COMPACT SF

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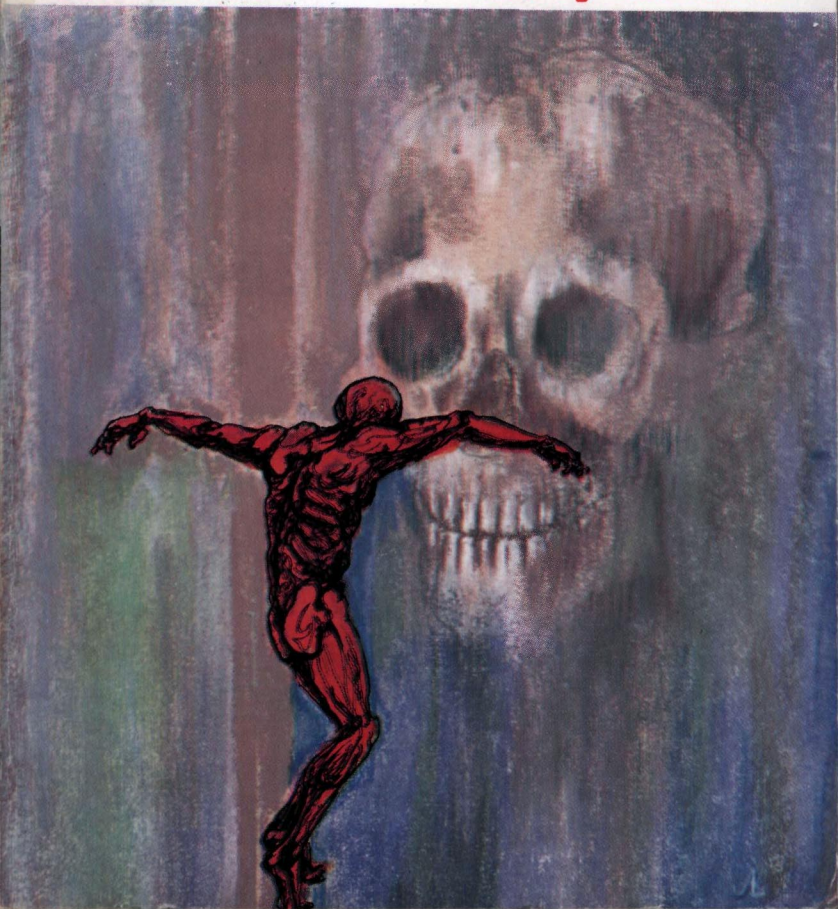
impulse

The NEW Science Fantasy

Brian Aldiss **Poul Anderson**

J. G. Ballard

James Blish **Harry Harrison**



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impulse

The NEW Science Fantasy

Edited by Kyril Bonfiglioli

Associate Editor: Keith Roberts

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Cover design *by Judith Ann Lawrence*

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Editorial . . . . . by Kyril Bonfiglioli

All around me as I start to write this first editorial for IMPULSE the ghosts of long-dead editors squeak and gibber. How many hopeful men have sat down to write an editorial for "Vol. 1, No. 1;" how many of their magazines never saw a second issue, how few reached double figures . . . ?

A melancholy thought, but one not too sobering in this instance, for IMPULSE, as many readers will know, is not exactly a naked, new born infant. In fact, to some extent, it is the old SCIENCE FANTASY in a false moustache and dark glasses and we hope to carry with us all the good will and loyal readership which SF accumulated in eighty-odd issues.

But a change of name and an increase in size is not the sum of the changes. We feel that jettisoning the old name enables us to broaden our frame of reference to embrace any kind of speculative and unusual fiction which is of the quality we are looking for: the change of price will help to provide a larger budget so that the rewards of writing for us will be more substantial and the considerable increase in size—each number now is the size of a full-length novel—will enable us to continue to give new writers a chance in every issue without stinting the ration of professional work by established names.

Non-fiction, for the present at least, is out; so are interior illustrations: the cost of art-work and engraving for a half-page drawing by a competent artist would buy ten pages of good fiction and my policy will still be that of giving the greatest possible value in stories and the minimum of editorial matter and other guff.

Imaginative fiction of the past will figure regularly in IMPULSE and suggestions from readers on the selection of this—as well as on the rest of the contents—will be very welcome.

As to the contents of this first issue, a glance at the list of contributors will speak for itself to readers familiar with science fiction: I take leave modestly to doubt whether any first issue of a magazine has been able to boast so distinguished a contents-page. The only name

not yet a household word in the science-fiction field is that of Keith Roberts, who made his debut in SCIENCE FANTASY over a year ago and whose stories and cover-designs have been steadily winning greater applause ever since. His present story is the first in a series which will, I am convinced, establish him firmly in the front rank of imaginative story-tellers. The second story in his "Pavane" series will appear in our next issue, accompanied by a cover design from the same versatile hand.

Keith Roberts has also, I am happy to say, just agreed to take the post of assistant editor in lieu of James Parkhill-Rathbone who has now quite enough to do launching his own literary magazine THE IDLER (details from The Old Crown, Crown Street, Wheatley, Oxon.)

Talking of cover art, it may come as a surprise to many readers to learn that Judith Ann Lawrence, our artist for this issue, is in private life Mrs. James Blish.

Perhaps at this stage I should rattle off a lot of wordage about how much this new metamorphosis could mean to the cause of science-fiction in general and the British product in particular, but I don't think this is necessary. The less special pleading for sf and fantasy as something apart the better: if it cannot take its place as a part of all other creative writing without explanation and defence, then it does not deserve to survive. We know it can. And does. And will.

— KYRIL BONFIGLIOLI

NOTE TO CONTRIBUTORS:

We are interested in considering for publication any stories falling more or less into the categories of science fiction, fantasy, speculation, supernatural or simply strange. We are not interested in Westerns, detective mysteries of the ordinary kind, ordinary adventure or romance. MSS, accompanied with a stamped self-addressed envelope, should be typed on one side of the paper with double-spacing and broad margins on each side of the page; the preliminary leaf should give the author's name, address, pen-name if any and number of words to the nearest fifty.

Specially written for this issue, on the theme of "sacrifice." No-one in this story lays down his life—rather the reverse, in fact.

THE CIRCULATION OF THE BLOOD

by Brian W. Aldiss

I

Under the impact of sunlight, the ocean seemed to burn. Out of the confusion of its flames and its long breakers, an old motor vessel was emerging, engine thudding as it headed for the narrow channel among the coral reefs. Two or three pairs of eyes watched it from the shore, one pair protected behind dark glasses from the glare beyond.

The 'Kraken' shut off its engines. As it slid between the pincers of coral, it let off a double blast from its siren. Minutes later, it lost all forward momentum, and an anchor rattled down onto the collapsed coral bed, clearly visible under the water. Then it was rubbing its paintless hull against the landing stage.

The landing stage, running out from the shore over the shallow water, creaked and swayed. As it and the ship became one unit, and a negro in a greasy nautical cap jumped down from the deck to secure the mooring lines, a woman detached herself from the shade of the coconut palms that formed a crest to the first rise of the beach.

She came slowly forward, almost cautiously, dangling her sunglasses now from a hand held at shoulder level. She came down onto the landing stage, her sandals creaking and tapping over the slats.

The motor vessel had its faded green canopy up, pro-

tecting part of the fore-deck from the annihilating sun. A bearded man stuck his head out of the side of the rail, emerging suddenly from the shadow of the canvas. He wore nothing but a pair of old jeans, rolled high up his calf—jeans, and a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles ; his body was tanned brown. He was ambiguously in his mid-forties, a long-faced man called Clement Yale. He was coming home.

Smiling at the woman, he jumped down onto the landing stage. For a moment they stood regarding each other. He looked at the line that now divided her brow, at the slight wrinkles by the corners of her eyes, at the fold that increasingly encompassed her full mouth. He saw that she had applied lipstick and powder for this great event of his return. He was moved by what he saw ; she was still beautiful—and in that phrase, "still beautiful", was the melancholy echo of another thought. She tires, she tires, although her race is not half-run!

"Caterina!" he said.

As they went into each other's arms, he thought, but perhaps, perhaps it could now be arranged that she would live—well, let's be conservative and say . . . say six or seven hundred years. . . .

After a minute, they broke apart. The sweat from his torso had marked her dress. He said, "I must help them unload a few essentials, darling, then I'll be with you. Where's Philip? He's still here, isn't he?"

"He's somewhere around," she said, making a vague gesture at the backdrop of palms, their house, and the scrub-clad cliff behind that—the only high ground on Kalpeni. She put the sunglasses on again, and Yale turned back to the ship.

She watched him move sparely, recalling that laconic and individual way he had of ordering both his sentences and his limbs. He set about directing the eight crew quietly, joking with Louis, the fat creole cook from Mauritius, supervising the removal of his electron microscope. Gradually a small pile of boxes and trunks appeared on the wooden quay. Once she looked round to see if Philip was about, but the boy was not to be seen.

She moved back to the shore as the men began to shoulder their loads. Without looking round, she climbed the board walk over the sand, and went into the house.

Most of the baggage from the ship was taken into the laboratory next door, or the store adjoining it. Yale brought up the rear, carrying a hutch made from old orange boxes. Between the bars of the hutch, two young Adelie penguins peered, croaking to each other.

He walked into the house by the back door. It was a simple one-storey structure, built of chunks of coral and thatched in the native manner, or the native manner before the Madrassis had started importing corrugated iron to the atolls.

"You'd like a beer darling," she said, stroking his arm. "Can't you rustle some up for the boys? Where's Philip?"

"I said I don't know."

"He must have heard the ship's siren."

"I'll get some beer."

She went through into the kitchen where Joe, the boy, was lounging at the door. Yale looked round the cool familiar living-room, at the paperbacks propped up with sea-shells, the rug they had bought in Bombay on the way out here, the world map and the oil portrait of Caterina hanging on the walls. It had been months since he had been home—well, it really was home, though in fact it was only a fisheries research station to which they had been posted. Caterina was here, so it must be home, but they could now think about getting back to the U.K. The research stint was over, the tour of duty done. It would be better for Philip if they went home to roost, at least temporarily, while he was still at university. Yale went to the front door and looked along the length of the island.

Kalpeni was shaped like an old-fashioned beer bottle opener, the top bar of which had been broken by sea action to admit small boats into the lagoon. Along the shaft of the island grew palms. Right at the far end lay the tiny native settlement, a few ugly huts, not visible from here because of intervening higher ground.

"Yes, I'm home," he said to himself. Along with his happiness ran a thread of worry, as he wondered how he'd ever face the gloom of the Northern European climate.

He saw his wife through the window talking to the crew of the trawler, watched their faces and drew pleasure from their pleasure in looking at and talking to a pretty woman again. Joe trotted behind her with a tray full of beers. He went out and joined them, sat on the bench beside them and enjoyed the beer.

When he had the chance, he said to Caterina, "Let's go and find Philip."

"You go, darling. I'll stay and talk to the men."

"Come with me."

"Philip will turn up. There's no hurry."

"I've something terribly important to tell you."

She looked anxious. "What sort of thing?"

"I'll tell you this evening."

"About Philip?"

"No, of course not. Is anything the matter with Philip?"

"He wants to be a writer."

Yale laughed. "It isn't long since he wanted to be a moon pilot is it? Has he grown very much?"

"He's practically an adult. He's serious about being a writer."

"How've you been, darling? You haven't been too bored? Where's Fräulein Reise, by the way?"

Caterina retreated behind her dark glasses and looked towards the low horizon. "She got bored. She went home. I'll tell you later." She laughed awkwardly. "We've got much to tell each other, Clem. How was the Antarctic?"

"Oh, marvellous! You should have been with us, Cat! Here it's a world of coral and sea—there it's ice and sea. You can't imagine it. It's clean. All the time I was there, I was in a state of excitement. It's like Kalpeni—it will always belong to itself, never to man."

When the crew were moving back to the ship, he put on a pair of canvas shoes and strolled out towards the native huts to look for his son Philip.

Among the shanties, nothing moved. Just clear of the long breakers, a row of fishing boats lay on the sand. An old woman sat against the elephant-grey bole of a palm, watching an array of jewfish drying before her, too idle to brush the flies away from her eyelids. Nothing stirred but the unending Indian Ocean. Even the cloud over distant

Karavatti was anchored there. From the largest hut, which served also as a store, came the thin music of a radio and a woman singing.

> Happiness, oh Happiness,
> It's what you are, it's not Progress.

The same, Yale thought to himself dryly, applied to laziness. These people had the good life here, or their version of it. They wanted to do nothing, and their wish was almost entirely fulfilled. Caterina also liked the life. She could enjoy looking at the vacant horizon day after day. He had always to be doing. You had to accept that people differed —but he had always accepted that, taken pleasure in it.

He ducked his head and went into the big hut. A genial and plump young Madrassi, all oiled and black and shining, sat behind his counter picking his teeth. His name was over the door, painted painfully on a board in English and Sanskrit, 'V. K. Vandranasis'. He rose and shook hands with Yale.

"You are glad to get back from the South Pole, I presume?"

"Pretty glad, Vandranasis."

"Without doubt the South Pole is cold even in this warm weather?"

"Yes, but we've been on the move you know—covered practically ten thousand nautical miles. We didn't simply sit on the Pole and freeze! How's life with you? Making your fortune?"

"Now, now, Mr. Yale, on Kalpeni are no fortunes to be made. That you surely know!" He beamed with pleasure at Yale's joke. "But life is not too bad here. Suddenly you know we got a swarm of fish here, more than the men can catch. Kalpeni never before got so many fish!"

"What sort of fish? Jewfish?"

"Yes, yes, many many jewfish. Other fish not so plenty, but the jewfish are now in their millions."

"And the whales still come?"

"Yes, yes, when it is full moon the big whales are coming."

"I thought I saw their carcasses up by the old fort."

"That is perfectly correct. Five carcasses. The last one last month and one the month before at the time of the full moon. I think maybe they come to eat the jewfish."

"That can't be. The whales started visiting the Laccadives before we had a glut of jewfish. In any case, blue whales don't eat jewfish."

V. K. Vandranasis put his head cutely on one side and said, "Many strange things happen you science wallahs and learned men don't know. There's always plenty change happening in the old world, don't you know? Maybe this year the blue whales newly are learning to appreciate eating the jewfish. At least, that is my theory."

Just to keep the man in business, Yale bought a bottle of raspberryade and drank the warm scarlet liquid as they chatted. The storekeeper was happy to give him the gossip of the island, which had about as much flavour to it as the sugary mess Yale was drinking. In the end, Yale had to cut him short by asking if he had seen Philip ; but Philip had not been down this end of the island for a day or two, it appeared. Yale thanked him, and started back along the strip of beach, past the old woman still motionless before her drying fish.

He wanted to get back and think about the jewfish. The months-long survey of ocean currents he had just completed, which had been backed by the British Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture and the Smithsonian Oceanic Research Institute under the aegis of the World Waters Organisation, had been inspired by a glut of fish—in this case, a superabundance of herring in the over-fished waters of the Baltic, which had begun ten years ago and continued ever since. That superabundance was spreading slowly to the herring banks of the North Sea ; in the last two years, those once-vast reservoirs of fish had been yielding and even surpassing their old abundance. He knew, too, from his Antarctic expedition, that the Adelie penguins were also greatly on the increase. And there would be other creatures, also proliferating, unrecorded as yet.

All these apparently random increases in animal population seemed not to have been made at the expense of any other animal—though obviously that state of affairs

would not be maintained if the numbers multiplied to really abnormal proportions.

It was a coincidence that these increases came at a time when the human population explosion had tailed off. Indeed, the explosion had been more of a dread myth than an actuality ; now it had turned into a phantom of might-have-been, rather like the danger of uncontained nuclear war, which had also vanished in this last decade of the old twentieth century. Man had not been able to voluntarily curtail his reproductive rate to any statistically significant extent, but the mere fact of over-crowding with all its attendant physical discomforts and anti-familial pressures, and with its psychic pressures of neurosis, sexual aberration, and sterility operating exactly in the areas previously most fecund, had proved dynamic enough to level off the acclerating birth spiral in the dense population centres. One result of this was a time of tranquillity in international affairs such as the world had hardly known throughout the rest of the century.

It was curious to think of such matters on Kalpeni. The Laccadives lay awash in ocean and sun ; their lazy peoples lived on a diet of dry fish and coconut, exporting nothing but dry fish and copra ; they were remote from the grave issues of the century—of any century. And yet, Yale reminded himself, misquoting Donne, no island is an island. Already these shores were lapped by the waves of a new and mysterious change that was flooding the world for better or worse—a change over which man had absolutely no command, any more than he could command the flight of the lonely albatross through the air above the southern oceans.

II

Caterina came out of the coral-built house to meet her husband.

"Philip's home, Clem!" she said, taking his hand.

"Why the anxiety?" he asked, then saw his son emerge from the shade, ducking slightly to avoid the lintel of the

door. He came forward and put his hand out to his father. As they shook hands, Philip smiling and blushing, Yale saw he had indeed grown adult.

This son by his first marriage—Yale had married Caterina only three and a half years ago—looked much as Yale himself had done at seventeen, with his fair hair clipped short and a long mobile face that too easily expressed the state of mind of its owner.

"Good to see you again. Come on in and have a beer with me," Yale said. "I'm glad the 'Kraken' got back here before you had to leave for England."

"Well, I wanted to speak to you about that, Father. I think I'd better go home on the 'Kraken'—I mean, get a lift in it to Aden, and fly home from there."

"No! They sail tomorrow, Phil! I shall see so little of you. You don't have to leave so soon, surely?"

Philip looked away, then said as he sat down at the table opposite his father, "Nobody asked you to be away the best part of a year."

The answer caught Yale unexpectedly. He said, "Don't think I haven't missed you and Cat."

"That doesn't answer the question, does it?"

"Phil, you didn't ask me a question. I'm sorry I was away so long, but the job had to be done. I hoped you'd be able to stay here a bit longer, so that we could see more of each other. Why have you got to go all of a sudden?"

The boy took the beer that Caterina had brought, raised his glass to her as she sat down between them, and took a long drink. Then he said, "I have to work, Father. I take finals next year."

"You're going to stay with your mother in the U.K.?"

"She's in Cannes or somewhere with one of her rich boy-friends. I'm going to stay in Oxford with a friend and study."

"A girl friend, Phil?"

The attempt at teasing did not come off. He repeated sullenly, "A friend."

Silence overcame them. Caterina saw they were both looking at her neat brown hands, which lay before her on the table. She drew them onto her lap and said, "Well, let's

all three of us go and have a swim in the lagoon, the way we used to."

The two men rose, but without enthusiasm, not liking to refuse.

They changed into their swim things. Excitement and pleasure buoyed Yale as he saw his wife in a bikini again. Her body was as attractive as ever, and browner, her thighs not an ounce too heavy, her breasts firm. She grinned naughtily at him as if guessing his thoughts and took his hand in hers. As they went down to the landing stage, carrying flippers and goggles and snorkels, Yale said, "Where were you hiding out when the 'Kraken' arrived, Phil?"

"I was in the fort, and I was not hiding."

"I was only asking. Cat says you're taking up writing?"

"Oh, does she?"

"What are you writing? Fiction? Poetry?"

"I suppose you'd call it fiction."

"What would you call it?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake, stop examining me, can't you? I'm not a bloody kid any more, you know!"

"Sounds as if I came back on the wrong day!"

"Yes, you did, if you want to know! You divorced mother and then you went chasing after Cat and married her—why don't you look after her if you want her?"

He flung his equipment down, took a run along the wooden platform, and made a fast shallow dive into the blue waters. Yale looked at Caterina, but she avoided his stare.

"He sounds as if he's jealous! Have you been getting a lot of this sort of thing?"

"He's at the moody stage. You must leave him alone. Don't annoy him."

"I've hardly spoken to him."

"Don't oppose his going away tomorrow if he's set on it."

"You two have been quarrelling over something haven't you?"

He was looking down at her. She was sitting on the platform, putting on her flippers. As he looked down at the well between her breasts, love overcame him again. They

must go back to London, and Cat must start a baby, for her sake; you could sacrifice too much just for the sake of sunlight; civilised behaviour could be defined as a readiness to submit to increased doses of artificial light and heat; maybe there was a direct relationship between the ever-growing world demand for power and a bolstering of the social contract. His moment's speculation was checked by her reply.

"On the contrary, we got on very well when you weren't here."

Something in her tone made him stand where he was, looking after her as she swam towards her stepson, sporting in the middle of the lagoon beyond the 'Kraken'. Slowly, he pulled down his goggles and launched himself after her.

The swim did them all good. After what Vandranasis had said, Yale was not surprised to find jewfish in the lagoon, although they generally stayed on the outer side of the atoll. There was one fat old fellow in particular, over six feet long and half-inclined to set up a leering and contemptuous friendship that made Yale wish he had brought the harpoon gun.

When he had had enough, Yale swam over to the north-west side of the lagoon, below the old Portuguese fort, and lay in the gritty coral sand. The others came and joined him in a few minutes.

"This is the life," he said, putting an arm round Caterina. "Some of our so-called experts explain all of life in terms of our power drives, others see everything explicable in terms of God's purpose; for another, it's all a matter of glands, or for another it all boils down to a question of sublimated incest-wishes. But for me, I see life as a quest for sunlight."

He caught his wife's strained look.

"What's the matter? Don't you agree?"

"I—no, Clem, I—well, I suppose I have other goals."

"What?"

When she didn't answer, he said to Philip, "What are your goals in life, young man?"

"Why do you always ask such boring questions? I just live. I don't intellectualise all the time."

"Why did Fräulein Reise go home? Was it because you were as discourteous to her as you are to me?"

"Oh, go to . . ." He got up, roughly pulled on his mask, and flung himself back in the water, striking out violently for the far beach. Yale, stood up, kicked off his flippers, and trod up the beach, ignoring the sharp bite of the coral sand. Over the top of the bank, scraggy grass grew, and then the slope tilted down towards the reef and the long barrier of ocean. Here the whales lay rotting, half out of water, flesh that was now something too terrible to count any more as flesh. Fortunately the south-west trades kept the stench away from the other side of the island; sniffing it now, Yale recalled that this scent of corruption had trailed far across the sea to the 'Kraken', as if all Kalpeni were the throne of some awful and immeasurable crime. He thought of that now, as he tried to control his anger against his son.

