I sum up the present state of our knowledge. Untreated, Rand's disease brings on death after infection in a period of roughly ten to twelve hours, in one hundred percent of the cases. To our knowledge no exceptions have been uncovered so far. However with supportive treatment we can extend that period to almost forty-eight hours. This is hopeful . . ."

"It is not hopeful, it is nothing." Dr. Hattyár's angry rumble interrupted. "It is no cure or treatment, just stretching out the time of dying."

Perkins controlled his temper with an effort. That may be true, Dr. Hattyár, but I am just summing up roughly. Perhaps this might be a good time for you to inform us about the progress of your immunology team."

"Results zero."

"That doesn't tell us very much."

"There is nothing much to tell. Until I can isolate an antibody I can do nothing. Rand's disease is very simple, alpha, beta, gamma, all of them simple in the reactions. The organism either is infected or not. If it is infected it dies. There are no mild forms of the disease and apparently none of the organism affected is capable of doing anything to combat the antigens. They just die."

"Could you tell me, doctor," Chabel asked, "what you think your chances are, or rather what your prospects are of finding the antibody you need?"

"Zero. Unless a wholly new factor is introduced there is nothing that can be done."

This time the silence was even more prolonged, and a general request for further reports brought no response; Perkins had to call on the team heads by name. Many of them were not as frank as Hattyár—or could not bring themselves to be so—but their words added up to the same conclusion.

"If I may be allowed to sum up," Prof. Chabel said, and there was a thin quaver to his voice that was caused by more than fatigue now, "we are not in a very good position. We know where Rand's disease came from, we know how it is spread. We know the first symptoms and we know the final result—which we can only postpone by a few hours at most. We know that none of the infected

organisms can generate antibodies to combat it, antibiotics do not stop it, interferon has only a limited effect, and we have no chemical agents capable of destroying it during the course of the disease without fatally injuring the host as well. We also know, and this fact is the most unusual of all, that Rand's disease can infect certain animals, which in turn can infect their own species or reinfect humans. This is a terrible list of factors, a damning indictment, and about the only thing in our favour is that we can't infect one another."

"We can't—yet . . ." Nita said, then raised her hand towards her mouth as though regretting that she had spoken aloud. Her words were clearly audible in the quiet room and chairs squeaked as everyone turned to look towards her.

"Would you explain that, Dr. Mendel?" Chabel asked frowning.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt—and I have no way of proving it. Call it an unjustified assumption if you want to, but it occurred to me when I had passed Rand-beta through seven hosts and found out that it then became Rand-gamma and could infect canines—"

"Pardon me," Prof. Chabel said, leafing quickly through the papers before him, "but I find no record of these experiments."

"They were not official experiments, professor, not part of any of the planned research, I undertook them on my own and am writing up my notes now."

"Unofficial or not—you should have reported this at once, when you obtained your results!"

"I did want to—" she looked up, then glanced quickly away from Eddie Perkins who was leaning forward his face white and set, "—but it was just last night when I went to see Dr. McKay, he had just been stricken and there was a great deal of confusion. Soon after this the infected dog was discovered in Connecticut and the danger known."

"Confusion or not, there should have been a report. Excuse me, doctor, I'm not criticizing you, I realize that the situation is all confused as well as you do. I just wish to stress again that *anything* that has a bearing on Rand's disease—no matter how trivial it may seem—must be re-

ported to me at once. Now please continue, you seem to feel that eventually Rand's disease will become contagious in humans?"

"I'm afraid I can't back the idea up with any facts, professor. The disease is alien, we all admit that, and we can see that it conforms to alien laws of some kind, a growing or a changing brought on by passing through various hosts, from man to bird then to man, back and forth until suddenly it gains the capacity to infect dogs. And after passing from dog to man a number of times—then what? I have a feeling that there will be another change, it is not altogether impossible considering what has gone before, perhaps to another species of host. Or perhaps the final mutation to full contagiousness, that would seem only normal—what is abnormal is the present arrangement of inability for one human host to infect another."

"It could happen," Chabel said, nodding agreement. "Though I pray it doesn't. But whether it does or not we must be aware of the danger and I suggest a programme of research into the possibility be instituted at once. Dr. Perkins, what arrangements do you suggest?"

There was a hum of cross talk as the required work was apportioned to various teams. Speaking softly, Sam leaned towards Nita and asked, "Why did you take Perkins off the hook?"

"I had to, Sam, with McKay out he's doing two men's work and we can't hang him for one mistake. You can't rock the boat."

"Don't rock the boat—that was what Perkins said—and I'd like to tip it right over. He made a bad mistake in not taking your report to Chabel and it should be mentioned and he should be canned. This is no time for mistakes."

"Aren't you being personally vindictive?"

"No I'm not! Though I admit I would enjoy seeing it happen—no, it's more than that. He's the wrong man for the job, he proved that, and as long as he is acting for McKay we are going to have trouble . . ."

The rapping of the gavel interrupted him, Prof. Chabel spoke.

"Thank you for your reports. Now I would like to tell you my reasons for asking for them. The Emergency Coun-

cil of the UN has been in continuous session, with the American Chiefs of Staff and the President as you know, and a decision has been reached. Within a few hours we are going to begin what the army has given the dramatic title of Operation Cleansweep, a concerted effort to halt the spread of Rand's disease at once. Zone Red, this is roughly a circular area within which the disease is now confined, will be evacuated completely. We are already beginning to move the inhabitants into a series of quarantine camps. As soon as all the developing cases of Rand's disease have appeared and have been separated, and the incubation period has been exceeded, these people will be lifted out of Zone Red. We are already widening Zone Blue which is a strip of no-man's land that circles Zone Red, a dead zone. We are bulldozing and levelling it, using explosives and flame throwers where necessary, and spreading poison bait through it. Zone Blue is now about 200 yards wide on the average and when it is done it will be at least half a mile. If nothing happens to upset our schedule we should have Zone Blue completed at the same time Zone Red is completely evacuated."

"Then Zone Red will be sown by air with radioactives having a half-life of two months."

A stunned silence followed his words as they tried to understand the magnitude of it. Over eight-thousand square miles of the most metropolitan area in the world would be dead and depopulated. New York City, Newark, Philadelphia, ghost cities from which man had fled and where every bird, insect and animal down to the microscopic life in the soil would be dead. Chabel's voice continued tonelessly and grimly.

—to be concluded

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