That evening, they gave supper to the men of the little trawler. It was a genial farewell meal, but it broke up early and afterwards Yale, Philip and Caterina sat on the veranda, taking a final drink and looking across to the lights of the 'Kraken' in the lagoon. Philip seemed to have completely recovered from his earlier sulkiness and was talking cheerfully, burbling on about life at the university until finally Caterina interrupted him.

"I've heard enough about Oxford over the past few weeks. How about hearing about the Antarctic from Clem?"

"It all sounds a gloomy dump to me."

"It has its vile moments and its good moments," Clem said, "which I suppose could be claimed for Oxford too. Take these penguins I've brought back. The conditions in which their species mates are death to man—perhaps minus thirty degrees Fahrenheit and with a howling snowstorm moving over them at something like eighty miles an hour. You'd literally freeze solid in that sort of weather, yet the penguins regard it as ideal for courting."

"More fool them!"

"They have their reasons. At certain times of year, Antarctica is swimming with food, the richest place in the

world. Oh, you'll have to go there one day, Philip. Great doses of daylight in the summer! It's—well, it's another planet down there, and far more undiscovered than the moon. Do you realise that more people have set foot on the moon than have ever ventured into the Antarctic?"

The reasons for the 'Kraken's' sailing into those far south waters had been purely scientific. The newly established World Waters Organisation, with its headquarters in a glittering new sky-scraper on the Bay of Naples, had inaugurated a five-year study of oceans, and the rusty old 'Kraken' was an inglorious part of the Anglo-American contribution. Equipped with Davis-Swallows and other modern oceanographic instrumentation, it had been at work for many months charting the currents of the Atlantic. During that time, Clement Yale had done an unexpected piece of detective work.

"I told you this morning I had something important to say. I'd better get it off my chest now. You know what a copepod is, Cat?"

"I've heard you speak of them. They're fish, aren't they?"

"They're crustaceans living among the plankton, and a vital link in the food chain of oceans. It's been computed that there may be more individual copepods than there are individuals in all other multi-celled animal classes combined—all human beings, fish, oysters, monkeys, dogs, and so on—the lot. A copepod is about the size of a rice grain. Some genera eat half their own weight in food—mainly diatoms—in a day. The world champion pig never managed that. The rate at which this little sliver of life ingests and reproduces might well stand as a symbol of the fecundity of old Earth.

"It might stand, too, for the way in which all life is linked all round the globe. The copepods feed on the smallest living particles in the ocean, and are eaten by some of the largest, in particular the whale shark and the basking shark and various whales. Several sea-going birds like a bit of copepod in their diet too.

"The different genera of copepod infest different lanes and levels in the multi-dimensional world of the ocean. We followed one genus for thousands of miles while we were tracking one particular ocean current."

"Oh-oh, I thought he was edging onto his favourite topic!" Philip said.

"Get your father another drink and don't cheek him. The complex of ocean flow is as necessary to human life as the circulation of the blood. The one as much as the other is the stream of existence, bearing us all forward willy-nilly. On the 'Kraken' we were interested in one part of that stream in particular, a current of whose existence oceanographers were aware in theory for some time. Now we have charted it exactly, and named it.

"I'll tell you the name of this current in a minute. It'll amuse you, Cat. The current starts lazily in the Tyrrhenian Sea, which is the name of the bit of the Mediterranean between Sardinia, Sicily and Italy. We've swum in it more than once off Sorento, Cat, but to us it was just the 'Med'. Anyhow, the evaporation rate is high there, and the extra salty water sinks and spills out eventually into the Atlantic, of which the Med is just a land-locked arm.

"The current sinks further and deflects south. We could follow it quite easily with salinity gauges and flow-rate recorders and so on. It divides, but the particular stream we were interested in remains remarkably homogeneous and comprises a narrow ribbon of water moving at a rate of about three miles a day. In the Atlantic, it is sandwiched between two other currents moving in the opposite direction, currents that have been known for some years as the Antarctic Intermediate Water and the Antarctic Bottom Water. Both these north-flowing streams are considerable masses of water—main arteries, you could call them. The Bottom Water is highly saline and icy cold.

"We followed our current right across the Equator and down into southern latitudes, into the cold waters of the Southern Ocean. It is eventually forced to the surface, fanning out as it rises, from the Weddell to the Mackenzie Sea, along the Antarctic coast. In this warmer water, during the short polar summer, the copepods and other small fry proliferate. Another little crustacean, the euphaustids or 'krill', turn the seas cinnamon, so many of them pack the waters. The 'Kraken' often rode on a pink sea. While they're feeding on diatoms, the whales are feeding on them."

"Nature's so horrible!" Caterina said.

Yale smiled at her. "Maybe, but there's nothing else *but* nature! Anyhow, we were very proud of our current for making such a long journey. Do you know what we have called it? We've named it in honour of the Director of the World Waters Organisation. It is to be known as the Devlin Current, after Theodore Devlin, the great marine ecologist and your first husband."

Caterina looked most striking when she was angry. Reaching for a cigarette from the sandalwood box on the table, she said, "I suppose that is your idea of a joke!"

"It's an irony perhaps. But it's only fitting, don't you know. Give the devil his due! Devlin's a great man, more important than I shall ever be."

"Clem, you know how he treated me!"

"Of course I do. Because of that treatment, I was lucky enough to get you. I hold no malice for the man. After all, he was once a friend of mine."

"No, he wasn't. Theo has no friends, only expediences. After my five years with him I should know him better than you."

"You could be prejudiced." He smiled, rather enjoying her annoyance.

She threw the cigarette at him and jumped up. "You're crazy, Clem! You drive me mad! Why don't you sometimes get your back up at someone? You're always so damned level-tempered. Why can't you hate someone, ever? Theo in particular! Why couldn't you hate Theo for my sake?"

He stood up too. "I love you when you're trying to be a bitch."

She smacked him across the face, sending his spectacles flying, and stamped out of the room. Philip did not move. Yale went over to the nearest cane chair and picked his spectacles up from the seat; they were not broken. As he put them on again, he said, "I hope these scenes don't embarrass you too much, Phil. We all need safety valves, for our emotions, women in particular. Caterina's marvellous, isn't she? Don't you think? You did get on well with her, didn't you?"

Philip flushed a slow red. "I'll leave you to your capers. I have to go and pack."

As he turned, Yale caught his arm. "You don't have to go. You are almost adult. You must face violent emotions. You never could as a child—but they're as natural as storms at sea."

"Child! You're the child, father! You think you're so poised and understanding, don't you? But you've never understood how people feel!"

He pulled himself away. Yale was left standing in the room alone. "*Explain* and I'd understand," he said aloud.

III

When he walked into the bedroom, Caterina was sitting dejectedly on her bed, barefoot, with her feet resting on the stone floor. She looked up at him intently, with something of the inscrutable stare of a cat.

"I drank too much tonight, darling. You know beer doesn't agree with me. I'm sorry!"

Yale went over to her, pulled the rug under her feet, and knelt beside her. "You horrible alcoholic! Come and help me feed the penguins before we turn in. Philip's gone to bed, I think."

"Say you've forgiven me."

"Oh, Christ, let's not have *that,* my sweet Cat! You can see I have forgiven you."

"Say it then, say it!"

He thought to himself, 'Phil's entirely right, I don't understand anyone. I don't even understand myself. It's true I have forgiven Cat ; why then should I be reluctant to say so because she insists I say so? Maybe it was because I thought there was so little to forgive. Well, what's a man's dignity beside a woman's need?' And he said it.

Outside, the waves made slumberous noises along the reef, a sound of continuous content. The island looked so low by night that it seemed a wonder the sea did not sweep over it. Not a light showed anywhere except for the lamp on the 'Kraken's' mast.

The two penguins were in one of the permanent cages at the rear of the lab. They stood with their beaks tucked under their flippers, asleep, and did not alter their position when the lights came on.

She put an arm round his waist. "Sorry I flew off the handle. I suppose we ought to have congratulated you? I mean, I suppose this current is rather a big discovery, isn't it?"

"It's certainly a *long* discovery—nine and a half thousand miles long."

"Oh, be serious, darling. You're underplaying what you've done as usual, aren't you?"

"Oh, terribly! I may get a knighthood any day. Anyhow, we'll have to fly to London in a week to receive some sort of applause, and I'll have to make a fuller report than I have done so far. In fact there is another discovery that I've only communicated to one other person as yet which makes the discovery of Devlin's Current seem nothing, a discovery that could affect every one of us."

"What do you mean?"

"It's late and we're both tired. You shall hear about it in the morning."

"Can't you tell me now, while you're feeding the birds?"

"They're okay. I just wanted to check on them. They'll feed better in the morning." He looked speculatively at her.

"I am a greedy man, Cat, though I try to hide it. I want life. I'd like to share life with you for a thousand years, I'd like to roam the Earth for a thousand years—with or without a knighthood! That may be possible."

They stood looking for each other, feeling for the neutral currents that flowed between them, relaxed enough after their tiff to feel that they were no longer two entirely separate organisms.

"There's a new infection in the world's bloodstream," he said. "It could bring a sort of illness that we could call longevity. It was first isolated in the herring schools in the Baltic a decade ago. It's a virus. Cat—you understand how we traced the Devlin Current, don't you? We had deep trawls and sonar devices and special floats that sink to predetermined water densities, so that we could trace the

particular salinity and temperature and speed of our current all the way. We could also check the plankton content. We found that the copepods carried a particular virus that I could identify as a form of the Baltic virus—it's a highly characteristic form. We don't know where the virus came from originally. The Russians think it was brought to Earth encased in a tektite, or by meteoritic dust, so that it may be extraterrestrial in origin—"

"Clem, please, all this is beyond me! What does this virus *do*? It lengthens life, you say?"

"In certain cases. In certain genera."

"In men and women?"

"No. Not yet. Not as far as I know." He gestured towards the equipment on the lab bench. "I'll show you what it looks like when I get the electron microscope set up. The virus is very small, about twenty millimicrons long. Once it finds a host it can use, it spreads rapidly through the cell tissue, where its action appears to be the destruction of anything threatening the life of the cell. In fact, it is a cell repairer, and a very effective one at that. You see what that means! Any life form infected with it is inclined to live for ever. The Baltic virus will even rebuild cells completely where it finds a really suitable host. So far, it seems to have found only two such hosts, both sea-going, one fish, one mammal, the herring and the blue whale. In the copepods it is merely latent."

He could see that Caterina was trembling. She said, "You mean that all herring and blue whales are—immortal?"

"Potentially so, if they've caught the infection, yes. Of course, the herrings get eaten, but the ones that don't, go on reproducing year after year with unimpaired powers. None of the animals that eat the herring appear to catch the infection. In other words, the virus cannot sustain itself in them. It's an irony that this minute germ holds the secret of eternal life, yet is itself threatened constantly with extinction."

"But people—"

"People don't come into it yet. The copepods we traced along our current were infected with the Baltic virus. They surfaced in the Antarctic. That was one of the discover-

ies I made—that there is another species that can be infected. The Adelie penguins have it too. They just don't die from natural causes any more. These two birds here are virtually immortal."

She stood looking at them through the mesh of the cage. The penguins perched on the edge of their tank, their comical feet gripping its tiled lip. They had awakened without removing their beaks from under their wings, and now regarded the woman with bright and unwinking eyes.

"Clem—it's funny, generations of men have dreamed of immortality. But they never thought it would come to penguins. . . . I suppose that's what you'd call an irony! Is there any way we can infect ourselves from these birds?"

He laughed. "It's not as easy as picking up psittacosis from a parrot. But it may be that laboratory research will find a means of infecting human beings with this disease. Before that happens, there's another question we ought to ask ourselves."

"How do you mean?"

"Isn't there a moral question first? Are we capable, either as a species or as individuals, of living fruitfully for a thousand years? Do we deserve it?"

"Do you think herrings deserve it more than we do?"

"They cause less damage than man."

"Try telling that to your copepods!"

This time he laughed with genuine pleasure, enjoying one of the rare occasions when he considered she answered him back wittily.

"It's interesting the way copepods carry the virus in a latent form all the way down from the Med to the Antarctic without becoming infected themselves. Of course, there must be a connecting link between the Baltic and the Med, but we haven't found it yet."

"Could it be another current?"

"Don't think so. We just don't know. Meanwhile, the ecology of Earth is slowly being turned upside down. Up till now, it has just meant a pleasant glut of food and the survival of whales that were on the threshold of extinction, but it may lead in time to famines and other unpleasant natural upheavals."

Caterina was less interested in that aspect. "Meanwhile,

you are going to see if the virus can be implanted in us?"

"That could be very dangerous. Besides, it's not my field"

"You're not just going to let it slide?"

"No. I've kept the whole matter secret, even from the others on the 'Kraken'. I've communicated the problem to only one other person. You'll hate me for this, Cat, but this thing is far too important to let personalities enter the situation. I sent a coded report to Theo Devlin at the WWO in Naples. I shall drop in to see him on our way back to London."

Suddenly her face looked tired and aged. "You're either a saint or you're raving mad," she said.

The penguins watched without moving as the two humans left the room. Long after the lights went out, they shut their eyes and returned to sleep.

Dawn next morning set the sky afire with a more than Wagnerian splendour, revealing the first sluggish activity on the 'Kraken', and mingling with the smell of preserved eggs frying in the galley. In four or five days, the crew would be back at their base in Aden, enjoying fresh and varied food again.

Philip was also astir early. He had slept naked between the sheets and did nothing more in the way of dressing than slipping on a pair of swimming trunks. He walked round the back of the house and looked into his father's bedroom window. Yale and Cat both slumbered peacefully together in her bed. He turned away, his face distorted, and made his way falteringly down to the lagoon for a last swim. A short while later, Joe, the negrito house boy, was bustling round the house, getting the breakfast and singing a song about the coolness of the hour.

As the day grew hotter, the bustle of preparation for departure increased. Yale and his wife were invited aboard the trawler for a farewell lunch, which was eaten under the deck canopy. Although Yale tried to talk to Philip, his son had retired behind his morose mood and would not be drawn; Yale comforted himself by reflecting that they would meet again in the U.K. in a very few days.

The ship sailed shortly after noon, sounding its siren when

it moved through the narrow mouth of the reef as it had done when it entered. Yale and Cat waved for a while from the shade of the palms, and then turned away.

"Poor Philip! I hope his holiday did him good. That troubled adolescent phase is hard to deal with. I went through just the same thing I remember!"

"Did you, Clem? I doubt it." She looked about her desperately, at her husband's gentle face, at the harsh sea on which the trawler was still clearly visible, up at the heavy leaves of palm above them. In none of these elements, it seemed, could she find help. She burst out, "Clem, I can't keep it a secret, I must tell you now, I don't know what you'll say or what it'll do to you, but these last few weeks, Philip and I have been lovers!"

He looked at her in a puzzled way, eyes narrow behind his lenses, as if he could not understand the expression she had used.

"That's why he went off the way he did! He couldn't bear to be around when you were. He begged me never to tell you. . . . He . . . Clem, it was all my fault, I should have known better." She paused and then said, "I'm old enough to be his mother."

Yale stood very still, and expelled one long noisy gasp of breath.

"You—you couldn't, Caterina! He's only a boy!"

"He's as adult as you are!"

"He's a boy! You seduced him!"

"Clem, try to see. It was the fräulein originally. She did it to him—or he started it. I don't know which way it was. But it's a small island. I came on them one afternoon, both naked, inside the old fort. I sent her away but somehow the poison spread. I . . . After I'd seen him. . . ."

"Oh, God, it's incest!"

"You use these stupid old-fashioned terms!"

"You cow! How could you do it with him?" He turned away. He started walking. She did not stop him. She could not stand still herself. Swinging about in misery, she burst weeping into the house and flung herself on to her unmade bed.

For three hours, Yale stood on the north-west edge of the island, staring paralysed into the sea. In that time, he

hardly moved, except once to unhook his spectacles and wipe his eyes. His heart laboured and he glared out at the immensity before him as if challenging it.

She came up quietly behind him, bringing him a glass of water in which she had dissolved lemon crystals.

He took the glass, thanked her quietly, and drank its contents, all without looking at her.

"If it makes any difference, Clement, I love and admire you very much. I'm not fit to be your wife, I know, and I think you are a saint. Much as I hurt you, your hurt was all for what I might have done to Philip, wasn't it?"

"Don't be silly! I shouldn't have left you all these months. I exposed you to temptation." He looked at her, his face stern. "I'm sorry for what I said—about incest. You are not related to Philip, except by marriage. In any case, man is the only creature that puts a ban on incest. Most other creatures, including the higher apes, find no harm in it. You can define man as the species that fears incest. Some psycho-analysts define all mental illnesses as incest-obsessions, you know. So I'm—"

"Stop!" It was almost a scream. For a moment she fought with herself, then she said, "Look, Clem, talk about *us*, for God's sake, not about what the psycho-analysts say or what the higher apes do! Talk about *us*! Think about *us*!"

"I'm sorry, I'm a pedant, I know, but what I meant—"

"And don't, don't, don't apologise to me! I should be apologising to you, kneeling, begging for forgiveness! Oh, I feel so awful, so guilty, so desperate! You have no idea what I've been through!"

He seized her painfully and held her, looking for the moment very like his son. "You're getting hysterical! I don't want you kneeling to me, Cat, though thank heavens it has always been one of your dearest traits that you acknowledge your errors in a way I can never manage with mine. You can see what you've done was wrong. I've thought it all over, and I can see the fault was largely mine. I shouldn't have left you isolated here on Kalpeni for so long. This won't make any difference between us, once I've got over the shock. I've thought it over and I

think I must write to Philip and tell him that you've told me everything, and that he is not to feel guilty."

"Clem—how can you—have you no feeling? How can you have forgiven me so easily?"

"I didn't say I'd forgiven you."

"You just said it!"

"No, I said—let's not quibble over words. I must forgive you. I have forgiven you."

She clung to him. "Then tell me you've forgiven me!"

"I just did."

"Tell me! Please tell me!"

In a sudden fury, he flung her away from him, crying, "Damn and blast you, I tell you I have forgiven you, you crazy slut! Why go on?" She fell, sprawling in the sand. Penitently, he stooped to help her up, apologising for his violence, saying over and over that he had forgiven her. When she was on her feet, they made their way back to the coral-built house, leaving an empty glass lying in the sand. As they went, Caterina said, "Can you imagine the pain of having to live for a thousand years?"

It was the day after she asked that question that Theodore Devlin arrived on the island.

IV

Almost the entire population of Kalpeni turned out to see the helicopter land on the round chopperport in the centre of the island. Even Vandranasis closed down his little store and followed the thin trickle of spectators northwards.

The great palm leaves clapped together as the machine descended, its WWO insignia gleaming on its black hull. As the blades stopped rotating, Devlin jumped down, followed by his pilot.

Devlin was two or three years Yale's senior, a stocky man in his late forties, well-preserved, and as trim in his appearance as Yale was straggling and untidy. He was a man sharp of face and brain, respected by many, loved by few. Yale, who was wearing nothing but jeans and canvas shoes, strolled over and shook hands with him.

"Fancy seeing you here, Theo! Kalpeni is honoured."

"Kalpeni is bloody hot! For God's sake, get me in the shade, Clement, before I fry. How you stick it here, I don't know!"

"Gone native, I guess. It's a home from home for me. See my two penguins swimming in the lagoon?"

"Uh." Devlin was in no mood for small talk. He walked briskly along in a neat light suit, a head shorter than Yale, his muscular movements tight and controlled even over the shifting sand.

At the door of his house, Yale stood aside to let his guest and the pilot, a lanky Indian, enter. Caterina stood inside the room, her face unsmiling. If Devlin was embarrassed at meeting his ex-wife, he gave no sign of it.

"I thought Naples got hot enough. You're living in a damned oven here. How are you, Caterina? You look well. Haven't seen you since you were weeping in the witness box. How does Clement treat you? Not in the style to which you were once accustomed, I hope?"

"You've obviously not come to make yourself pleasant, Theo. Perhaps you and your pilot would care for a drink. Perhaps you were going to introduce him to us?"

After this initial shot across his bows, Devlin pursed his mouth and behaved less pugnaciously. His next remark might even have been construed as an apology. "Those natives out there annoy me, plastering their fingerprints all over the copter. They haven't taken one elementary step forward since mankind began. They're parasites in every sense of the word! They owe their little all to the fish and the wonderful coconut, both brought to their doorstep by the courtesy of the tides—even their damned island was built for them by countless coral insects!"

"Our culture owes the same sort of debt to other plants and animals, and to the earthworm."

"At least we pay our debts. However, that's neither here nor there. I just don't share your sentimental attachment to desert islands."

"We didn't invite you to come here, Theo," Caterina said. She was still suppressing surprise and anger at seeing him.

Joe appeared and served beer to them all. The pilot

stood by the open door to drink his, nervously watching his boss. Devlin, Yale, and Caterina sat down facing each other.

"I gather you got my report?" Yale said. "That's why you're here, isn't it?"

"You're blackmailing me. Thomas!" Devlin snapped his fingers as he spoke, and his pilot produced a pistol fitted with what Yale recognised as a silencer ; it was the first time he had ever seen one in real life. The pilot stood holding his beer glass in his left hand, sipping casually, but his glance was far from casual. Yale stood up.

"Sit down!" Devlin said, pointing at him. "Sit down and listen to me, or it will appear later that you had a misunderstanding with a shark while out swimming. You're up against a tough organisation, Clement, but you may come to no harm if you behave. What are you after?"

Yale shook his head. "You're in trouble, Theo, not I. You'd better explain this whole situation."

"You're always so innocent, aren't you? I'm well aware that that report you sent me, with your assurance that you had let nobody else know the facts, was a thinly camouflaged piece of blackmail. Tell me how I buy your silence."

Yale looked at his wife ; he read in her face the same bafflement he himself felt. Anger with himself grew in him to think that he could not understand Devlin. What was the fellow after? His report had been merely a scientific summary of the cycle by which the Baltic virus had been carried from the Tyrrhenian Sea down to the Antarctic. Dumbly, he shook his head and dropped his eyes to his folded hands. "I'm sorry, Theo ; you know how terribly naïve I am. I just don't get what you are talking about, or why you should think it necessary to point a gun at us."

"This is more of your paranoia, Theo!" Caterina said. She got up and walked towards Thomas with her hand out. He put the beer down hastily and levelled the pistol at her. "Give it to me!" she said. He faltered, his gaze evaded her, she seized the weapon by the barrel, took it from him, and flung it down in one corner of the room.

"Now get out! Go and wait in your helicopter! Take your beer!"

Devlin made a move towards the gun, then stopped. He

sat down again, obviously nonplussed. Choosing to ignore Caterina as the only way of salving his dignity, he said, "Clement, are you serious? You really are such a fool that you don't know what I'm talking about?"

Caterina tapped him on the shoulder. "You'd better go home. We don't like people to threaten us on this island."

"Leave him, Cat, let's get out of him whatever extraordinary idea he is nursing. He comes here all the way from Naples, risking his reputation in order to threaten us as if he were a common crook. . . ."

Words failed him.

"What do you want, Theo? It's some horrible thing about me, isn't it?"

That restored his humour and some of his confidence. "No, Caterina, it's not! It's nothing at all to do with you. I lost all interest in you a long, long time ago, long before you ran off with this fisherman!" He got up and crossed to the map of the world hanging dark and fly-spotted, on the wall.

"Clement, you'd better come and look at this. Here's the Baltic. Here's the Med. You tracked the immortality virus all the way from the Baltic right down to the Antarctic. I thought you'd had the wit to grasp how the missing link between Baltic and Mediterranean was forged; I assumed you were suggesting that your silence could be bought on that score. I over-estimated you! You still haven't got it, have you?"

Yale frowned and stroked his face. "Don't be so superior, Theo. That area was right beyond my bailiwick. I only started in the Tyrrhenian Sea. Of course, if you know what the link is, I'd be tremendously interested. . . . Presumably it's brought from one sea to the other by a pelagic species. A bird seems a likely agent, but as far as I know nobody has established that the Baltic virus—the immortality virus, you call it—can survive in the body of a bird . . . except the Adelie penguin, of course, but there are none of those in the northern hemisphere."

Taking his arm, Caterina said, "Darling, he's laughing at you!"

"Ha, Clement, you are a true man of science! Never see what's under your nose because you're sunk up to your

eyes in your own pet theories! You gangling fathead! The vital agent was human—me! I worked on that virus on a ship in the Baltic, I took it back with me to Naples to W.W.O. H.Q. I worked on it in my own private laboratory, I—"

"I don't see how I was supposed to know—Oh! . . . Theo, you've found it—you've found a way to infect human beings with the virus!"

The expression on Devlin's face was enough to confirm the truth of that. Yale turned to Caterina. "Darling, you're right and he's right, I really am a short-sighted idiot! I should have guessed. After all, Naples is situated on the Tyrrhenian Sea—it's just that one never thinks of the term and speaks of it always as the Med."

"You got there at last!" Devlin said. "That's how the virus leaked into your Devlin Current. There is a small colony of us in Naples with the virus in our veins. It passes out through the body in inert form, and survives the sewage processing, so that it is carried out to sea still living—to be digested by the copepods, as you managed to discover."

"The circulation of the blood!"

"What?"

"No matter. A metaphor."

"Theo—Theo, so you are now . . . you have it, do you?"

"Don't be afraid to say it, woman. Yes, I have immortality flowing in my veins."

Tugging his beard, Yale went and sat down and took a long drink at his beer. He looked from one to the other of them for a long while. At last he said, "You are something of the true man of science yourself, Theo, aren't you, as well as a career man? You couldn't resist telling us what you know! But leaving that aside, we of course realised that an inoculation of man with the virus was theoretically possible. Cat and I were discussing it until late last night. Do you know what we decided? We decided that even if it were possible to acquire immortality, or shall we say longevity, we should refuse it. We should refuse it because neither of us feels mature enough to bear the responsibility of our emotional and sexual lives for a span of maybe several hundred years."

"That's pretty negative, isn't it?" Devlin strolled over to

the far corner and retrieved the pistol. Before he could slip it into his pocket, Yale stretched out his hand. "Until you leave, I'll keep it for you. What were you planning to do with it, anyway?"

"I ought to shoot you, Yale."

"Give it to me! Then you won't be exposed to temptation. You want to keep your little secret, don't you? How long do you think it will be before it becomes public property anyhow? A thing like that can't be kept quiet indefinitely."

He showed no sign of giving up the gun. He said, "We've kept our secret for five years. There are fifty of us now, fifty-three, men with power and some women. Before the secret comes into the open, we are going to be even more powerful: an Establishment. We only need a few years. Meanwhile, we make investments and alliances. Take a look at the way brilliant people have been attracted to Naples these last few years! It's not been just to the W.W.O. or the European Common Government Centre. It's been to my clinic! In another five years, we'll be able to step in and rule Europe—and from there it's just a short step to America and Africa."

"You see," Caterina said, "he is mad, Clem, that sort of sane madness I told you about. But he daren't shoot! He daren't shoot, in case they locked him up for life—and that's a long time for him!"

Recognising the wild note in his wife's voice, Yale told her to sit down and drink another beer. "I'm going to take Theo round to see the whales. Come on, Theo! I want to show you what you're up against, with all your fruitless ambitions."

Theo gave him a sharp look, as if speculating whether he might yield useful information if humoured, evidently concluded that he would, and rose to follow Yale. As he went out, he looked back towards Caterina. She avoided his glance.

It was dazzling to be out in the bright sun again. The crowd was still hanging about the helicopter, chatting intermittently with the pilot, Thomas. Ignoring them, Yale led Devlin past the machine and round the lagoon, blinding in the glare of noon. Devlin gritted his teeth and said

nothing. He seemed diminished as they exposed themselves to a landscape almost as bare as an old bone, walking the narrow line between endless blue ocean and the green socket of lagoon.

Without pausing, Yale led onto the north-west strip of beach. It sloped steeply, so that they could see nothing of the rest of the island except the old Portuguese fort, which terminated their view ahead. Grim, black, and ruinous, it might have been some meaningless tumescence erupted by marine forces. As the men tramped towards it, the fort was dwarfed by the intervening carcasses of whales.

Five whales had died here, two of them recently. The giant bodies of the two recently dead still supported rotting flesh, though the skulls gleamed white where the islanders had stripped them for meat and cut out their tongues. The other three had evidently been cast up here at an earlier date, for they were no more than arching skeletons with here and there a fragment of parched skin flapping between rib bones like a curtain in the breeze.

"What have you brought me here for?" Theo was panting, his solid chest heaving.

"To teach you humility and to make you sweat. Look on these works, ye mighty, and despair! These were blue whales, Theo, the largest mammal ever to inhabit this planet! Look at this skeleton! This chap weighed over a hundred tons for sure. He's about eighty feet long." As he spoke, he stepped into the huge rib cage, which creaked like an old tree as he braced himself momentarily against it. "A heart beat right here, Theo, that weighed about eight hundredweight."

"You could have delivered Fifty Amazing Facts of Natural History, or whatever you call this lecture, in the shade."

"Ah, but this isn't natural history, Theo. It's highly *un*natural. These five beasts rotting here once swallowed krill far away in Antarctic waters. They must have gulped down a few mouthfuls of copepod at the same time—copepods that had picked up the Baltic virus. The virus infected the whales. By your admission, that can only have been five years ago, eh? Yet it is long enough to ensure that more blue whales—they were practically extinct from over-

fishing, as you know—survived the hazards of immaturity and bred. It would mean too that the breeding period of older specimens was extended. Yet five years is not enough to produce a glut in whales as it is in herrings."

"What are blue whales doing near the Laccadives in any case?"

"I never found a way to ask them. I only know that these creatures appeared off shore here at full moon, each in a different month. Caterina could tell you—she saw them and told me all about it in her letters. My son Philip was here with her when the last one arrived. Something drove the whales right across the Equator into these seas. Something drove them to cast themselves up onto this beach, raking their stomachs open on the reefs as they did so, to die where you see them lying now. Hang around for ten days, Theo, till the next full moon. You may see another cetaceous suicide."

There were crabs working in the sand among the barred shadows of the rib cage, burrowing and signalling to each other. When Devlin spoke, anger was back in his voice.

"Okay, you clever trawlerman, tell me the answer to the riddle. It's been revealed to you alone, I suppose, why they killed themselves?"

"They were suffering from side effects, Theo. The side effects of the immortality disease. You know the Baltic virus seems to bring long life—but you haven't had time to find out what else it brings. You've been in so much of a hurry you abandoned scientific method. You didn't want to get any older before you infected yourself. You didn't allow a proper trial period. You may be going to live a thousand years—*but what else is going to happen to you?* What happened to these poor creatures so awful that they could not bear their increase of years? Whatever it was, it was terrible, and soon it will be overtaking you, and all your conspirators sweating it out uneasily in Naples!"

The silencer was extremely effective. The pistol made only a slight hiss, rather like a man blowing a strawberry pip from between his teeth. The bullet made a louder noise as it ricocheted off a bleached rib and sped over the ocean. Suddenly Yale was full of movement, moving faster than he had moved in years, lunging forward. He hit Devlin

before he fired again. They fell into the sand, Yale on top. He got his foot over Devlin's arm, grasped him with both hands by the windpipe, and bashed his head repeatedly in the sand. When the gun slid loose, he stopped what he was doing, picked up the weapon, and climbed to his feet. Puffing a little, he brushed the sand from his old jeans.

"It wasn't graceful," he said, glaring down at the purple-faced man rolling at his feet. "You're a fool!" With a last indignant slap at his legs, he turned and headed back for the coral-built house.

Caterina ran out in terror at the sight of him. The natives surged towards him, thought better of it, and cleared a way for him to pass.

"Clem, Clem, what have you done? You've not shot him?"

"I want a glass of lemonade. It's all right, Cat, my love. . . . He isn't really hurt."

When he was sitting down at the table in the cool and drinking the lemonade she mixed him, he began to shake. She had the sense not to say anything until he was ready to speak. She stood beside him, stroking his neck. Presently they saw through the window Devlin coming staggering over the dunes. Without looking in their direction, he made his way over to the helicopter. With Thomas's aid, he climbed in, and in a few moments the engine started and the blades began to turn. The machine lifted, and they watched in silence as it whirled away over the water, eastwards towards the Indian sub-continent. The sound of it died and soon the sight of it was swallowed up in the gigantic sky.

"He was another whale. He came to wreck himself here."

"You'll have to send a signal to London and tell them everything, won't you?"

"You're right. And tomorrow I must catch some jew-fish. I suspect they may be picking up the infection."

He looked askance at his wife. She had put on her dark glasses while he was gone. Now she took them off again and sat by him, regarding him anxiously.

"I'm not a saint, Cat. Never suggest that again. I'm a bloody liar. I had to tell Theo an awful lie about why the whales ran themselves up our beach."

"Why?"

"I don't know! Whales have been beaching themselves for years and nobody knows why. Theo would have remembered that if he hadn't been so scared."

"I meant, why lie to him? You should only lie to people you respect, my mother used to say."

He laughed. "Good for her! I lied to scare him. Everyone is going to know about the immortality virus in a few weeks, and I suspect they're all going to want to be infected. I want them all scared. Then perhaps they'll pause, and think what they're asking for—the length of many lifetimes living with their first lifetime's inadequacies."

"Theo's taking your lie with him. You want that to circulate with the virus?"

He started to clean his spectacles on his handkerchief.

"I do. The world is about to undergo a drastic and radical change. The more slowly that change takes place, the more chance we—all living things, I mean, as well as you and I—have of living quiet and happy as well as lengthy lives. My lie may act as a sort of brake on change. People ought to think what a terrifying thing immortality is—it means sacrificing the mysteries of death. Now how about a bathe, just as if nothing revolutionary had happened?"

As they changed into their swim things, as she stood divested of her clothes, Caterina said, "I've suddenly had a vision, Clem. Please, I've changed my mind—I want to, I want us both to live as long as we possibly can. I'll sacrifice death for life. You know what I did with Philip? It was only because I suddenly felt my youth slipping from me. Time was against me. I got desperate. With more time . . . well, all our values would change, wouldn't they?"

He nodded and said simply, "You're right, of course."

They both began to laugh, out of pleasure and excitement. Laughing, they ran down to the lapping ocean, and for a moment it was as if Yale had left all his hesitations behind with his clothes.

As they sat on the edge of the water and snapped their flippers on, he said, "Sometimes I understand things about people. Theo came here to silence me. But he is an effective

man and he was so ineffectual today. It must mean that at bottom he really came to see you, just as you guessed at the time—I reckon he wanted company in all that limitless future he opened up for himself."

As they sliced out side by side into the warm water, she said without surprise, "We need time together, Clem, to understand each other."

They dived together, down in a trail of bubbles below the sparkling surface, startling the fish. Flipping over on his side, Yale made for the channel that led out to the open sea. She followed, glad in her heart, as she was destined to do and be for the next score and a half of centuries.

— BRIAN W. ALDISS

This story, specially written for IMPULSE, *was actually started in England whilst Poul and Karen Anderson were touring after the London Convention.*

HIGH TREASON

by Poul Anderson

In three hours by the clock they will be here to kill me. The door will crack open. Two noncoms will step through and flank it, in parade uniform with stunners at the ready. I don't know whether their faces will wear loathing and righteousness, or that sick pity I have observed on some aboard this ship, but it is certain that they will be pathetically young, because all the enlisted ratings are. Then Erik Halvorsen will stride in between them and come to attention. So will I. "Edward Breckinridge," he will say like a machine, and proceed with the formula. Not so long ago he called me Ed, and we were messmates, and on our last leave we went on a drinking bout which must by now have become a part of the local mythology. (This was in Port Desire, but next day we flitted down to the sea, which is golden coloured on that planet, and tumbled in the surf and lay on the sand letting sunlight and thunder possess us.) I don't know what will be in his eyes either. Curious, that one's closest male friend should be so unpredictable. But since he was always a good officer, he can be counted on to play his role out.

So can I. There is no gain in breaking the ritual, and ample reason for not doing so. Perhaps I should not even have dismissed the chaplain. With so much religiosity about, as our universe goes down in wreck, I have painted myself more strongly Lucifer by not spending these last hours in prayer. Will my children hear at school, He wasn't

just a traitor, he was a dirty atheist—? Never mind. I am not entitled to a great deal, but let me claim the dignity of remaining myself.

There will also be a kind of dignity in what follows: barbaric, macabre, and necessary. I will march down the corridor between the stiff bodies and stiffer faces of men I commanded; drums will drown the mutter of engines and priest. The inner airlock door will already stand wide. I will enter the chamber. The door will close. Then, for a moment, I can be alone. I shall try to hold to me the memory of Alice and the children, but perhaps my sweat will stink too harshly.

They don't pump the air out of the chamber in cases like this. That would be cruel. They simply pull the emergency switch. (No, not "they." One man's hand must do it. But whose? I don't want to know.) An engine will strain against the atmospheric pressure, one kilogram per square centimetre that we have borne with us, along with salt blood and funny little patches of hair and funny little instincts, all the way from Earth. The outer door will swing. Suddenly my coffin brims with darkness and stars. Earth's air rejects me. I fly out. The ship resumes hyperdrive.

For me, then, the universe will no longer ever have been.

But I ramble. It was well meant of them to give me this psychograph. The written word lies, the distorted molecules of a thought-recording tape do not. My apologia can be analysed for sincerity as well as logic. The worlds will be assured that I was at least an honest fool, which could make things easier for Alice, Jeanne, small Bobby who—her last letter said—has begun to look like his father. On the other hand, being no expert in the use of the machine, I will commit more of myself to the record than I like.

Well, keep trying, Ed, old chap. You can always wipe the tape. Though why you should be concerned about your privacy, when you are going to be dead—

Drusilla.

NO.

Go away. Take back your summer-scented hair, the feel of breasts and belly, the bird that sang in the garden beyond your window, take them back, Alice is my girl and

I'd simply been away from her too long, and no, that isn't true either, I damn well had fun with you, Dru my puss, and I don't regret a microsecond of our nights but it would hurt Alice to know, or would she understand, Christ-Osiris-Baldr-Xipe, I can't even be sure about that.

Get your mind back to higher things. Like battle. Quite okay to kill, you know, it's love which is dangerous and must be kept on tight leash, no, now I'm knee-jerking like one of those Brotherhood types. The soldier is akin to the civil monitor, both trained in violence because violence is sometimes necessary for the purposes of society. My problem was, what do you do when those purposes become impossible of attainment?

You fight. The Morwain will not forget either, certain hours amidst the blaze of Cantrell's Cluster. Part of my defence, remember, Erik Halvorsen?—my squadron inflicted heavy damage on the enemy—but the court martial couldn't follow such logic. Why did I attack a superior force after betraying a planet . . . a species? My claim is on record, that in my considered judgment the mission on which we had been ordered would have had catastrophic results, but that something might have been accomplished by striking elsewhere. Be it said, though, here to the ultimate honesty of this machine, I hoped to be captured. I have no more death wish than you, Erik.

And *someone* will have to represent men, when the Morwain come. Why not myself?

One reason why not, among others: Hideki Iwasaki. (I mean Iwasaki Hideki, the Japanese put the surname first, we're such a richly variant life form.) "Yahhh!" he screamed when we took our direct hit. I saw the control turret flare with lightnings, I saw him penetrated, through earthquake shudder in the ship and a whistle of departing air that pierced my helmet, my phones heard him scream.

Then darkness clapped down upon us. The gee-field had gone dead too, I floated, whirling until I caromed off a bulkhead and caught a stanchion. My mouth was full of blood, which tasted like wet iron. As the dazzle cleared from my retina, I saw the master panel shine blue, emergency lighting, and Hideki outlined before it. I knew him by the number fluorescing on his armour. Air gushed from

him, as fast as the tank could replace it, white with condensing moisture, mingled with blood in thick separate globules. I thought amidst my pulses, gloriously, Why, we're disabled. Totally. We haven't gone onto standby control, we're rudderless in space, the switchover circuits must be fused. We can only surrender. Plug in your jack quick, man, raise Comcentre and order the capitulation signal broadcast. No, wait. First you pass command on formally, to Feinstein aboard the *Yorktown,* so that the squadron may proceed with its battle. But then you're out of action. You'll come home with the Morwain.

Iwasaki's gauntlets moved. He had tools in them. Dying, he floated in front of the smitten superconductor brain and made a jackleg repair. It didn't take long. Just a matter of a few connections, so that the standby system could get the order to take over. I should have thought of trying it myself. That I did not, well, yes, I admit that that was my real treason. But when I saw what he was doing, I shoved myself to him, along with Mboto and Ghopal, and lent a hand.

We couldn't do much. He was the electronics officer. Besides, as for me, his blood drifted across my faceplate and fogged it. But we passed him what he needed from the tool kit. By the blue light, through the black smears, I saw his face a little, drained of everything but sweat and will. He did not permit himself to die until he had finished.

The lights came back on. So did weight. And the viewscreens. And the audio inductors. We'd have to get along on tanked air until we could shift to the other turret. I looked into space. The stars were thick here, heartlessly brilliant against black, but sharpest was a flash half a million kilometres away. And: *"¡Por Dios!"* cried the evaluation officer, "she was a Jango cruiser! Someone's put a missile in her!"

Turned out the *Agincourt* had done so. I hear her captain has been cited for a medal. Is he grateful to me?

At the moment, though, I knew only that Iwasaki had resurrected the *Syrtis Minor* and I must therefore continue to fight her. I called for the medics to come see if they could resurrect him too. He was a good little man, who had shyly shown me pictures of his good little children,

under the cherry trees of Kyoto. But later I heard there was no chance for him. With normal hospital facilities, he could have been hooked into a machine until a new gastro-intestinal tract had been grown ; however, warships haven't room or mass to spare for such gadgets.

I plugged myself back into control. Reports snapped through my ears, numbers flickered before my eyes, I made my decisions and issued my orders. But chiefly I was conscious of a background whine in my phones, blood and a little vomit on my tongue. We were not going to be captured after all.

Instead, we fought free and returned to base, what was left of us.

I wonder if military men have always been intellectuals. It isn't in their legend. Rather, we think of headlong Alexander, methodical Caesar, Napoleon stumping across Europe, Malanowicz and his computers. But shouldn't we likewise remember Aristotle, the Julian calendar, the Code, the philosophical project? At any rate, when you fight across interstellar distances, for commonwealths embodying whole planetary systems, you have to understand the machines which make it possible ; you have to try to understand races as sentient as man, but separated from us by three or four thousand million years of evolution ; you even have to know something about man himself, lest minds fall to pieces out yonder. So the average officer today is better educated and has done a good bit more thinking than the average Brother of Love.

Oh, that Brotherhood! I wish they could have sat, dirt and self-righteousness and the whole dismal works, in Colonel Goncharov's class.

Sunlight slanted across Academy lawns, lost itself among oak leaves, emerged to glance off a cannon which had fired at Trafalgar, and struck the comets upon his shoulders. I sat and worshipped, at first, for he had won the Lunar Crescent before I was born. But then he asked me to do what was harder.

"Gentlemen," he said, in that slow, accented Esperanto which was such a joke in our barracks—and he leaned across his desk, balanced on fingertips, and the sun touched

his hair also, it was still rust colour, and made shadows in the creases of his face; and, yes, a smell of green (E)arth blew in, with the sleepy noise of a mower somewhere in the middle distance—"gentlemen, you have heard a good many fine words about honour, *esprit de corps,* and service to mankind. They are true enough. But you will not live up to them unless you can see your service in its proper perspective. The Cosmocorps is not the élite of human society, its mission is not the purpose of society, it must not expect the highest material rewards or even the highest honours which society has to offer.

"We are an instrument.

"Man is not alone in this universe. Nor is he entitled to every habitable world. There are other races, with their own hopes and ambitions, their own pains and fears; they look out of other eyes and they think other thoughts, but their aims are no less legitimate to them than ours are to us. It is well when we can be friends with them.

"But that isn't forever possible. Some of you will explain it by original sin, some by Karma, some by simple mortal fallibility. The fact remains that societies do conflict. In such cases, one must try to negotiate the dispute. And true negotiation can only take place between equals. Therefore equality in the capability of inflicting harm, as well as in other and higher capabilities, is essential. I do not say this is good, I say merely that it is so. You are to become part of the instrument which gives Earth and the Union that capability.

"An instrument can be misused. A hammer can drive a nail or crush a skull. All too often, armies have been similarly misused. But the fact that you have accepted military discipline and will presently accept commissions does not absolve you from your responsibilities as citizens.

"*Read* your Clausewitz. War is not an end but a continuation of political intercourse. The most horrible disasters of horrible history occurred when that was forgotten. Your duty as officers—a duty too high and difficult to be included in the Articles—will be to remember."

I suppose that basically I am a humourless type. I like a joke as well as you do, I rather distinguished myself in my

class by my fund of limericks, a poker game or a drinking bout is fun, but I do take some things with a possibly priggish seriousness.

Like this matter of racial hatred. I will no more tolerate that word "Jango" than I would have tolerated "Nigger" or "Gook" a few centuries ago. (You see, I've read quite a lot of history. Hobby of mine, and a way to pass the long time between stars.) It was brought against me at the court martial. Tom Deare testified that I had spoken well of the Morwain. They were fair-minded men on the board, who reprimanded him and struck his words from the record, but—Tom, you were my friend. Weren't you?

Let me set straight what happened. Memory gets more total with every sweep of that minute hand. We were on Asphodel for refitting. Once this was the pet hope of every spaceman. Next to Earth herself, perhaps more so for many, Asphodel! (Yes, yes, I know it's an entire world, with ice caps and deserts and stinking swamps, but I mean the part we humans made our own, in those magnificent days when we thought we had the freedom of the galaxy, and could pick and choose our colony sites.) Mountains shouldering white into a cornflower sky, valleys one dazzle of flowers and bird wings, the little laughterful towns and the girls. . . . But this was late in the war. You hated to go out after dark, for the enemy held those stars. Most of the towns were already empty, doors creaked in the wind, echoes rang hollow from your footfall in the streets. Now and then a thunderclap rolled, another ferry taking off with another load of civilians for evacuation. Asphodel fell to the Morwain two months afterward.

We sat in a deserted tavern, Tom and I, violating regs by drinking liquor which could not be taken away. There was nothing else to do. War is mostly hurry up and wait. Sunlight came in, and the same green smell I remembered across an eon, and a dog ran by outside, abandoned, bewildered, hungry.

"Oh, God *damn* them!" Tom shouted into silence.

"Who?" I asked, pouring myself a refill. "If you mean those officious bastards in Q.M., I entirely agree, but aren't you wishing a rather large job onto the Almighty?"

"This is no time to be funny," he said.

"It's no time to be anything else," I answered. We had just heard about the destruction of the Ninth Fleet.

"The Jangos," he said. "The filthy, slimy, slithering, pervert-begotten Jangos."

"The Morwain, you mean," I said. I was rather drunk too, or I would simply have held my peace. But it buzzed in my brain. "They aren't filthy. Cleaner by instinct than we are. You don't see litter in their cities. Their perspiration is glutinous, they walk like cats, and they have three sexes, but what of it?"

"What *of* it?" He raised a fist. His features had gone white, except for two fever-spots on the cheekbones. "They're going to take over the universe and you ask what of it?"

"Who says they're going to?"

"The news, you clotbrain!"

I couldn't answer directly, so I said, with that exaggerated consciousness of each single word which comes at a certain stage of drink: "Earth-type planets are none too common. They wanted the same real estate we did. Border disputes led to war. Now their announced purpose is to draw Earth's teeth, just as ours was to draw theirs. But they haven't said anything about throwing us off the planets—most of the planets—we already hold. That'd be too costly."

"No, it wouldn't. They'll only need to massacre our colonials."

"Would we massacre—what's the figure?—about twenty thousand million in either case—would we massacre that many thinking creatures?"

"I'd like to," he got out between his teeth.

"Look," I said, "forget the propaganda. As the war dragged on, and went badly, we've lost all sense of proportion. Suppose they do occupy us?"

"Those tentacled horrors," he whispered, "under the spires of Oxford."

Well, for me it would be strangers walking the Wyoming earth where free men once whooped their cattle down the long trail; and for Iwasaki, demon shapes gaping before Buddha at Kamakura; and for Goncharov, if he was unfortunate enough to be still alive, an alien victory

monument raised in the holy Kremlin; and on and on, man-history's tapestry warped into a shape our dead would never have recognized. But—"They'll set up a government, if they win," I told him, "and we'll have to learn some new ways of thinking. But you know, I've studied them, and I met some of them before the war and got pretty friendly, and you know, they admire a lot about us."

He sat altogether still for a long while, before he breathed, "You mean you don't care if they win?"

"I mean that we'll have to face facts . . . if they win," I said. "We'll have to adapt, in order to conserve as much as we can. We could be useful to them."

That was when he hit me.

Well, I didn't hit back. I walked straight out of there, into the obscenely beautiful sunlight, and left him weeping. The next day we said nothing about the incident and worked together with stiff politeness.

But he has testified that I want to be a collaborationist.

Alice, did you ever understand what the war was about? You said goodbye with a gallantry which was almost more than I could endure, and the one time in these five years that I have had Earth furlough, we had too much else CENSOR CENSOR CENSOR. But I suspect that to you these imperial questions were simply a thing, like sickness or a floater crash, which could eat your man.

It was raining when last I left. The ground was still dark with winter, here and there a bank of dirty snow melting away. The sky hung low, like some vague grey roof, and threw tendrils of mist around the house. But I could see quite a distance across this ranch of ours, over the high plateau until the buttes, where I was someday going to take my son hunting, blocked off vision. The rain was soft, it made little drops in your hair, like Hiddy's blood—No, anyhow, I heard our brook chuckle, the one we installed the first year we owned the place, and the air smelled wet too, and I was as conscious of an aching toe as I was of your body or of the stiffness in my gullet.

I hope you find yourself another man. That may not be easy. It won't be, if I know you; for you are a traitor's widow, and you have too much cleanliness to take one of

those Brothers who will come sucking around. But, well, someone from the Cosmocorps, returned to cope as best he can with an Earth gone strange.

Sure, I'm jealous of him. But curiously, not of the fact that you will tell him, "I love you" in the dark. Only of his becoming father to Jeanne and Bobby. So does this justify Drusilla (and others, now and then) when I never doubted you would stay loyal to me?

But I am supposed to justify something allegedly more important. The trouble is, it's so childishly simple that I can't see why this psychograph is needed.

Look: The Morwain and the Terrestrial spheres had interpenetrated long before the war. "Border dispute" is a bad phrase; the universe is too big for borders. They have a thriving colony on the second planet of GGC 421387, which has extended its industry throughout the system. And this planet is a bare fifty light-years from Earth.

The fighting began much further away. Savamor, as we call the planet in question—human throats can't make that particular music—was then a liability to them. They had to defend it, which tied up considerable strength.

We evacuated Asphodel, didn't we? Yes, but Savamor was too valuable. Not just the industry and the strategic location, though naturally they counted too. Savamor is a myth.

I have been there. That was as a newly fledged lieutenant, aboard the old *Danno-ura,* in days when the Fleet made goodwill visits. Already there were disputes, there had been clashes, an ugliness was in the air. We knew, and they knew, that we orbited our ships around the planet as a warning.

Nevertheless we were understandably excited about getting leave. This was where the Dancers had gone to escape the upheavals at home, this was where they had raised those cities which remain a wonder and written the Declaration for a new chapter—oh, think of America shining before weary old Europe, but think also of Paris.

We got off at Darway port, and I shook my party in order to drift about on my own. When I was among elfin green towers, on a green-carpeted lane, and the long line

of jewelposts glistened before me . . . what could I do but call it the Emerald City? After some hours I was tired and sat down on a terrace to hear the melodies. They're plangent, on no scale that men ever invented, but I liked them. Watching the beings go by, not just Morwain but beings from twenty different species, a thousand different cultures, I felt so cosmopolitan that it was like kissing my first girl.

Before long a Morwa joined me. "Sir," he said in fluent Esperanto—I won't try to remember the nuances of his accent—"may this one have the joy of your presence?"

"My pleasure," I said. And we got to talking. Of course, there was no drink, but none was required, I was quite intoxicated enough.

Tamulan was one of his names. At first we just exchanged pleasantries, then we got onto customs, then into politics. He was unfailingly courteous, even when I got a little overheated about aggressions against our colonies. He simply pointed out how the matter looked from his side—but never mind now. You will be hearing the same things in years to come.

"We must not fight," he said. "We have too much in common."

"Maybe that's why we do fight," I said, and congratulated myself on so neat an insight.

His tentacles drooped; a man would have sighed. "Perhaps so. But we are natural allies. Consider our societies, consider how the stars lie in the galaxy. Who would profit from a war between Earth and Morwai, except the Bilturs?"

In those days the Bilturs were remote from Sol. We hadn't borne their pressure, that had been Morwai's job. "They're sentient too," I said.

"They are monsters," he replied. At the time, I didn't believe what he went on to tell me. Now I have studied too much to disbelieve. I will not admit that there is any race which has forfeited its right to existence, but there are certainly cultures which have.

"Come, though," he said at length, "twilight cools inward and one hears a rustle of nest-found feathers. Will you grace our home by taking dinner?"

Our home, you note. Not his, but his and his mates' and

the fuzzy little cubs'. We can learn some things from the Morwain.

And they from us, to be sure. Chiaroscuro painting; Périgordian cuisine; the Bill of Rights. However, such matters have been cheapened by noise about What We Are Fighting For. They will need time to recover.

So what have we been fighting for? Not a few planets; both sides are realistic enough to horse trade them, albeit our conflicting claims were the proximate cause of battle. Nor, in truth, any desire on either side to impose a particular set of values on the galaxy; only our commentators are sufficiently stupid to believe that's even desirable. Why, then?

Why me? Why have I fought?

Because I was a career officer. Because men of my blood were fighting. Because I do not want aliens walking our land and ordering us about. *I do not.*

I say into the psychograph, and I am going to leave this tape unwiped because I most passionately want to be believed, my wish is that Earth should win. For this I would not only give my own life; that's easy, if you don't stop to think about the implications, and it's always possible. No, I would throw Alice, and Bobby, and Jeanne who must by now have become the most enchanting awkward hybrid of child and girl, into the furnace. Not to speak of Paris, and the caves where my ancestors drew the mammoths they dared hunt, and the whole damned state of Wyoming—from which it follows that Savamor planet would occasion me simply the mildest regret. Doesn't it?

As for why my feelings run thus, we must go deeper than psycho-dynamics has yet managed. In spite of glib talk about "instinct of territoriality" and "symbol identification," I don't believe we really know

> *Why men were born: but surely we are brave,*
> *Who take the Golden Road to Samarkand.*

(Will they remember Flecker, when Earth has been changed?)

I'm rambling again. My position can be put approximately, in crude terms: Somebody has to have the final

say—not any dictatorship, just the tribunal power—as to what is to happen in the galaxy. I want it to be my people.

No, let's modify that. I only want my people to have the final say as to what is to happen to them.

If, for this purpose, we must destroy Tamulan who was so hospitable, and his mates and his fuzzy cubs that climbed over my knees, and the Emerald City, well, so be it. Earth should not be dominated by anyone. Nor dominate anyone else, ideally; trouble is, nobody's allowed simply to mind his own business. We get down to some kind of bedrock when we say that man must be free to settle man's destiny.

My question, then, is merely, What do you do when you see that this isn't going to be possible?

I would like to write a love letter to Earth, but I am no writer and I can only call up a jumble: a sky that burned with sunset one snow-clad evening; "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created free and equal;" the astonishing smallness of Stonehenge, so that you need some time to feel the sheer mass of it, and the astonishing mass of the Parthenon, so that you must sit a while in the spilling Athenian sunlight to grasp its beauty; moonlight on a restless ocean; Beethoven's quartets; the cadence of boots in a rain-wet street; a hand axe chipped out by some heavy-browed Neanderthal who also wondered why men were born; a kiss which becomes more than a kiss, and nine months later a red, wrinkled, indignant blob of life; the feel of a horse's muscles flowing between my thighs; caviar, champagne, and eyes meeting in the middle of elegance; outrageous puns; Mrs. Elton, my neighbour, who raised three sons to manhood after her own man was dead—no, the clock is moving. I have to compose my thoughts most carefully now.

None less than General Wang briefed me. He sat in the command room, in the depths of Hell-Won't-Have-it, with the star tank a-glitter behind his big bald head, and after I came to attention there was a silence so long that the rustle of the ventilators began to run up and down my

spine. When he finally said, "At ease, Colonel. Sit down," I was shocked to hear he had grown old.

He played with a duplipen for a while longer before he raised his eyes and said, "You notice we are alone. This is a matter for absolute security. At present an 87 per cent probability of success is computed—success defined as mission accomplished with less than 50 per cent casualties—but if word should get out the operation will become hopeless."

I never really believed those rumours about Morwain agents among us. No being who would sell out his own species could make officer grade, could he? However, I nodded and said, "Understood, sir."

He swivelled around to face the tank. "This thing has a very limited value," he remarked in the same dead voice. "There are too many stars. But it can illustrate the present situation. Observe." His hands passed over the controls, some of those swimming points of light turned gold and some blood colour.

Enemy colour.

I saw how we had reeled back across the parsecs, I saw the ugly salient thrusting in among those suns which still were ours, and even then I guessed what was to come and snatched after words of protest.

"This system . . . entire sector dependent on it . . . interior lines of communication . . . depots . . . repair centre—" I scarcely heard. I was back on Savamor, in Tamulan's home.

Oh, yes, a squadron could get through. Space is too big to guard everywhere. One would meet defences at the end of the trip, which were not too heavy when attack was unexpected, and afterward one must fight back through ships which would converge like hornets from every point of the three-dimensional compass; but yes, indeed, the probability was more than 85 per cent that one could shoot a doomsday barrage into the sky of Savamor.

It wouldn't even be inhumane. Simply a concerted flash of so many megatons that the whole atmosphere was turned momentarily into an incandescent plasma. True, the firestorms would run for months afterward, and nothing would be left but desert, and if any life whatsoever

survived it would need several million years to crawl back from the oceans. But Tamulan would never know what had happened. If Tamulan wasn't off with his own fleet somewhere; if he hadn't already died with a laser beam through his guts, or gasping for air that wasn't around him any longer, or vomiting in radiation sickness, as I'd seen human men do. Without a habitable planet for their economic foundation, industries on the other worlds around GGC 421387 could no longer be maintained. Without the entire system for base and supply centre, the salient must be pinched off. Without that salient, pointed like a knife at Earth—

"Sir," I said, "they haven't bombarded any of our colonies."

"Nor we any of theirs," Wang said. "Now we have no choice."

"But—"

"Be still!" He surged half out of his chair. One eyelid began to twitch. "Do you think I have not lain awake about this?"

Presently, in the monotone with which he began: "It will be a heavy setback for them. We will be able to hold this sector for an estimated year longer: which is to say, prolong the war a year."

"For the sake of that—"

"Much could happen in a year. We might develop a new weapon. They might decide Earth is too expensive a conquest. If nothing else, a year can be lived in, back home."

"Suppose they retaliate," I said.

He is a brave man; he met my gaze. "One cannot act, or even exist, without risk," he said.

I had no answer.

"If you feel grave objections, Colonel," he said, "I shall not order you into this. I shall not so much as think ill of you. There are plenty of others."

Nor could I answer that.

Be it made plain here, as it was at my eminently fair trial: no man under my command is in any way to blame for what happened. Our squadron took space with myself the only one in all those ships who knew what the mission

was. My subordinate captains had been told about a raid in the Savamor environ, and took for granted that we were after some rogue planet used for a stronghold, much like our own. The missile officers must have had their suspicions, after noting what cargo was given into their care, but they stand far down the chain. And they assumed that last-minute information caused me to shift course and make for Cantrell's Cluster. There we fought our bloody, valiant, and altogether futile battle, won, and limped home again.

Thus I am responsible for much death and maiming. Why?

My official defence was that I had decided the attack on Savamor was lunacy, but knowing that the Morwain salient also depended on the Cluster, I hoped to accomplish our purpose by a surprise attack there. Nonsense. We only shook them up a little, as any second-year cadet could have predicted.

My private reason is that I had to cripple the strength which Wang would otherwise use to destroy Savamor, with a more reliable officer in charge. Facts vindicate my logic. We have already abandoned Hell-Won't-Have-It, and could now find no way past the triumphantly advancing enemy. Nor would there be any point in it; they have straightened out their front and the rest of the war must be fought along conventional lines.

My ultimate motive was the hope of being captured. They would have treated us decently, as we have thus far treated our own prisoners. In time I would have returned to Alice, with the favour of the Morwain behind me. And isn't my race going to need go-betweens?

Eventually, leaders? For they can't hold us down too long. The Bilturs are coming, the Morwain will want allies. We can set a price on our friendship, and the price can perhaps be freedom.

Once upon a time, the English fought the French, and the Americans fought the English, and those were fairly clean wars as wars go. They left no lasting hates. It was possible later for the nations to make fellowship in the face of the real enemy. But who, across the centuries, has forgiven Dachau?

Had we fired on Savamor, I don't believe the Morwain would have laid Earth waste. Tamulan's people aren't that kind. Nevertheless, would they not have felt bound to tear down every work, every institution, every dream of the race which was capable of such a thing, and rebuild in their own image? And could they ever have trusted us again?

Whereas, having fought and been defeated honourably, we may hope to save what is really ours: may even hope to have it admired and imitated, a decade or two from now.

Of course, this is predicated on the assumption that Earth will lose the war. One keeps believing a miracle will come, can we but hold out long enough. I did myself; I had to strangle the belief. And then, in my arrogance, I set my single judgment against what can only be called that of my entire people.

Was I right? Will my statue stand beside Jefferson's and Lincoln's, for Bobby to point at and say, He was my father—? Or will they spit on our name until he must change it in the silly hope of vanishing? I don't know. I never will.

So I am now going to spend what time remains in thinking about

THE END

The author writes—"The theme of sacrifice led me to think of the Messiah or, more exactly, the idea of the second coming and how this might take place in the twentieth century. In my version, which I would describe as a botched second coming, the Messiah never quite managing to come to terms with the twentieth century, I have used a fragmentary and non-sequential technique . . . and have tried to invoke some of the images that a twentieth century Messiah might see. You'll notice that the entries are alphabetised."

YOU AND ME AND THE CONTINUUM

by J. G. Ballard

Author's note. The attempt to break into the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on Good Friday, 196–, first assumed to be the act of some criminal psychopath, later led to enquiries of a very different character. Readers will recall that the little evidence collected seemed to point to the strange and confusing figure of an unidentified Air Force pilot whose body was washed ashore on a beach near Dieppe three months later. Other traces of his 'mortal remains' were found in a number of unexpected places: in a footnote to a paper on some unusual aspects of schizophrenia published thirty years earlier in a since defunct psychiatric journal; in the pilot for an unpurchased TV thriller, "Lieutenant 70"; and on the record labels of a pop singer known as The Him—to instance only a few. Whether in fact this man was a returning astronaut suffering from amnesia, the figment of an ill-organised advertising campaign or, as some have suggested, the

second coming of Christ, is anyone's guess. What little evidence we have has been assembled below.

Ambivalent. She lay quietly on her side, listening to the last bars of the scherzo as his hand hesitated on the zip. This strange man, and his endless obsession with Bruckner, nucleic acids, Minkowski space-time and God knows what else. Since she had picked him up at the conference on Space Medicine they had barely exchanged a word. Was he wholly there? At times it was almost as if he were trying to put himself together out of some bizarre jigsaw. She turned round, surprised by his dark glasses six inches from her face and the eyes burning through them like stars.

Brachycephalic. They stopped beneath the half-painted bowl of the radio-telescope. As the blunt metal ear turned on its tracks, fumbling at the sky, he put his hands to his skull, feeling the still-open sutures. Beside him Quinton, this dapper pomaded Judas, was waving at the distant hedges where the three limousines were waiting. "If you like we can have a hundred cars—a complete motorcade." Ignoring Quinton, he took a piece of quartz from his flying jacket and laid it on the turf. From it poured the code-music of the quasars.

Coded Sleep. Dr. Nathan looked up as the young woman in the white coat entered the laboratory. "Ah, Doctor Austin." He pointed with his cigarette to the journal on his desk. "This monograph—'Coded Sleep and Intertime' —they can't trace the author . . . someone at this Institute, apparently. I've assured them it's not a hoax. By the way, where's our volunteer?"

"He's asleep." She hesitated, but only briefly. "In my apartment."

"So." Before she left Dr. Nathan said: "Take a blood sample. His group may prove interesting at a later date."

Delivery System. Certainly not an ass. Recent research, the lecturer pointed out, indicated that cosmic space vehicles may have been seen approaching the earth two

thousand years earlier. As for the New Testament story, it had long been accepted that the unusual detail (Matt. XXI) of the Messiah riding into Jerusalem on "an ass and a colt the foal of an ass" was an unintelligently literal reading of a tautological Hebrew idiom, a mere verbal blunder. "What is space?" the lecturer concluded. "What does it mean to our sense of time and the images we carry of our finite lives? Are space vehicles merely overgrown V2's, or are they Jung's symbols of redemption, ciphers in some futuristic myth?"

As the applause echoed around the half-empty amphitheatre Karen Novotny saw his hands stiffen against the mirror on his lap. All week he had been bringing the giant mirrors to the empty house near the reservoirs.

Export Credit Guarantees. "After all, Madame Nhu is asking a thousand dollars an interview, in this case we can insist on five and get it. Damn it, this is The Man. . . ." The brain dulls. An exhibition of atrocity photographs rouses a flicker of interest. Meanwhile, the quasars burn dimly from the dark peaks of the universe. Standing across the room from Elizabeth Austin, who watches him with guarded eyes, he hears himself addressed as "Paul", as if waiting for clandestine messages from the resistance headquarters of World War III.

Five Hundred Feet High. The Madonnas move across London like immense clouds. Painted on clapboard in the Mantegna style, their composed faces gaze down on the crowds watching from the streets below. Several hundred pass by, vanishing into the haze over the Queen Mary reservoir, Staines, like a procession of marine deities. Some remarkable *entrepreneur* has arranged this *tour de force*, in advertising circles everyone is talking about the mysterious international agency that now has the Vatican account. At the Institute Dr. Nathan is trying to sidestep the Late Renaissance. "Mannerism bores me. Whatever happens," he confides to Elizabeth Austin, "we must keep him off Dali and Ernst."

Gioconda. As the slides moved through the projector the

women's photographs, in profile and full-face, jerked one by one across the screen. "A characteristic of the criminally insane," Dr. Nathan remarked, "is the lack of tone and rigidity of the facial mask."

The audience fell silent. An extraordinary woman had appeared on the screen. The planes of her face seemed to lead towards some invisible focus, projecting an image that lingered on the walls, as if they were inhabiting her skull. In her eyes glowed the forms of archangels. "That one?" Dr. Nathan asked quietly. "Your mother? I see."

Helicopter. The huge fans of the Sikorski beat the air fifty feet above them as they drove into the town, a tornado of dust subsiding through the shattered trees along the road. Quinton sat back at the wheel of the Lincoln, now and then signalling over his shoulder at the helicopter pilot. As the music pounded from the radio of the car Quinton shouted: "What a beat! Is this you as well? Now, what else do you need?" "Mirrors, sand, a time shelter."

Imago Tapes.
Tanguy: *Jours de Lenteur.*
Ernst: The Robing of the Bride.
Chirico: The Dream of the Poet.

Jackie Kennedy, I See You in My Dreams. At night the serene face of the President's widow hung like a lantern among the corridors of sleep. Warning him, she seemed to summon to her side all the legions of the bereaved. At dawn he knelt in the grey hotel room over the copies of Newsweek and Paris-Match. When Karen Novotny called he borrowed her nail scissors and began to cut out the photographs of the model girls. "In a dream I saw them lying on a beach. Their legs were rotting, giving out a green light."

Kodachrome. Captain Kirby, MI5, studied the prints. They showed: (1) a thick-set man in an Air Force jacket, unshaven face half-hidden by the dented hat-peak; (2) a transverse section through the spinal level T-12; (3) a

crayon self-portrait by David Feary, 7-year-old schizophrenic at the Belmont Asylum, Sutton; (4) radio-spectra from the quasar CTA 102; (5) an antero-posterior radiograph of a skull, estimated capacity 1500 cc.; (6) spectroheliogram of the sun taken with the K line of calcium; (7) left and right hand-prints showing massive scarring between second and third metacarpal bones. To Dr. Nathan he said: "And all these make up one picture?"

Lieutenant 70. An isolated incident at the Strategic Air Command base at Omaha, Nebraska, December 25, 196–, when a landing H-bomber was found to have an extra pilot on board. The subject carried no identification tags and was apparently suffering from severe retrograde amnesia. He subsequently disappeared while being X-rayed at the base hospital for any bio-implants or transmitters, leaving behind a set of plates of a human foetus evidently taken some thirty years previously. It was assumed that this was in the nature of a hoax and that the subject was a junior officer who had become fatigued while playing Santa Claus on an inter-base visiting party.

Minkowski Space-Time. In part a confusion of mathematical models was responsible, Dr. Nathan decided. Sitting behind his desk in the darkened laboratory, he drew slowly on the gold-tipped cigarette, watching the shadowy figure of the man seated opposite him, his back to the watery light from the aquarium tanks. At times part of his head seemed to be missing, like some disintegrating executive from a Francis Bacon nightmare. As yet irreconcilable data: his mother was a 65-year-old terminal psychopath at Broadmoor, his father a still-unborn child in a Dallas lying-in hospital. Other fragments were beginning to appear in a variety of unlikely places: text-books on chemical kinetics, advertising brochures, a pilot for a TV puppet thriller. Even the pun seemed to play a significant role, curious verbal cross-overs. What language could embrace all these, or at least provide a key: computer codes, origami, dental formulae? Perhaps in the end Fellini

would make a sex-fantasy out of this botched second coming: 1½.

Narcissistic. Many things preoccupied him during this time in the sun: the plasticity of visual forms, the image maze, the catatonic plateau, the need to re-score the C.N.S., pre-uterine claims, the absurd—i.e., the phenomenology of the universe. . . . The crowd at the plage, however, viewing this beach Hamlet, noticed only the scars which disfigured his chest, hands and feet.

Ontologically Speaking. In slow motion the test cars moved towards each other on collision courses, unwinding behind them the coils that ran to the metering devices by the impact zone. As they collided the gentle debris of wings and fenders floated into the air. The cars rocked slightly, worrying each other like amiable whales, and then continued on their disintegrating courses. In the passenger seats the plastic models transcribed graceful arcs into the buckling roofs and windshields. Here and there a passing fender severed a torso, the air behind the cars was a carnival of arms and legs.

Placenta. The X-ray plates of the growing foetus had shown the absence of both placenta and umbilical cord. Was this then, Dr. Nathan pondered, the true meaning of the immaculate conception—that not the mother but the child was virgin, innocent of any Jocasta's clutching blood, sustained by the unseen powers of the universe as it lay waiting within its amnion? Yet why had something gone wrong? All too obviously there had been a complete cock-up.

Quasars. Malcolm X, beautiful as the trembling of hands in *tabes dorsalis*; Claude Etherly, migrant angel of the Pre-Third; Lee Harvey Oswald, rider of the scorpion.

Refuge. Gripping the entrenching tool in his bloodied hands, he worked away at the lid of the vault. In the grey darkness of the Abbey the chips of cement seemed to draw light from his body. The bright crystals formed points

like a half-familiar constellation, the crests of a volume graph, the fillings in Karen Novotny's teeth.

Speed-King. The highest speed ever achieved on land by a mechanically-propelled wheeled vehicle was 1004.347 m.p.h. reached at Bonneville Salt Flats on 5 March 196–, by a 27-feet-long car powered by three J-79 aircraft engines developing a total of 51,000 h.p. The vehicle disintegrated at the end of the second run, and no trace was found of the driver, believed to be a retired Air Force pilot.

The Him. The noise from the beat group rehearsing in the ballroom drummed at his head like a fist, driving away the half-formed equations that seemed to swim at him from the gilt mirrors in the corridor. What were they—fragments of a unified field theory, the tetragrammaton, or the production sequences for a deodorant pessary? Below the platform the party of teenagers the Savoy doormen had let in through the Embankment entrance were swaying to the music. He pushed through them to the platform. As he pulled the microphone away from the leader a girl jeered from the floor. Then his knees began to kick, his pelvis sliding and rocking. "Ye . . . yeah, yeah yeah!" he began, voice rising above the amplified guitars.

U.H.F. "Considerable interference has been noted with TV reception over a wide area during the past three weeks," Kirby explained, pointing to the map. "This has principally taken the form of modifications to the plot-lines and narrative sequences of a number of family serials. Mobile detection vans have been unable to identify the source, but we may conclude that his central nervous system is acting as a powerful transmitter."

Vega. In the darkness the half-filled reservoirs reflected the starlight, the isolated heads of pumping gear marking the distant catwalks. Karen Novotny moved towards him, her white skirt lifted by the cold air. "When do we see you again? This time, it's been . . ." He looked up at the night sky, then pointed to the blue star in the solar apex. "Per-

haps in time. We're moving there. Read the sand, it will tell you when."

W.A.S.P. Without doubt there had been certain difficulties after the previous incarnation resulting from the choice of racial stock. Of course, from one point of view the unhappy events of our own century might be regarded as, say, demonstration ballets on the theme "Hydrocarbon Synthesis" with strong audience participation. This time, however, no ethnic issues will be raised, and the needs for social mobility and a maximum acceptance personality profile make it essential that a subject of Gentile and preferably Protestant and Anglo-Saxon . . .

Xoanon. These small plastic puzzles, similar to the gewgaws given away by petroleum and detergent manufacturers, were found over a wide area, as if they had fallen from the sky. Millions had been produced, although their purpose was hard to see. Later it was found that unusual objects could be made from them.

Ypres Reunion. Kirby waded through the breaking surf, following the tall man in the peaked cap and leather jacket who was moving slowly between the waves to the submerged sandbank two hundred yards away. Already pieces of the dying man were drifting past Kirby in the water. Yet was this the time-man, or did his real remains lie in the tomb at the Abbey? He had come bearing the gifts of the sun and the quasars, and instead had sacrificed them for this unknown soldier resurrected now to return to his Flanders field.

Zodiac. Undisturbed, the universe would continue on its round, the unrequited ghosts of Malcolm X, Lee Harvey Oswald and Claude Etherly raised on the shoulders of the galaxy. As his own identity faded, its last fragments glimmered across the darkening landscape, lost integers in a hundred computer codes, sand-grains on a thousand beaches, fillings in a million mouths.

— J. G. BALLARD

This is James Blish's first appearance with an original story in a British science-fiction magazine. It was specially written for this issue on the theme of sacrifice.

A HERO'S LIFE

by James Blish

I

Listening automatically for the first sound of possible interruption, Simon de Kuyl emptied his little poisons into the catch-basin in his room and ironically watched the wisps of wine-coloured smoke rise from the corroded maw of the drain. He was sorry to see them go; they were old though venomous friends.

He knew without vanity—it was too late for that—that High Earth had no more distinguished a traitor than he. But after only four clockless days on Boadicea, he had already found it advisable to change his name, his methods and his residence. It was a humiliating beginning.

The almost worn-away legend on the basin read: *Julius, Boadicea*. Things made on this planet were usually labelled that generally, as though any place in the world were like every other, but this both was and was not true. The present city, Druidsfall, was the usual low jumble of decayed masonry, slightly less ancient slums and blank-faced offices, but the fact that it was also the centre of the treason industry—hence wholly inconvenient for Simon—gave it character. The traitors had an architectural style of their own, characterized by structures put together mostly of fragmented statues and petrified bodies fitted like puzzle-pieces or maps. Traitors on Boadicea had belonged to an honoured social class for four hundred years, and their edifices made it known.

Luckily, custom allowed Simon to stay clear of these

buildings after the first formalities and seek out his own bed and breakfast. In the old friendly inns of Druidsfall, the anonymous thumps of the transients—in death, love or trade—are said to make the lodgers start in their beds with their resident guilts. Of course all inns are like that; but nevertheless, that is why the traitors like to quarter there, rather than in the Traitors' Halls: it guarantees them privacy, and at the same time helps them to feel alive. There is undoubtedly something inhibiting about trying to deal within walls pieced together of broken stone corpses.

Here in The Skopolamander, Simon awaited his first contact. This—now that he had dumped his poisons—would fall at the end of his immunity period. Quarantine was perhaps a more appropriate term. . . .

No, the immunity was real, however limited, for as a traitor to High Earth he had special status. High Earth, the Boadiceans thought, was not necessarily Old Earth—but not necessarily not, either. For twelve days Simon would not be killed out of sheer conservatism, at least, though nobody would attempt to deal with him, either.

He had three of those days still to run—a dull prospect, since he had already completed every possible preliminary, and spiced only by the fact that he had yet to figure out how long a day might be. Boadicea's sun was a ninety-minute micro-variable, twinned at a distance of a light-year with a blue-white, Rigel-like star which stood—or had stood throughout historical times—in high Southern latitudes. This gave Druidsfall only four consecutive hours of quasi-darkness at a time, and even during this period the sky was indigo rather than black at its deepest, and more often than not flaring with aurorae. There was one lighting the window now, looking like a curtain of orange and hazy blue fire licking upward along a bone trellis.

Everything in the city, as everywhere upon Boadicea, bespoke the crucial importance of fugitive light, and the fade-out-fade-in weather that went with it, all very strange after the desert glare of High Earth. The day of Simon's arrival had dawned in mist, which cold gales had torn away into slowly pulsating sunlight; then had come clouds and rain which had turned to snow and then to sleet—more weather in a day than the minarets of Novoe Jiddah,

Simon's registered home town, saw in a six-month. The fluctuating light and wetness was reflected in Druidsfall most startlingly by its gardens, which sprang up when one's back was turned and did not need to be so much weeded as actually fought. They were constantly in motion to the ninety-minute solar cycle, battering their elaborate heads against back walls which were everywhere crumbling after centuries of such soft, implacable impacts. Half the buildings in Druidsfall glistened with their leaves, which were scaled with so much soft gold that they stuck to anything they were blown against—the wealth of Boadicea was based anciently in the vast amounts of uranium and other power-metals in its soil, from which the plants extracted the inevitable associated gold as radiation shielding for their spuriously tender genes. Everyone one saw in the streets of Druidsfall, or any other such city, was a mutation of some sort—if he was not an outworlder—but after a day in the winds they were all half yellow, for the gold scales smeared off the flying leaves like butter; everyone was painted with meaningless riches, the very bedsheets glittered ineradicably with flakes of it, and brunettes—especially among the elaborate hair-styles of the men—were at a premium.

Simon poured water from an amphora into the basin, which promptly hissed like a dragon just out of the egg and blurted a mushroom of cold blue steam which made him cough. Careful! he thought; acid after water, never water after acid—I am forgetting the most elementary lessons. I should have used wine. Time for a drink, in Gro's name!

He caught up his cloak and went out, not bothering to lock the door. He had nothing worth stealing but his honour, which was in his right hip pocket. Oh, and of course, High Earth—that was in his left. Besides, Boadicea was rich: one could hardly turn around without knocking over some heap of treasures, artifacts of a millennium which nobody had sorted for a century or even wanted to be bothered to sort. Nobody would think to steal from a poor traitor any object smaller than a king, or preferably, a planet.

In the tavern below, Simon was joined at once by a playwoman. "Are you buying tonight, excellence?"

"Why not?" And in fact he was glad to see her. She was blonde and ample, a relief from the sketchy women of the Respectables whom fashion made look as though they suffered from some nervous disease that robbed them of appetite. Besides she would exempt him from the normal sort of Boadicean polite conversation which consisted chiefly of elaborately involuted jokes at which it was considered gauche to laugh. The whole style of Boadicean conversation for that matter was intended to be ignored; gambits were a high art but end-games were a lost one. Simon sighed and signalled for beakers.

"You wear the traitors' clasp," she said, sitting across from him, "but not much tree-gold. Have you come to sell us High Earth?"

Simon did not even blink; he knew the query to be a standard opening with any outworlder of his profession.

"Perhaps. But I'm not on business at the moment."

"Of course not," the girl said gravely, her fingers playing continuously with a sort of rosary tasselled with two silver phalluses. "Yet I hope you prosper. My half-brother is a traitor, but he can find only small secrets to sell—how to make bombs, and the like. It's a thin life; I prefer mine."

"Perhaps he should swear by another country."

"Oh, his country is well worth selling, but his custom is poor. Neither buyer nor seller trusts him very far—a matter of style, I suppose. He'll probably wind up betraying some colony for a thousand beans and a fish-ball."

"You dislike the man—or is it the trade?" Simon said. "It seems not unlike your own, after all: one sells something one never really owned, and yet one still has it when the transaction is over, as long as both parties keep silent."

"You dislike women," the girl said, tranquilly, as a simple observation, not a challenge. "But all things are loans—not just chastity and trust. Why be miserly. To 'possess' wealth is as illusory as to 'possess' honour or a woman, and much less gratifying. Spending is better than saving."

"But there are rank orders in all things, too," Simon said, lighting a kief stick. He was intrigued in spite of himself. Hedonism was the commonest of philosophies in the civilized galaxy, but it was piquant to hear a playwoman trotting out its mouldy clichés with such fierce solemnity.

"Otherwise we should never know the good from the bad, or care."

"Do you like boys?"

"No, that's not one of my tastes. Ah: you will say that I don't condemn boy-lovers, and that values are in the end only preferences? I think not. In morals, empathy enters in, eventually."

"So: you wouldn't corrupt children, and torture revolts you. But Gro made you that way. Some men are not so handicapped. I meet them now and then." The hand holding the looped beads made a small, unconscious gesture of revulsion.

"I think they are the handicapped, not I—most planets hang their moral imbeciles, sooner or later. But what about treason? You didn't answer that question."

"My throat was dry . . . thank you. Treason, well—it's an art, hence again a domain of taste or preference. Style is everything; that's why my half-brother is so inept. If tastes changed he might prosper, as I might had I been born with blue hair."

"You could dye it."

"What, like the Respectables?" She laughed, briefly but unaffectedly. "I am what I am; disguises don't become me. Skills, yes—those are another matter. I'll show you, when you like. But no masks."

Skills can betray you too, Simon thought, remembering that moment at the Traitors' Guild when his proud sash of poison-shells had lost him in an instant every inch of altitude over the local professionals that he had hoped to trade on. But he only said again, "Why not?" It would be as good a way as any to while away the time; and once his immunity had expired he could never again trust a playwoman on Boadicea.

She proved, indeed, very skilful, and the time passed . . . but the irregular days—the clock in the tavern was on a different time from the one in his room, and neither even faintly agreed with his High Earth-based chronometer and metabolism—betrayed him. He awoke one morning/noon/night to find the girl turning slowly black beside him, in the last embrace of a fungal toxin he would have reserved for

the Emperor of Canes Venatici or the worst criminal in human history.

War had been declared. He had been notified that if he still wanted to sell High Earth, he would first have to show his skill at staying alive against the whole cold malice of all the Traitors of Boadicea.

II

He holed up quickly and drastically, beginning with a shot of transduction serum—an almost insanely dangerous expedient, for the stuff not only altered his appearance but his very heredity, leaving his head humming with false memories and traces of character, derived from the unknowable donors of the serum, which conflicted not only with his purposes but even with his tastes and motives. Under interrogation he would break down into a babbling crowd of random voices, as bafflingly scrambled as his blood types and his retina—and finger-prints, and to the eyes his gross physical appearance would be a vague characterless blur of many rôles—some of them derived from the D.N.A. of persons who had died a hundred years ago and at least that many parsecs away in space—but unless he got the anti-serum within fifteen days, he would first forget his mission, then his skills, and at last his very identity. Nevertheless, he judged that the risk had to be taken; for effete though the local traitors seemed to be, they were obviously quite capable of penetrating any lesser cover.

The next problem was how to complete the mission itself—it would not be enough just to stay alive. After all, he was still no ordinary traitor, nor even the usual kind of double agent; his task was to buy Boadicea while seeming to sell High Earth, but beyond that, there was a grander treason in the making for which the combined Guilds of both planets might only barely be sufficient—the toppling of the Green Exarch, under whose subtle non-human yoke half of humanity's worlds had not even the latter-day good sense to groan. For such a project, the wealth of Boadicea

was a pre-requisite, for the Green Exarch drew tithes from six fallen empires older than man—the wealth of Boadicea, and its reputation as the first colony to break with Old Earth, back in the first days of the Imaginary Drive.

And therein lay the difficulty, for Boadicea, beyond all other colony worlds, had fallen into a kind of autumn cannibalism. In defiance of that saying of Ezra-Tse, the edge was attempting to eat the centre. It was this worship of independence, or rather, of autonomy, which had not only made treason respectable, but had come nigh on to ennobling it . . . and was now imperceptibly emasculating it, like the statues one saw everywhere in Druidsfall which had been defaced and sexually mutilated by the grey disease of time and the weather.

Today, though all the Boadiceans proper were colonials in ancestry, they were snobs about their planet's pre-human history, as though they had themselves not nearly exterminated the aborigines but were their inheritors. The few shambling Charioteers who still lived stumbled through the streets of Druidsfall loaded with ritual honours, carefully shorn of real power but ostentatiously deferred to on the slightest occasion which might be noticed by anyone from High Earth. In the meantime, the Boadiceans sold each other out with delicate enthusiasm, but against High Earth —which was not necessarily Old Earth, but not necessarily was not, either—all gates were formally locked.

Formally only, Simon and High Earth were sure; for the habit of treason, like lechery, tends to grow with what it feeds on, and to lose discrimination in the process. Boadicea, like all forbidden fruits, should be ripe for the plucking, for the man with the proper key to its neglected garden.

The key that Simon had brought with him was now lost; he would have to forge another, with whatever crude tools could be made to fall to hand. The only one accessible to Simon at the moment was the dead playwoman's despised half-brother.

His name, Simon had found easily enough, was currently Da-Ud tam Altair, and he was Court Traitor to a small religious principate on the Gulf of the Rood, on the edge of The InContinent, half the world away from Druidsfall.

Since one of his duties was that of singing the Rood-Prince to sleep to the accompaniment of a sareh, a sort of gleeman's harp (actually a Charioteer instrument, ill-adapted to human fingers, and which Da-Ud played worse than most of those who affected it), Simon reached him readily in the guise of a ballad-merchant, selling him twelve-and-a-tilly of ancient High Earth songs Simon had made up while in transit to the principate ; it was as easy as giving Turkish Delight to a baby.

After the last mangled chord died, Simon told Da-Ud quietly:

"By the way . . . well sung, excellence . . . did you know that the Guild has murdered your half-sister?"

Da-Ud dropped the fake harp with a noise like a spring-toy coming unwound.

"Jillith? But she was only a playwoman! Why, in Gro's name—"

Then Da-Ud caught himself and stared at Simon with sudden, belated suspicion. Simon looked back, waiting.

"Who told you that? Damn you—are you a Torturer? I haven't—I've done nothing to merit—"

"I'm not a Torturer, and nobody told me," Simon said. "She died in my bed, as a warning to me."

He removed his Clasp from the shoulder of his cloak and clicked it. The little machine flowered briefly into a dazzling actinic glare, and then closed again. While Da-Ud was still covering his streaming eyes, Simon said softly:

"I am the Traitor-in-Chief of High Earth."

It was not the flash of the badge that was dazzling Da-Ud now. He lowered his hands. His whole plump body was trembling with hate and eagerness.

"What—what do you want of me, excellence? I have nothing to sell but the Rood-Prince . . . and a poor stick he is. Surely you would not sell me High Earth ; I am a poor stick myself."

"I would sell you High Earth for twenty riyals."

"You mock me!"

"No, Da-Ud. I came here to deal with the Guild, but they killed Jillith—and that as far as I'm concerned disqualifies them from being treated with as civilized professionals, or as human beings at all. She was pleasant and

intelligent and I was fond of her—and besides, while I'm perfectly willing to kill under some conditions, I don't hold with throwing away an innocent life for some footling dramatic gesture."

"I wholly agree," Da-Ud said. His indignation seemed to be at least half real. "But what will you do? What *can* you do?"

"I have to fulfil my mission, any way short of my own death—if I die, nobody will be left to get it done. But I'd most dearly love to cheat, dismay, disgrace the Guild in the process, if it could possibly be managed. I'll need your help. If we live through it, I'll see to it that you'll turn a profit, too; money isn't my first goal here, or even my second now."

"I'll tackle it," Da-Ud said at once, though he was obviously apprehensive, as was only sensible. "What precisely do you propose?"

"First of all, I'll supply you with papers indicating that I've sold you a part—not all—of the major thing I have to sell, which gives any man who holds it a lever in the State Ministry of High Earth. It shows that High Earth has been conspiring against several major powers, all human, for purposes of gaining altitude with the Green Exarch. They won't tell you precisely which worlds, but there will be sufficient information there so that the Exarchy would pay a heavy purse for them—and High Earth an even heavier one to get them back.

"It will be your understanding that the missing information is also for sale, but you haven't got the price."

"Suppose the Guild doesn't believe that?"

"They'll never believe—excuse me, I must be blunt—that you could have afforded the whole thing; they'll know I sold you *this* much of it only because I have a grudge, and you can tell them so—though I wouldn't expose the nature of the grudge if I were you. Were you unknown to them they might assume that you were me in disguise, but luckily they know you, and, ah, probably tend rather to underestimate you."

"Kindly put," Da-Ud said with a grin. "But that won't prevent them from assuming that I know your whereabouts, or have some way of reaching you. They'll interro-

gate for that, and of course I'll tell them. I know them, too ; it would be impossible not to tell, and I prefer to save myself needless pain."

"Of course—don't risk interrogation at all, tell them you want to sell *me* out, as well as the secret. That will make sense to them, and I think they must have rules against interrogating a member who offers to sell ; most Traitors' Guilds do."

"True, but they'll observe them only so long as they believe me ; that's standard, too."

Simon shrugged. "Be convincing, then," he said. "I have already said that this project will be dangerous ; presumably you didn't become a traitor for sweet safety's sole sake."

"No, but not for suicide's, either. But I'll abide the course. Where are the documents?"

"Give me access to your Prince's toposcope-scriber and I'll produce them. But first—twenty riyals, please."

"Minus two riyals for the use of the Prince's property. Bribes, you know."

"Your sister was wrong, you do have style, in a myopic sort of way. All right, eighteen riyals—and then let's get on to real business. My time is not my own—not by a century."

"But how do I reach you thereafter?"

"That information," Simon said blandly, "will cost you those other two riyals. and cheap at the price."

III

The Rood-Prince's brain-dictation laboratory was very far from being up to Guild standards, let alone High Earth's, but Simon was satisfied that the documents he generated there would pass muster. They were utterly authentic, and every experienced traitor had a feeling for that quality, regardless of such technical deficiencies as blurry image registration and irrelevant emotional overtones.

That done, Simon began to consider how he would meet Da-Ud when the game had that much furthered itself. The

arrangement he had made with the playwoman's half-brother was of course a blind, indeed a double blind, but it had to have the virtues of its imperfections or nothing would be accomplished. Yet Simon was now beginning to find it hard to *think*; the transduction serum was increasingly taking hold, and there were treasons taking place inside his skull which had nothing to do with Boadicea, the Green Exarch or High Earth. Worse: they seemed to have nothing to do with Simon de Kuyl, either, but instead muttered away about silly little provincial intrigues nothing could have brought him to care about—yet which made him feel irritated, angry, even ill, like a man in the throes of jealousy toward some predecessor and unable to reason them away. Knowing their source, he fought them studiously, but he knew they would get steadily worse, however resolute he was; they were coming out of his genes and his bloodstream, not his once finely honed, now dimming consciousness.

Under the circumstances, he was not going to be able to trust himself to see through very many highly elaborate schemes, so that it would be best to eliminate all but the most necessary. Hence it seemed better, after all, to meet Da-Ud in the Principate as arranged, and save the double dealing for more urgent occasions.

On the other hand, it would be foolish to hang around the Principate, waiting and risking some miscarriage—such as betrayal through a possible interrogation of Da-Ud—when there were things he might be accomplishing elsewhere. Besides, the unvarying foggy warmth and the fragmented, garish religiousness of the Principate both annoyed him and exercised pulls of conflicting enthusiasms and loyalties on several of his mask personalities, who had apparently been as unstable even when whole as their bits and pieces had now made him. He was particularly out of sympathy with the motto graven on the lintel of the Rood-Prince's vaguely bird-shaped palace: IVSTICE IS LOVE. The sentiment, obviously descended from some colonial Islamic sect, was excellent doctrine for a culture given to treason, for it allowed the prosecution of almost any kind of betrayal on the grounds that Justice was being pursued; but Simon found it entirely too pat. Besides, he was sus-

picious of all abstractions which took the form "A is B", in his opinion, neither justice nor mercy were very closely related to love, let alone being identical with it.

These bagatelles aside, it seemed likely to Simon that something might be gained by returning for a while to Druidsfall and haunting the vicinity of the Guild hall. At the worst, his address would then be unknown to Da-Ud, and his anonymity more complete in the larger city, the Guild less likely to identify him even were it to suspect him —as of course it would—of such boldness. At best, he might pick up some bit of useful information, particularly if Da-Ud's embassy were to create any unusual stir.

For a while he saw nothing unusual, which was in itself fractionally reassuring: either the Guild was not alarmed by Da-Ud, or was not letting it show. On several days in succession, Simon saw the Boadicean Traitor-in-Chief enter and leave, sometimes with an entourage, more often with only a single slave: Valkol "The Polite", a portly, jowly man in a black abah decorated only by the Clasp, with a kindly and humorous expression into which were set eyes like two bites of an iceberg. This was normal, although it gave Simon a small, ambiguous *frisson* which was all the more disturbing because he was unsure which of his *personae* he should assign it to: certainly not to his fundamental self, for although Valkol was here the predestined enemy, he was no more formidable than others Simon had defeated (while, it was true, being in his whole and right mind).

Then Simon recognized the "slave", and ran.

There was no possibility of his identifying *who* the creature was; he was fortunate—in no way he could explain—to be able to penetrate just to *what* it was. The "slave" was a vombis, or what in one of the oldest languages was called a Proteus, a creature which could imitate perfectly almost any life-form within its size range. Or nearly perfectly; for Simon, like one in perhaps five thousand of his colleagues, was sensitive to them, without ever being able to specify in what particular their imitations of humanity were deficient; other people, even those of the sex opposite to the one the vombis assumed, could find no flaw in them. In part because they did not

revert when killed, no human had ever seen their "real" form—if they had one—though of course there were legends aplenty. The talent might have made them ideal double agents, were it possible to trust them—but that was only an academic speculation, since the vombis were wholly creatures of the Green Exarch.

Simon's first impulse, like that of any other human being, had been to kill this one instantly upon recognition, but that course had many obvious drawbacks. Besides, the presence of an agent of the Exarchy so close to the heart of this imbroglio was suggestive and might be put to some use. Of course the vombis might be in Druidsfall on some other business entirely, but Simon would be in no hurry to make so dangerous an assumption. No, it was altogether more likely that the Exarch, who could hardly have heard yet of Simon's arrival and disgrace, was simply aware in general of how crucial Boadicea would be to any scheme of High Earth's—he was above all an efficient tyrant—and had placed his creature here to keep an eye on things.

Yes, that situation might be used, if Simon could just keep his disquietingly percolating brains under control. Among his present advantages was the fact that his disguise was better than that of the vombis, a fact the creature was probably constitutionally incapable of suspecting. With a grim chuckle which he hoped he would not later regret, Simon flew back to the Gulf of the Rood.

Da-Ud met Simon in the Singing Gardens, a huge formal maze not much frequented of late even by lovers, because the Rood-Prince in the throes of some new religious crotchet had let it run wild, so that one had constantly to be fending off the ardour of the flowers. At best this made even simple conversation difficult, and it was rumoured that deep in the heart of the maze, the floral attentions were of a more sinister sort.

Da-Ud was exultant, indeed almost manic in his enthusiasm, which did not advance comprehension either; but Simon listened patiently.

"They bought it like lambs," Da-Ud said, naming a sacrificial animal of High Earth so casually as to make one

of Simon's *personae* shudder inside him. "I had a little difficulty with the underlings, but not as much as I'd expected, and I got it all the way up to Valkol himself."

"No sign of any outside interest?"

"No, nothing. I didn't let out any more than I had to until I reached His Politeness, and after that he put the blue seal on everything—wouldn't discuss anything but the weather while anyone else was around. Listen, Simon, I don't want to seem to be telling you your business, but I think I may know the Guild better than you do, and it seems to me that you're underplaying your hand. This thing is worth *money*."

"I said it was."

"Yes, but I don't think you've any conception how much. Old Valkol took my asking price without a murmur, in fact so fast that I wish I'd asked for twice as much. Just to show you I'm convinced of all this, I'm going to give it all to you."

"Don't want it," Simon said. "Money is of no use to me unless I can complete the mission. All I need now is operating expenses, and I've got enough for that."

This clearly had been what Da-Ud had hoped he would say, but Simon suspected that had matters gone otherwise, the younger man might indeed have given over as much as half the money. His enthusiasm mounted.

"All right, but that doesn't change the fact that we could be letting a fortune slip here."

"How much?"

"Oh, at least a couple of megariyals—and I mean *apiece*," Da-Ud said grandly. "I can't imagine an opportunity like that comes around very often, even in the circles you're used to."

"What would we have to do to earn it?" Simon said with carefully calculated doubt.

"Play straight with the Guild. They want the material badly, and if we don't trick them we'll be protected by their own rules. And with that much money, there are a hundred places in the galaxy where you'd be safe from High Earth for the rest of your life."

"And what about your half-sister?"

"Well, I'd be sorry to lose that chance, but cheating the Guild wouldn't bring her back, would it? And in a way,

wouldn't it be *aesthetically* more satisfying to pay them back for Jillith by being scrupulously fair with them? 'Justice is Love,' you know, and all that."

"I don't know," Simon said fretfully. "The difficulty lies in defining justice, I suppose—you know as well as I do that it can excuse the most complicated treasons. And 'What do you mean by love?' isn't easily answerable either. In the end one has to chuck it off as a woman's question, too private to be meaningful in a man's world—let alone in matters of polity. Hmmmm."

This maundering served no purpose but to suggest that Simon was still trying to make up his mind; actually he had reached a decision several minutes ago. Da-Ud had broken; he would have to be disposed of.

Da-Ud listened with an expression of polite bafflement which did not quite completely conceal a gleam of incipient triumph. Ducking a trumpet-vine which appeared to be trying to crown him with thorns, Simon added at last: "You may well be right—but we'll have to be mortally careful. There may after all be another agent from High Earth here; in matters of this importance they wouldn't be likely to rest with only one charge in the chamber. That means you'll have to follow my instructions to the letter, or we'll never live to spend a riyal of the proceeds."

"You can count on me," Da-Ud said, tossing his hair out of his eyes. "I've handled everything well enough this time, haven't I? And after all it was my idea."

"Certainly; an expert production. Very well. What I want you to do now is go back to Valkol and tell him that I've betrayed you, and sold the other half of the secret to the Rood-Prince."

"Surely you wouldn't actually do such a thing!"

"Oh, but I would, and I shall—the deed will be done by the time you get back to Druidsfall, and for the same twenty riyals that you paid for your half."

"But the purpose—?"

"Simple. I cannot come to Druidsfall with my remaining half—if there's another Earthman there, I'd be shot before I got halfway up the steps of the Hall. I want the Guild to consolidate the two halves by what seems to be an unrelated act of aggression, between local parties. You make this

clear to them by telling them that I won't actually make the sale to the Rood-Prince until I hear from you that you have the rest of the money. To get the point across at once, when you tell His Politeness that I've 'betrayed' you—wink."

"And how do I get word to you this time?"

"You wear this ring. It communicates with a receiver in my Clasp. I'll take matters from there."

The ring—which was actually only a ring, which would never communicate anything to anybody—changed hands. Then Da-Ud saluted Simon with solemn glee, and went away to whatever niche in history—and in the walls of the Guild hall of Boadicea—is reserved for traitors without style; and Simon, breaking the stalk of a lyre-bush which had sprung up between his feet, went off to hold his muttering, nattering skull and do nothing at all.

Valkol the Polite—or the Exarch's agent, it hardly mattered which—did not waste any time. From a vantage-point high up on the Principate's only suitable mountain, Simon watched their style of warfare with appreciation and some wonder.

Actually, in the manoeuvring itself the hand of the Exarchy did not show, and did not need to; for the whole campaign would have seemed a token display, like a tournament, had it not been for a few score of casualties which seemed inflicted almost inadvertently. Even among these there were not many deaths, as far as Simon could tell—at least, not by the standards of battle to which he was accustomed. Clearly nobody who mattered got killed, on either side.

The Rood-Prince, in an exhibition of bravado more garish than sensible deployed on the plain before his city several thousand pennon-bearing mounted troopers who had nobody to fight but a rabble of foot soldiers which Druidsfall obviously did not intend to be taken seriously; whereupon the city was taken from the Gulf side, by a squadron of flying submarines which broke from the surface of the sea on four buzzing wings like so many dragonflies.

These devices particularly intrigued Simon. Some boadi-

cious genius, unknown to the rest of the galaxy, had solved the ornithopter problem . . . though the wings were membranous rather than feathered. Hovering, the machines thrummed their wings through a phase shift of a full 180 degrees, but when they swooped, the wings moved in a horizontal figure eight, lifting with a forward-and-down stroke, and propelling with the back stroke. A long fish-like tail gave stability, and doubtless had other uses under water.

After the mock battle, the 'thopters landed and the troops withdrew; and then, matters took a more sinister turn, manifested by thumping explosions and curls of smoke from inside the Rood palace. Evidently a search was being made for the supposedly hidden documents Simon was thought to have sold, and it was not going well. The sounds of demolition, and the occasional public hangings, could only mean that a maximum interrogation of the Rood-Prince had failed to produce any papers, or any clues to them.

This Simon regretted, as he did the elimination of Da-Ud. He was not normally so ruthless—an outside expert would have called his workmanship in this affair perilously close to being sloppy—but the confusion caused by the transduction serum, now rapidly rising as it approached term, had prevented him from manipulating every factor as subtly as he had originally hoped to do. Only the grand design was still intact now: It would now be assumed that Boadicea had clumsily betrayed the Exarchy, leaving the Guild no way out but to capitulate utterly to Simon . . . with whatever additional humiliations he judged might not jeopardize the mission, for Jillith's sake—

Something abruptly cut off his view of the palace. He snatched his binoculars away from his eyes in alarm.

The object that had come between him and the Gulf was a mounted man—or rather, the idiot-headed apteryx the man was sitting on. Simon was surrounded by a ring of them, their lance-points aimed at his chest, pennons trailing in the dusty sareh-grass. The pennons bore the device of the Rood-Prince; but every lancer in the force was a vombis.

Simon rose resignedly, with a token snarl intended more

for himself than for the impassive protean creatures and their fat birds. He wondered why it had never occurred to him before that the vombis might be as sensitive to him as he was to them.

But the answer to that no longer mattered. Sloppiness was about to win its long-postponed reward.

IV

They put him naked into a wet cell: a narrow closet completely clad in yellowed alabaster, down the sides of which water oozed and beaded all day long, running out into gutters at the edges. He was able to judge when it was day, because there were clouded bull's-eye lenses in each of the four walls which waxed and waned at him with any outside light; the wet cell was a sort of inverted oubliette, thrust high up into Boadicea's air, probably a hypertrophied merlon on one of the towers of the Traitors' Hall. At night, a fifth lens, backed by a sodium vapour lamp, glared down from the ceiling, surrounded by a faint haze of steam where the dew tried to condense on it.

Escape was a useless fantasy. Erected into the sky as it was, the wet cell did not even partake of the usual character of the building's walls, except for one stain in the alabaster which might have been the under side of a child's footprint; otherwise the veinings were mockingly meaningless. The only exit was down, an orifice through which they had inserted him as though he were being born, and now plugged like the bottom of a stopped toilet. Could he have broken through one of the lenses with his bare hands, he would have found himself naked and torn on the highest point in Druidsfall, with no place to go.

Naked he was. Not only had they pulled all his teeth in search of more poisons, but of course they had also taken his Clasp. He hoped they would fool with the Clasp—it would make a clean death for everybody—but doubtless they had better sense. As for the teeth, they would regrow if he lived, that was one of the few positive advantages of the transduction serum, but in the meantime his bare jaws ached abominably.

They had missed the antidote, which was in a tiny gel capsule in his left earlobe, masquerading as a sebaceous cyst—left, because it is automatic to neglect that side of a man, as though it were only a mirror image of the examiner's right—and that was some comfort. In a few more days now, the gel would dissolve, he would lose his multiple disguise, and then he would have to confess, but in the meantime he could manage to be content despite the slimy, glaring cold of the cell.

And in the meantime, he practised making virtues of deficiencies: in this instance, calling upon his only inner resources—the diverting mutterings of his other personalities—and trying to guess what they might once have meant. Some said:

"But I mean, like, you know—"

"Wheah they goin'?"

"Yeah."

"Led's gehdahda heah—he-he-he!"

"Wheah?"

"So anyway, so uh."

Others:

"It's hard not to recognize a pigeon."

"But Mother's birthday is July 20."

"So he knew that the inevitable might happen—"

"It made my scalp creak and my blood curl."

"Where do you get those crazy ideas?"

And others:

"Acquit Socrates!"

"Back when she was sure she was married to a window-washer."

"I don't know what you've got under your skirt, but it's wearing white socks."

"And then she made a noise like a spindizzy going sour."

And others:

"Pepe Satan, pepe Satan aleppe."

"Why, so might any man."

"EVACUATE MARS!"

"And then she sez to me, she sez—"

". . . if he would abandon his mind to it.

"With all of love."

And . . . but at that point the plug began to unscrew, and

from the spargers above him which formerly had kept the dampness running, a heavy gas began to curl. They had tired of waiting for him to weary of himself, and the second phase of his questioning was about to begin.

They questioned him, dressed in a hospital gown so worn that it was more starch than fabric, in the Traitor-in-Chief's private office to begin with—a deceptively bluff, hearty, leather-and-piperacks sort of room, which might have been reassuring to a novice. There were only two of them: Valkol in his usual abah, and the "slave," now dressed as a Charioteer of the high blood. It was a curious choice of costume, since Charioteers were supposed to be free, leaving it uncertain which was truly master and which slave; Simon did not think it could have been Valkol's idea.

Noticing the direction of his glance, Valkol said, "I asked this gentleman to join me to assure you, should you be in any doubt, that this interview is serious. I presume you know who he is."

"I don't know who 'he' is," Simon said, with the faintest of emphasis. "But it must be representing the Green Exarch, since it's a vombis."

The Traitor-in-Chief's lips whitened slightly. Aha, then he hadn't known that! "Prove it," he said.

"My dear Valkol," the creature interposed. "Pray don't let him distract us over trifles. Such a thing could not be proved without the most elaborate of laboratory tests, as we all know. And the accusation shows what we wish to know, i.e., that he is aware of who I am—otherwise why try to make such an inflammatory charge?"

"Your master's voice," Simon said. "Let us by all means proceed—this gown is chilly."

"This gentlemen," Valkol said, exactly as if he had not heard any of the four preceding speeches, "is Chag Sharanee of the Exarchy. Not from the embassy, but directly from the court—he is His Majesty's deputy Fomenter."

"Appropriate," Simon murmured.

"We know you now style yourself Simon de Kuyl, but what is more to the point, that you proclaim yourself the Traitor-in-Chief of High Earth. Documents now in my

possession persuade me that if you are not in fact that officer, you are so close to being he as makes no difference. Possibly the man you replaced, the putative amateur with the absurd belt of poison-shells, was actually he. In any event you are the man we want."

"Flattering of you."

"Not at all," said Valkol the Polite. "We simply want the remainder of those documents, for which we paid. Where are they?"

"I sold them to the Rood-Prince."

"He had them not, nor could he be persuaded to remember any such transaction."

"Of course not," Simon said with a smile. "I sold them for twenty riyals; do you think the Rood-Prince would recall any such piddling exchange? I appeared as a bookseller, and sold them to his librarian. I suppose you burned the library—barbarians always do."

Valkol looked at the vombis. "The price agrees with the, uh, testimony of Da-Ud tam Altair. Do you think—?"

"It is possible. But we should take no chances; e.g., such a search would be time-consuming."

The glitter in Valkol's eyes grew brighter and colder. "True. Perhaps the quickest course would be to give him over to the Sodality."

Simon snorted. The Sodality was a lay organization to which Guilds classically entrusted certain functions the Guild lacked time and manpower to undertake, chiefly crude physical torture.

"If I'm really who you think I am," he said, "such a course would win you nothing but an unattractive cadaver —not even suitable for masonry repair."

"True," Valkol said reluctantly. "I don't suppose you could be induced—politely—to deal fairly with us, at this late date? After all, we did pay for the documents in question, and not any mere twenty riyals."

"I haven't the money yet."

"Naturally not, since the unfortunate Da-Ud was held here with it until we decided he no longer had any use for it. However, if upon the proper oaths—"

"High Earth is the oldest oath-breaker of them all," the

Fomenter said. "We—viz., the Exarchy—have no more time for such trials. The question must be put."

"So it would seem. Though I hate to handle a colleague thus."

"You fear High Earth," the vombis said. "My dear Valkol, may I remind you—"

"Yes, yes, I know all that," Valkol snapped, to Simon's surprise. "Nevertheless—Mr. de Kuyl, are you *sure* we have no recourse but to send you to the Babble Room?"

"Why not?" Simon said. "I rather enjoy hearing myself think. In fact, that's what I was doing when you two interrupted me."

Simon was naturally far from feeling all the bravado he had voiced, but he had no choice left but to trust to the transduction serum, which was now on the shuddering, giddy verge of depriving all three of them of what they each most wanted. Only Simon could know this, but only he also knew something much worse—that insofar as his distorted time-sense could calculate, the antidote was due to be released into his bloodstream at best in another six hours, at worst within only a few minutes. After that, the Exarchy's creature would be the only victor—and the only survivor.

And when he saw the Guild's toposcope laboratory, he wondered if even the serum would be enough to protect him. There was nothing in the least outmoded about it; Simon had never encountered its like even on High Earth. Exarchy equipment, all too probably.

Nor did the apparatus disappoint him. It drove directly down into his subconscious with the resistless unconcern of a spike penetrating a toy balloon. Immediately, a set of loudspeakers above his supine body burst into multi-voiced life:

"Is this some trick? No one but Berentz had a translation-permit—"

"Now the overdrive my-other must woo and win me—"

"Wie schaffen Sie es, solche Entfernungen bei Unterlichtgeschwindigkeit zurueckzulegen?"

"REMEMBER THOR FIVE!"

"Pok. Pok. Pok."

"We're so tired of wading in blood, so tired of drinking blood, so tired of dreaming about blood—"

The last voice rose to a scream and all the loudspeakers cut off abruptly. Valkol's face, baffled but not yet worried, hovered over Simon's, peering into his eyes.

"We're not going to get anything out of that," he told some invisible technician. "You must have gone too deep; those are the archetypes you're getting, obviously."

"Nonsense." The voice was the Fomentor's. "The archetypes sound nothing like that—for which you should be grateful. In any event we have barely gone beneath the surface of the cortex; see for yourself."

Valkol's face withdrew. "Hmm. Well, *something's* wrong. Maybe your probe is too broad. Try it again."

The spike drove home, and the loudspeakers resumed their mixed chorus.

"Nausentampen. Eddettompic. Berobsilom. Aimkaksetchoc. Sanbetogmow—"

"Dites-lui que nous lui ordonnons de revenir, en vertu de la Loi du Grand Tout."

"Perhaps he should swear by another country."

"Can't Mommy ladder spaceship think for bye-bye-see-you two windy Daddy bottle seconds straight—"

"Nansima macamba yonso cakosilisa."

"Stars don't have points. They're round, like balls."

The sound clicked off again. Valkol said fretfully: "He can't be resisting. You've got to be doing something wrong, that's all."

Though the operative part of this statement was untrue, it was apparently also inarguable to the Fomentor. There was quite a long silence, broken only occasionally by small hums and clinks.

While he waited, Simon suddenly felt the beginnings of a slow sense of relief in his left earlobe, as though a tiny but unnatural pressure he had long learned to live with had decided to give way precisely, in fact, like the opening of a cyst.

That was the end. Now he had but fifteen minutes more in which the toposcope would continue to vomit forth its confusion—its steadily diminishing confusion . . . and only an hour before even his physical appearance would

reorganize, though that would no longer matter in the least.

It was time to exercise the last option—now, before the probe could by-pass his cortex and again prevent him from speaking his own, fully conscious mind. He said:

"Never mind, Valkol. I'll give you what you want."

"What? By Gro, I'm not going to give you—"

"You don't have to give me anything, I'm not selling anything. You see for yourself that you can't get to the material with that machine. Nor with any other like it, I may add. But I exercise my option to turn my coat, under Guild laws; that gives me safe-conduct, and that's sufficient."

"No," the Fomentor's voice said. "It is incredible—he is in no pain and has frustrated the machine; why should he yield? Besides, the secret of his resistance—"

"Hush," Valkol said. "I am moved to ask if you *are* a vombis; doubtless the machine would tell us that much. Mr. de Kuyl, I respect the option, but I am not convinced yet. The motive, please?"

"High Earth is not enough," Simon said. "Remember Ezra-Tse? 'The last temptation is the final treason. . . . To do the right thing for the wrong reason.' I would rather deal fairly with you, and then begin the long task of becoming honest with myself. But with you only, Valkol—not the Exarchy. I sold the Green Exarch nothing."

"I see. A most interesting arrangement; I agree. What will you require?"

"Perhaps three hours to get myself unscrambled from the effects of fighting your examination. Then I'll dictate the missing material. At the moment it's quite inaccessible."

"I believe that, too," Valkol said ruefully. "Very well—"

"It is not very well," the vombis said, almost squalling. "The arrangement is a complete violation of—"

Valkol turned and looked at the creature so hard that it stopped talking of its own accord. Suddenly Simon was sure Valkol no longer needed tests to make up his mind what the Fomentor was.

"I would not expect you to understand it," Valkol said in a very soft voice indeed. "It is a matter of style."

Simon was moved to a comfortable apartment and left

alone, for well more than the three hours he had asked for. By that time his bodily reorganization was complete, though it would take at least a day for all the residual mental effects of the serum to vanish. When the Traitor-in-Chief finally admitted himself, he made no attempt to disguise either his amazement or his admiration.

"The poison man! High Earth is still a world of miracles. Would it be fair to ask what you did with your, uh, over-populated associate?"

"I disposed of him," Simon said. "We have traitors enough already. There is your document; I wrote it out by hand, but you can have toposcope confirmation whenever you like, now."

"As soon as my technicians master the new equipment—we shot the monster, of course, though I don't doubt the Exarch will resent it."

"When you see the rest of the material, you may not care what the Exarch thinks," Simon said. "You will find that I've brought you a high alliance—though it was Gro's *own horns getting it to you.*"

"I had begun to suspect as much. Mr. de Kuyl—I must assume you are still he, for sanity's sake—that act of surrender was the most elegant gesture I have ever seen. That alone convinced me that you were indeed the Traitor-in-Chief of High Earth, and no other."

"Why, so I was," Simon said. "But if you will excuse me now, I think I am about to become somebody else."

With a mixture of politeness and alarm, Valkol left him. It was none too soon. He had a bad taste in his mouth which had nothing to do with his ordeals . . . and, though nobody knew better than he how empty all vengeance is, an inexpungeable memory of Jillith.

Maybe, he thought, "Justice is Love" after all—not a matter of style, but of spirit. He had expected all these questions to vanish when the antidote took full hold, wiped into the past with the personalities who had done what they had done; but they would not vanish; they were himself.

He had won, but obviously he would never be of use to High Earth again.

In a way, this suited him. A man did not need the transduction serum to be divided against himself. He still had many guilts to accept, and not much left of a lifetime to do it in.

While he was waiting, perhaps he could learn to play the sareh.

— JAMES BLISH

Specially written for this issue on the theme of "sacrifice" —a slightly involuntary one in this case. . . .

THE GODS THEMSELVES THROW INCENSE

by Harry Harrison

One instant the space ship *Yuri Gagarin* was a thousand-foot long projectile of gleaming metal, the next it was a core of flame and expanding gas, torn fragments and burning particles. Seventy-three people died at that moment, painlessly and suddenly. The cause of the explosion will never be determined since all the witnesses were killed and the pieces of wreckage that might have borne evidence were hurtling away from each other towards the corners of infinity. If there had been any outside witness, there in space, he would have seen the gas cloud grow and disperse while the pieces of twisted metal, charred bodies, burst luggage and crushed machines moved out and away from each other. Each had been given its own velocity and direction by the explosion and, though some fragments travelled parallel course for a time, individual differences in speed and direction eventually showed their effect until most fragments of the spatial debris rushed on alone through the immensity of space. Some of the larger pieces had companions: a book of radio-frequency codes orbited the ragged bulk of the ship's reactor, held in position by the gravitic attraction of its mass, while the gape-mouthed, wide-eyed corpse of the assistant purser clutched the soft folds of a woman's dress in its frozen hands. But the unshielded sun scorched the fibres of the cloth while the utter

dryness of space desiccated it, until it powdered and tore and centrifugal force pushed it slowly away. It was obviously impossible for anyone to have survived the explosion, but the blind workings of chance that kill may save as well.

There were three people in the emergency capsule and one, the woman, was still unconscious, having struck her head when the ship erupted. One of the two men was in a state of shock, his limbs hanging limply while his thoughts went round and round incessantly like a toy train on a circular track. The other man was tearing at the seal of a plastic flask of vodka.

"All the American ships carry brandy," he said as he stripped off a curl of plastic, then picked at the cap with his nails. "British ships stock whisky in their medical kits, which is the best idea, but I had to pull this tour on a Russian ship. So look what we get. . . ." His words were cut off as he raised the flask to his mouth and drank deeply.

"Thirty thousand pounds in notes," Damian Brayshaw said thickly. "Thirty thousand pounds . . . good God . . . they can't hold me responsible." One heel drummed sluggishly against the padded side of the capsule and moved him away from it a few inches. He drifted slowly back. Even though his features were flaccid with shock, and his white skin even paler now, with a waxen hue, it could be seen that he was a handsome man. His hair, black and cut long, had burst free of its careful dressing and hung in lank strands down his forehead and in front of his eyes. He raised his hand to brush at it, but never completed the motion.

"You want a drink, chum?" the other man asked, holding out the flask. "I think you need it, chum, knock it back."

"Brayshaw . . . Damian Brayshaw," he said, as he took the bottle. He coughed over a mouthful of the raw spirit and for the first time his attention wandered from the lost money, and he noticed the other's dark green uniform with the gold tabs on the shoulders. "You're a spaceman . . . a ship's officer."

"Correct. You've got great eyesight. I'm Second Lieutenant Cohen. You can call me Chuck. I'll call you Damian."

"Lieutenant Cohen, can you tell . . ."

"Chuck."

". . . can you tell me what happened. I'm a bit confused." His actions matched his words as his eyes roamed over the curved, padded wall of the closed deadlight, to the wire-cased bulb then back down to the row of handles labelled with incomprehensible Cyrillic characters.

"The ship blew up," Lieutenant Cohen said tonelessly, but his quick pull at the flask belied the casualness of his words. Years of service in space had carved the deep wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and greyed the barely-seen stubble of his shaven head, yet no amount of service could have prepared him to accept casually the loss of his ship. "Have some more of this," he said, passing over the vodka flask. "We have to finish it. Blew up, that's all I knew, just blew up. I had the lock of this capsule open, inspection check, I got knocked halfway through it. You were going by, so I grabbed you and pushed you in, don't you remember?"

Damian hesitated in slow thought, then shook his head *no*.

"Well, I did. Grabbed you, then the girl, she was lying on the deck out cold. Just as I stuffed her in I heard the bulkhead blowing behind me so I climbed in right on top of her. Vacuum sucked the inner hatch shut even before I could touch it."

"The others . . .?"

"Dead, Damian boy, every single one. Sole survivors, that's us."

Damian gasped. "You can't be sure," he said.

"I'm sure. I watched from the port. Torn to pieces. Blew up. The blast sealed off the chunk of ship we were in just long enough for us to get into this can. Even then there wouldn't have been enough time if I hadn't had the lid open and knew the drill. Don't expect those kind of odds to pay off twice in a lifetime."

"Will anyone find us?" There was a faint tremor in his voice. Chuck shrugged.

"No telling. Give me back the booze before you squeeze the bottle out of shape."

"You can send a message, there must be a radio in this thing."

Chuck gasped happily after a throat-destroying drink and held the almost empty flask up to the light. "Save a little to bring the girl around. You must have been out on your feet, Damian lad, you lay right there all the time watching me send the S O S. I stopped just as soon as I tried the receiver."

"I don't remember. It must have been the shock—but why did you stop transmitting, I don't understand."

Chuck bent and pulled at one of the handles below them. The padded lid lifted to reveal the controls of a compact transceiver. He flipped a switch and a waterfall-like roar filled the tiny space, then was silenced as he turned it off and closed the lid. Damian shook his head.

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"Solar flare. Storm on the sun. We can never push a signal through that kind of interference. All we can do is hold our water until it stops. Say, it looks like our girlfriend is coming around."

They both turned to look at her where she lay on the padded wall of the capsule, Damian's eyes widening as he realized for the first time just how attractive she was. Her hair was deep, flaming red, lovely even in the tangled disarray that framed her face. Only the ugly bruise on her forehead marred the pink smoothness of her skin, and her figure was lush, clearly defined by the tight-bodiced, full-skirted dress. The skirt had ridden up, almost to her waist, revealing graceful and supple legs and black lace sequined undergarments.

"Really," Damian said, putting his hand out, then pulling it back. "It's not right, shouldn't we . . . adjust her garments?"

"Help yourself," Chuck smiled. "But I was enjoying it. I've never seen . . . what do you call them? knickers—quite like that before. Very fancy." But he was pulling her skirt down even as he said it. Her head turned and she moaned.

"Can she be badly hurt?" Damian asked. "Have you done anything for her?"

"I have no idea, and no, in that order. Unless you're a doctor . . ."

"No, I'm not."

". . . there is nothing we can do. So I let her sleep. When she comes to I'll give her a slug of this paint remover. Never give drink to anyone unconscious, it could get in the lungs, First Aid Course 3B, Space Academy."

Both men watched, silently, as her eyelids slowly opened, disclosing grey, lovely eyes that moved their gaze across their faces and about the cramped interior of the capsule. Then she began to scream, emptying her lungs in a single spasm of sound then gasping them full again only to repeat the terrified sound. Chuck let her do this three times before he cracked her across the face with his open hand leaving an instant red imprint on the fairness of her skin. The screams broke off and she began to sob.

"You shouldn't . . ." Damian began.

"Of course I should," Chuck said. "Medicinal. She got it out of her system and now she's having a good cry. I'm Chuck," he told the girl, "and this is Damian. What's your name?"

"What happened to us? Where are we?"

"Chuck and Damian. What's yours?"

"Please tell me. I'm Helena Tyblewski. What happened?"

"I know you, at least I've heard of you," Damian said. "You're with the Polish artists at Mooncenter. . . ."

"Socialities later, boy. We're in an emergency capsule, Helena, in good shape. We have water, food, oxygen—and a radio to call for help. I'm telling you that so you'll realize how well off we are compared to the others aboard the *Yuri*. There was an accident. Everyone else is dead."

"And . . . what will happen to us?"

"A good question. You can help me find out. Drain this vodka bottle, I need the empty flask. And let me have your shoes, yours too, Damian."

"What are you talking about? What for?"

Chuck began to loosen the wing nuts that held the deadlight sealed in place. "A fair question," he said. "Since I'm the only member of the ship's company present, I'm automatically in command. But we're a little too cramped here for me to pull rank, so I'll tell you what I know and what

I want to do. When the accident happened we were, roughly, a quarter of the way from the moon to Earth. Where we are now I have no idea, and it is important that I find out."

The deadlight came free and he swung it to one side, disclosing the capsule's single porthole. Outside, the stars cut ribbons of white light across the darkness, while the Earth made a wider, greenish band.

"As you can see we are rotating about the major axis of this thermos bottle. I'll need star sights to plot our position, which means we have to slow down or stop this thing. Luckily the outer hatch opening faces the direction of motion so anything ejected from it will slow us down. The more the mass and the greater the speed of ejection, the more retardation we'll get. There isn't much surplus to throw away in one of these capsules, that's why I want your shoes. The temperature controls work fine so you won't need them. Okay?"

There were no arguments. Their shoes went into the lock along with the empty flask, some of the padding from the wall, and all the other small items that could be accumulated. Chuck sealed the inner hatch and pumped in oxygen from the tanks to raise the pressure as high as possible. When he threw the handle that opened the latch on the outer door, the capsule seemed to start spinning around them and they tumbled together against the wall.

"Sorry," Damian said, reddening as he realized that his arms were around Helen and he was lying on top of her. She smiled as they drifted away from the padding and there was suddenly no up and down as they floated in free fall. Chuck frowned at the stars moving leisurely by the port.

"That should be good enough to get some sightings. If not we can jettison some more junk."

He unclipped his comparison dectant from the holder on his belt and pointed it out the port, squinting through it. "That is going to take awhile," he said, "so relax. With this gadget I can measure the angular distance of up to five astronomical objects, it will remember the angles and its tiny, microminiaturized brain can even do some of the basic computations. But it will still take time. So let's trade confidences, get to know each other, real chummy if you

get what I mean. Me, I'm the simple one. Bronx High School, Columbia, the Academy—then the moon run ever since. What about you, Helena? Our limey friend said you were an artiste. A singer? Going to let us have an aria or two?"

Helena compressed her lips. "I am not *that* sort of artiste. I create, the newest and most expressive art form, light mobiles."

"I've seen them," Chuck said, sighting on another star. "They always hurt my eyes and give me a headache. What about you, Damian, are you a bank robber or an embezzler?"

"Sir!"

"Well don't blame me for asking, not after all that mumbling you were doing about thirty thousand pounds, gone, gone."

Damian clutched his hands together, tightly. "I'm with the British Embassy. It was currency, in my charge. I was transferring it back to Earth. Now it's gone. . . ."

Chuck laughed. "Don't be an idiot. It's just paper, it's been destroyed. They'll just write it off and print some more."

Damian smiled sheepishly. "You're right, of course. I never stopped to think of that after the accident. Stupid of me."

"We all have our bad days. Now talk to yourselves for a couple of minutes while I run these figures through the meatgrinder."

The conversation lagged while he pecked at the tiny computor and, as the first shock of the tragedy faded, the other two began to feel the pressing loneliness of their position. Once they stopped talking the only sound was the almost inaudible hum of the air-circulating fan, and the occasional click of the computer. The naked bulb shone down, the stars drifted by in the blackness of the port. They were warm and comfortable in their capsule. Six feet by twelve feet inside. A container of comfort, one man wide and two men high, packed with the necessities to sustain life. Yet two inches away, on the other side of the insulated wall, was the endless emptiness of space.

"That's that," Chuck said, and slipped the dectant back

into its sheath. "Now let's see what the chow is like in this commy canister." The others almost smiled at the welcome hoarseness of his voice.

"What about your figures? Where are we?" Helena asked.

"I have no idea," Chuck said, throwing back a large padded lid in the end of the capsule. "That's not exactly correct. I have a reading that places us somewhere between the Earth and the moon. But I wasn't on the bridge and I have no idea where we were before the explosion. So we'll wait awhile, at least an hour, then I'll shoot some more sights. Comparing the two positions should give us an idea of our course and speed. Anyone thirsty?" He reached in and removed one of the containers of water that were ranked like giant bullets in a clip.

"I will take some, please," Helena said.

"Just suck it through the teat in the end. . . ."

"I have drunk it free fall before, thank you."

"Sorry, sweetheart, I forgot you were an old space hand. Something to eat with it?" He withdrew a flat, brownish package and frowned at it. "Looks like a cardboard deck of cards. Can anyone hear read Russian better than I can."

"I'm sure I can," Helena said, taking the package and glancing at it briefly. "These are *latkes*, it says so clearly on the outside."

"Dehydrated potato pancakes . . ." he choked out. "I'm beginning to think the rest of the people in the *Yuri* were the lucky ones."

"Not even in jest," Damian said. "Touch wood when you say that."

"I doubt if there is any in this capsule, if you don't count the *latkes*."

When they had finished, Chuck counted the stores, then opened another lid to check the reading on the meter attached to the oxygen tanks. He tried the radio again, but there was only the waterfall of static. At the end of an hour he did his observations once more, then computations.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said.

"Is something wrong?" Damian asked.

"Let me check again."

Only after he had done everything a third time did he speak to them. There was no humour in his voice now.

"I'll lay it right on the line. We're in trouble. We had the luck to be behind the explosion—in relation to the ship's direction of travel, that is—and it had the effect of cancelling a good part of our momentum."

"I don't understand what you are talking about," Helena said firmly.

"Then I'll simplify it. If the ship hadn't blown it would have reached Earth in about two days. But this capsule doesn't have the same speed anymore. It's going to be three to four weeks before we get near enough to Earth to send a message and be picked up."

"So what is wrong with that? It will be uncomfortable certainly, the lack of privacy here with you two men. . . ."

"Will you let me finish. It will be more than uncomfortable, it will be deadly. We have food—though we could go without eating for that long—the water is recycled so there is no shortage there. But these capsules are too small to carry CO_2 regenerators. Our oxygen will run out in about two weeks. We'll be a week dead before we can send a message that anyone can hear and act on."

"Is there no way out?" Damian asked.

"I don't know. If we . . ."

"This is nonsense!" Helena burst in. "We can radio the moon, Earth, they'll send ships."

"It's not that easy," Chuck said. "I know what ships there are on the moon and I know their range. We're practically outside their zone of operation now, not forgetting the fact that we can't even contact them. If the solar storm lasts even a few hours more we have to write them off. They won't even be able to pick up our signals by that time. After that it is the long haul to Earth, contacting one of the satellite stations, waiting while they plot our position and a ship can reach us. Three weeks absolute minimum, probably four."

Helena began to cry then, and he didn't try to stop her. It was something to cry about. He waited until she had finished and then, since neither of the others had seemed to see the obvious answer, he told them, in a flat and toneless voice.

"The amount of air that three people breathe in two weeks is the same amount that two people breathe in three weeks. It might even last a little longer with proper care."

There was a long moment of silence before Damian spoke.

"You do realize what you are saying? There is no other way out of this?"

"I've gone over everything, every possibility. This is the only way that some of us stand a chance. Sure death for three. A fifty-fifty chance for two. Not good odds, but better than no odds."

"But—someone will have to die to give the others a chance to live?"

"Yes, putting it simply, that's the way it will have to be."

Damian took a deep breath. "And the one to die won't be you. You're needed to navigate and to work the radio—"

"Not at all. Though I confess to a sneaking wish that it really were that way. The navigation is done. It will take me about ten minutes to show you both how to operate the radio and call for help. There is unlimited power from the solar cells so the signal can go out continuously once the solar storm is over."

"That is—well—very decent of you. You could have told us differently and we would have believed you. Makes it a bit easier on me, if you know what I mean. For a moment there, with Miss Tyblewski out of it it looked like I was going to be the reluctant volunteer. So it is you or I. . . ."

"No, one of the three of us," Chuck said.

"I'm sorry, you can't possibly mean that a woman. . . ."

"I can and do. This is no game, Damian, of women and children first into the lifeboat. This is death, one-hundred per cent certain that I am talking about. All lives are equal. We are all in this together. I'm sure Helena appreciates your gesture, but I don't think she is the kind of person who wants to take advantage of it. Am I right?" he asked, turning to the girl.

"You're a pig," she hissed. "A fat, stupid pig."

"I'm wrong," Chuck said flatly, facing Damian. "I'll issue the order and take the responsibility. You can both sign it as witnesses, under protest if you like. . . ."

"You want to kill me, I know, to save yourself," Helena shouted. "You don't care. . . ."

"Please, don't," Damian said, taking her by the arms, but she shook him off, pushing him so hard he hit the opposite side of the capsule.

". . . who do you think you are to set yourself up as a judge of life and death!"

"I am the officer in charge of this vessel," Chuck said in a voice of great weariness. "There are rules and orders for this sort of occasion and I am on my oath to follow them. This is the correct procedure, an equal chance for all to survive, no favouritism."

"You are just using that for an excuse."

"You are welcome to think so. However, I agree with the rule and think it the only just one. . . ."

"I'll have nothing to do with it."

"That is your choice. But the results are binding on you whether you partake or not." He looked over at Damian who, whitefaced, had been listening silently. "You talk to her, Damian, perhaps she'll listen to you. Or do you agree with her?"

"I . . . really don't know. It is so hard to say. But we, that is there isn't much choice, really."

"None," Chuck said.

It was something Damian would never have considered doing before, putting his arms about a girl whom he had just met, but everything was very different now. He held her and she leaned against him and sobbed and it was very natural for both of them.

"Let's get this over with," Chuck said, "the worst thing we can do is wait. And we'd all better agree beforehand what is going to happen. I have three identical squares of plastic here, and I've marked one of them with an *X*. Take a look at them. And three pieces of brown wrapper from this food pack. You do it, Damian, twist a piece of wrapper around each square, twist each one the same way so they can't be told apart. Now shake them up in your cupped hands so you don't know which is which. All right. Let them float right there in the middle where we can all see them."

Damian opened his cupped hands and the three twists

of plastic drifted in free fall. One floated away from the others and he prodded it back into position. They all stared, they could not help themselves, fixedly and intently at the tiny scraps of destiny.

"Here's what will happen next," Chuck said. "We'll each take one. I'll draw last. I have a pill in my belt, it's standard spacer gear, and whoever draws the piece with the *X* takes the pill six hours from now—" He looked at his watch. "—at exactly 1900 hours. Is it understood and agreed? This is it. There is no going back or mind-changing later. Now and forever. Agreed?"

Tight-lipped, Damian only gave a quick nod. Helena said or did nothing, beyond flashing Chuck a look of utter hatred.

"It is agreed then," he said. "The pill is instantaneous and absolutely painless. Here we go. Helena, do you want to draw first?"

"No," she said unbelievingly. "You can't. . . ."

"We have no other choice, do we," Damian told her, and managed to smile. "Here, let me draw first. You can have the second one."

"Don't open it," Chuck said as Damian reached out and took the nearest one. "Go ahead, Helena, none of us is enjoying this."

She did not move until Chuck shrugged and reached for a wrapper marker himself. Then her hand lashed out and she clutched the one he had been about to take. "That's mine," she said.

"Whatever you say," Chuck smiled wryly and took the remaining one. "Open them up," he said.

The others did not move, so he carefully unwrapped his and held up the square. It was blank on both sides. Helena gasped.

"Well, I'm next I imagine," Damian said and slowly unfolded his. He looked at it, then quickly closed his fist.

"We have to see it too," Chuck told him.

Damian slowly opened his hand to show a blank.

"I knew it would be a trick!" Helena screamed and threw hers from her. Damian caught it when it rebounded from the wall, opened it at arm's length to reveal the scrawled, black *X*.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, not looking at her.

"I think we need a drink," Chuck told them as he twisted about to burrow in one of the lockers. "There are at least four more litres of vodka stowed down here with the water jugs, for some obscure Russian reason, and now is the time we can use them."

Damian took a deep breath so his voice wouldn't shake when he talked. "I'm sorry, I can't go along with this. If we come out of this I couldn't live with myself. I think I had better take Helena's place. . . ."

"No!" Chuck Cohen said, outwardly angry for the first time. "It invalidates everything, all the choosing. You've put your life on the line—isn't that enough? Death hits by chance in space, the way it hit the others on the ship and missed us. It has hit again. The matter is closed." He pulled out a container and started the party by drinking a good fifth of it in one gulp.

Perhaps that was why the vodka was there. Helena, still unbelieving, drank because it was handed to her by the two men who could not look her in the eye. It numbed. If you drank enough it numbed.

The stars slipped by outside the uncovered port, the thermostat kept the temperature at a comfortable 22 degrees centigrade and the fan hummed as it circulated the air, pumping in metered amounts of the oxygen, each minute lowering the infinitely precious level in the tanks.

"Lower metabolism . . ." Chuck said, then closed his eyes so he wouldn't see the spinning walls of the capsule—nor the two others who were at the end of the capsule, as far as they could get from him. He found his mouth with the flask and sucked in a burning measure of the liquid. "Metabolism is oxidation and we gotta save oxygen. Don't eat, eat less, burn less. Go three weeks without food. Good for the figure. Lie down. Move less, burn less . . . oxygen. . . ." His grumbling voice died away and the plastic flask floated free of his limp fingers.

"No, no I can't," Helena sobbed and held to Damian. She had drunk little, but fear had affected her even more strongly.

"No, you shouldn't, shouldn't," Damian said and drank again because he did not know what to do. He bent to kiss

her hair and somehow had his lips against the tear-cold dampness of her cheek, then on the full warmth of her mouth.

She was suddenly aware of him. Her lips responded and her arms were about him, her body pressing against him, her legs thrusting. They floated freely in the air, rotating slowly locked in tight embrace.

"I want you, I don't want to die, I can't, I can't," Helena sobbed and took his hand, putting it inside her dress onto the bare, warm, firmness of her breast. "Help me, help me. . . ."

Damian kissed her in a roaring wave of sensation. He knew that the spaceman was there, unconscious, only feet away, yet he didn't care. The escape from the wreck, the unbearable tension of gambling with his own life, the amount he had drunk, the closeness of death, the passion of the woman's flesh against his, all of this combined to wipe away everything except the burning awareness of her presence and the rising passion she evoked.

"Come to me, I need you," she whispered in his ear, then took it hard between her teeth. "I can't die. Why should I? He wants it, that pig. Only he wants it. He wants death, why can't he die? Why didn't he leave me in the ship? He gave me my life and now he will take it away again. And you too, you'll see, after me he'll find a way to kill you. What does he need either of us for. You can't believe a thing he said, why should we. He's brutal, deadly, a monster. He's going to kill me. You want me and he is going to kill me."

"Helena . . ." he whispered, as his flesh touched hers.

"No!" she wailed, and pushed him from her. He did not understand, he pressed forward again but she held him from her. "No, I cannot, I want to, but I cannot. Not with him here, not before I die. But I do want you. . . ."

Then she was gone, and when he turned to look for her he became dizzy and saw her bending over the end of the capsule. Time moved strangely, too fast, yet slow at the same time. She was gone a long time, yet she was suddenly back and putting something cold into his hand.

"Take this," she whispered, "it's from the medical kit. I can't do it, you must. Someone must die. He must die, you

can do it. He is the biggest. Do it then come back to me. I'll be here, I'll be with you always, just do this for me."

Blinking, Damian looked down at the glittering scalpel on his palm, at her hand closing his fingers over it. "Do it!" she breathed and pulled him, drifting, the length of the tiny space until he hung over the snoring spaceman. "DO IT!" the voice said and, not knowing quite what he was doing or why, he raised his fist high.

"There!" her voice said and her finger swam before him touching the sleeping man on the side of the neck, just on a thick and pulsing artery.

"Do it!" her lips touched moistly down his face and in a sudden spasm he struck down at the bare flesh.

It was the bellow of a wounded beast. Sober, awake in the instant, with the pain tearing red fingers into his neck, Chuck reared up, lashing out with his hands. The scalpel was plunged an inch deep into his flesh, lodged in the thick mastoid muscle of his neck, bleeding floating red spheres into the air.

His hands clutched Damian and, still roaring with agony, he began to beat him as only a spacer knows how to do, holding one hand behind his head so he could not recoil away while the other fist pounded and crushed his face. Damian fought back, trying to escape the pain, but there was no escape. As they battled Helena's voice shattered about them.

"He tried to kill you, Chuck, he wanted me but I told him no. So he tried to kill you while you slept. A coward! Rape me, he tried . . . kill him . . . put him out of the ship. Here, the port!"

She pushed over to the airlock and opened the inner port as she had seen him do earlier. The lock was just big enough for a man. "In here!" she screeched.

Her words came through Chuck's anger and fitted it, telling him what he really wanted to do. Holding the other by the throat he spun him across the capsule and began to jamb him, struggling, into the tiny space. The scalpel fell from his neck and slow droplets bubbled in its wake.

Damian's body went suddenly limp and Chuck pushed in the legs and then a dangling arm.

"No, you don't have to force me," Damian said quietly. "It's all right now. I'll go. I deserve it."

Something of the man's tones penetrated Chuck's rage and he hesitated, blinking at the other.

"It's only fair," Damian said. "I attacked you, I admit that, tried to kill you. It doesn't matter that she used herself to make me do it, promised everything—then helped you when she saw I hadn't succeeded. There was something in me that let me do it. . . ."

"Don't believe him, he's lying!" Helena wailed.

"No, I have no reason to lie. I'm taking your place, Helena, so at least don't vilify me. I tried to kill him for you—and for myself."

"She wanted you to do this?" Chuck said thickly, blinking through his pain.

"You both want me dead," she screamed, then tore at the heavy computor on Chuck's belt. He groped for it as she pulled it loose, and was only half turned towards her when heavy pain and blackness crushed against his skull.

"About time you came around," Damian said. "Drink this."

Chuck felt the bandage on his neck when he bent to put the spout to his lips. He looked around the room while he sucked in the water. "How long have I been out?" he asked.

"About nine hours. You lost some blood and you have a hole in your head."

"There are just two of us here?"

"That's right," Damian said, and the smile was gone now. "Maybe I figured this wrong, but it's over and done now. I tried to kill you. I didn't succeed and—fairly enough—you tried to kill me right back. But neither of us managed to finish the job. Maybe I'm thinking wrong, but I feel the score is even now and no recriminations."

"You don't hear me complaining. And Helena?"

Damian looked uncomfortable. "Well . . . the six hours were almost up. And she did agree on the drawing. And she did lose. She—attacked me with the scalpel. I'm afraid

your computor was completely smashed. I had to dispose of it."

"The insurance will replace it," Chuck said hoarsely. "God, my neck hurts. Head, too."

"Do you think we'll make it?" Damian asked.

"The odds are a hell of a lot better now than they were nine hours ago."

"Yes, one could say that. Perhaps powers that be have been propitiated by Miss Tyblewski's noble gesture. *Upon such sacrifices. . . . The gods themselves throw incense.*" He looked out, unseeing, at the blackness beyond the port. "Do you think that should we get out of this, we should, well, mention Helena . . .?"

"Helena who?" Chuck said. "Seventy-four people died when the *Yuri Gagarin* blew. We're the sole survivors."

— HARRY HARRISON

DESERTER

by Richard Wilson

His name, like those of millions of other soldiers in any war, did not matter. What did matter was that he was a lonely, lovesick man, that his emotions outweighed his patriotism and that he deserted to the enemy.

As recorded in his 201 file the name was William N.M.I. Leslie. The file also showed that he was 22, Caucasian. U.S.-born, married. N.M.I. is army jargon for no middle initial. He might have had no front or back initials, either, for all the good they did him, posteritywise. He won't be remembered.

His wife called him Bill.

That was his trouble, that he had a wife. He had been advised not to marry. War was near and separation inevitable.

But he and Betty went ahead. They stood up before a clerk in Borough Hall and because they couldn't afford to go away, not really away, they went to Coney Island on the subway and took a room in a hotel near the big amusement park.

They thought it would be fun, maybe even kind of beautiful, to ride the rides and eat hot dogs and fresh boiled corn and sugar candy and later make love for the first real time up in their room where they could hear the merry-go-round music and the pounding of the surf.

But they never got back to their room. War was declared as they were walking from the Old Mill to the Bumps-a-Daisy.

One minute they were holding hands fiercely, remembering how they'd kissed in the Old Mill, and in the next the music was stilled and the commands were booming out of the loudspeakers.

A group of men came at them, shouting unintelligibly, and pushed them apart. They shoved Bill backwards against a shooting gallery, not listening to his feeble protests. A

group of women, shrilling, grabbed Betty and rushed her toward the Crack the Whip.

"Betty!" he cried hopelessly. She looked back at him but one of the women pulled at her. She stumbled, looked away from him and then was gone in the crowd.

"Forget about her, Mac," one of the men told him. "This is it."

"But we just got married!"

"That's tough, Mac. You knew this was coming. You were crazy to do it."

All over the amusement park people were separating into three groups. The loudspeakers told them where to go.

"Men will proceed to the north gate, women to the south entrance. Children under sixteen gather at the merry-go-round for further instructions. Infants in arms go with their mothers. Let's move now. There will be a forty-eight-hour truce before hostilities commence. Men to the north gate. Let's go. Women south. Children at the merry-go-round. Move right along."

Bill Leslie, stumbling reluctantly towards the north gate in the crowd of men, protested to anyone who would listen.

"It's not my war," he said. "I won't go."

"You'll go," somebody told him, shoving him from behind with an open hand. "It's everybody's war."

The truce had to be extended, of course. Forty-eight hours wasn't enough. But a week later the Greatest War was under way.

The battles of Central Park and Bensonhurst were fought. Seventeen men and forty-three women were killed in messy hand-to-hand engagements before the rules of procedure were codified.

This was to be a civilized war, between intelligent men and women, and there was to be no killing.

Killing of the enemy would be punished by death.

The anaguns anaesthetized.

Bill Leslie and the other conscripts trained on a practice range that had been a golf course. He learned how to squeeze the trigger of the cumbersome weapon and topple the goats and dogs and rabbits. A hit anywhere on the body

was enough to send them into instant sleep. They were revived later, physically no worse, and used again and again.

The animals, the dogs especially, didn't like it, though there was no pain. They dodged and hid on the firing range, which made them more elusive targets than the goats or rabbits and thus sharpened the recruits' marksmanship.

Bill Leslie trained sullenly, then resignedly. At night he returned tired and unhappy to his cot among rows of cots on the third floor of the New York Coliseum and listened to the rumours.

There were no briefings for the troops yet and the news was undoubtedly garbled. But there was talk with some apparent foundation of the battle of Richmond Hill where in a classroom-to-classroom stalk at the high school the men had their first formal victory.

"Twenty-two Annas they got," said someone down the row of cots. That was the word that came to be used for the anaesthetized women.

"What do they do with them?" someone else asked.

"Haul 'em back in trucks."

"Then what?"

"Store 'em up till V-W Day, then revive 'em."

"Do they keep?"

"Sure they keep. They're in suspended animation."

"I hear they revive some of the good-looking Annas for the officers."

"Yeah? Where'd you hear that?"

"Oh, around."

So it went. Bill Leslie didn't know how much he could believe. He listened, saying little, and waited. His fellow recruits made attempts at friendship and were discouraged. It didn't take long for them to peg him as a loner and leave him to himself.

Lying in his sack, staring at the ceiling, Bill thought about the origins of the war. Bill wasn't much of a reader of the smaller print in newspapers—never had been. He hadn't followed the sexo-political manoeuvrings and incidents which had precipitated this greatest and worst of all wars. But he did know from the headlines and the

newscasts that there had been a sharp rise in the rate of wife-beatings and, later, what came to be the familiar word uxoricide, and husband-poisonings and suspicious intramarital accidents. But it was a violent age and Bill had seen nothing significant in them.

One thing he did remember—the Herald Square Riot. It had come at the rush hour when women loaded down from shopping jammed their way into subway trains already bursting with tired, gritty men going home from work. The riot had started with shoving and jabbing and soon boiled up into the streets. The weapons were mostly packages from Macy's and Gimbels, wielded by the women, then grabbed away and hurled back by the men. No one was critically hurt, but it had been the first serious battle.

It was about that time that the newspaper for men first came out. It was called the *Daily Male* and Paul, the married fellow at the desk next to Bill's, used to read it on his lunch hour. At first Paul would throw it in the wastebasket before he left, but toward the end he started taking it home with him. Later, Bill remembered, Paul came to work with a cut on the bridge of his nose and never said anything about it. And then one day Paul didn't come in at all and Bill read that he'd had a fatal accident in his basement workshop. The *Daily Male,* minus one reader, hinted it was murder.

But these were the symptoms, not the causes. The unbridgeable antagonisms, the ultimate unmendable rifts that had set not man against woman but men against women were never explained to Bill.

One day they loaded everybody from the Coliseum into a fleet of buses. The convoy crossed the George Washington Bridge and rolled north along the Hudson shore. An hour later the buses rumbled into a tent camp on the edge of a lake.

"Where are we?" Bill asked his sergeant, taking interest. Maybe he wouldn't have to wait too much longer.

"Congers," the sergeant said.

"What are Congers?" somebody asked.

"Wise guy," the sergeant said. "Congers is the village up the hill. You take your advanced basic here and if you're

good little boys maybe you'll get a pass. There's a bowling alley and a bar."

"No movie?"

"The nearest movie's in Haverstraw. It's off limits."

They were assigned six to a pyramidal tent—five new men plus a corporal from the cadre.

The frogs in the lake interfered with their sleep the first few nights and there was a fresh batch of rumours. Bill listened, partly to the frogs and partly to the rumours, trying to distil truth from scuttlebutt.

There was a women's camp at Bear Mountain, farther up the Hudson. The women had taken over Bear Mountain Inn. After six weeks of advanced basic the men were to go on manoeuvres in Palisades Interstate Park. The women manoeuvred there, too, sometimes, and there might be a battle.

Bill wondered if Betty was at Bear Mountain. She could be.

He realized that he almost never thought about Betty in the present tense—what she was doing now. Mostly it was Betty past or Betty future—what they had done before the war and what they would do after it.

She'd been the intellectual type, he sometimes had to admit in thinking about Betty past. They'd been so unwise as to compare I.Q.'s once, to his detriment. But they'd laughed it away. She had never lorded it over him on account of it and he was convinced, anyway, that their emotional bonds were stronger than any other thing.

Oh sure, she'd ragged him about the natural superiority of women in general and they'd had arguments about it—she had called them discussions—but it was just a thing people talked about in those days; it didn't apply to the two of them. She'd even gone to some women's meetings and he'd kidded her about it and she'd got a little tight around the lips. But that was nothing.

His memory of Betty and himself in those days was of two lost sheep, wandering bemused and a little scared through a world they'd had no rôle in making, and whose only salvation lay in each other.

Bill wondered what he would do if he saw Betty in the woods during manoeuvres. He knew what he would do if

she were alone and he were alone. They'd escape together. West to Pennsylvania, where maybe they weren't fighting—at least maybe not everybody.

But suppose he was with a bunch of men and she was with a bunch of women. And suppose they saw each other. He got a pain in his windpipe thinking about it. Suppose one of his buddies was taking aim at her. Would Bill shoot him? Or—the pain almost choked him—could he force himself to shoot her, knowing it was painless, and then turn the anagun on himself? That way they'd both be out of it till V-W Day. Or—he considered the possibility—V-M Day.

He fell asleep, finally, in spite of the frogs.

They completed their advanced basic and went on manoeuvres and met no women. Back at the lake again, they got passes to go to Haverstraw and saw an old war movie. It had an all-male cast.

Bill wondered what the women were allowed to see. There were not too many movies with no women in them, but there were enough. He could remember only one movie he'd ever seen with no men in it. But maybe the women's army had different rules.

Bill saw his first and last skirmish the night he was assigned to a detail guarding the Spring Valley entrance of the Thruway. The superhighway was male-held from the New York City line, across the Tappan Zee Bridge and north as far as the New Paltz toll station. Beyond that, control of the Thruway passed from side to side.

The platoon leader sent Bill and another greenhorn named Wally to guard the abandoned drive-in movie on Route 59. Their orders were to go up in the projection booth and watch for anything suspicious.

The booth was high and gave a good view of the empty, quiet countryside, the huge screen and the auto ramps and the posts for the sound that looked like parking meters. The drive-in was pretty far from the Thruway and Bill suspected that he and Wally had been shunted to the boondocks because they were misfits. He knew Wally slightly and though he had no real evidence he suspected him of being queer. Newlyweds and fairies, Bill thought, couldn't

be trusted too far in a war such as this. They weren't properly partial.

There were a few strips of film on the dusty floor, apparently left from a splice, and for a while he and Wally amused themselves by holding them up to the full moon and trying to guess what movies they were from. They had been forbidden to smoke or show any lights. They argued for a while about whether one strip was from *The Caine Mutiny* or *The Cruel Sea*.

It was Wally who first noticed the movement behind the screen. He nudged Bill.

"Look out there. What's that?"

Bill looked, squinting. The shadows were tricky. "A deer, maybe. They got lots of deer up here."

"That's no deer," Wally said. "It's more up and down than a deer. It's a man—or a woman."

Bill tried to make it out. "I'll go see," he said. He was sure it was nothing and welcomed the chance to stretch his legs. "You cover me."

"Okay," Wally said. "If you want to."

Bill let himself down the ladder at the back of the booth and made his way with perfunctory caution around the edge of the drive-in's ramps. He was so positive Wally hadn't seen anything that he was re-arguing to himself the question of the film strip. He was sure the man in it was Jack Hawkins but Wally had insisted it was Humphrey Bogart. They'd seen re-issues of both pictures recently, with the women scenes censored out, and Bill, thinking about them, paid less attention to his mission than he should have until he saw the tell-tale flicker of an anagun.

He dropped flat, instinctively. The flicker had come from behind the screen. So they weren't deer.

Bill's heart pounded at his first taste of combat. He inched forward, unslinging his own gun from his shoulder. He crawled to a boulder at the edge of the ramp space and waited for the moon to come out from behind a cloud.

Its gradual effulgence showed him three figures—undoubtedly female—behind the screen. He tried to make out the colour of their hair. Betty's hair was yellow—pure sunlit yellow—and she wore it long. Or she had. But the moonlight was too weak. All he could tell was that the

figures were crouched down, their anaguns aimed at the projection booth.

The guns flickered and there was an answering flicker from Wally. No hits were scored and the women were unaware that they were being flanked.

Bill moved foot by foot from the boulder's protection till he was almost behind the three women. He was careful not to get directly back of them—no sense in getting it from Wally.

There was another exchange of flickerings and one of the women collapsed. Good boy, Wally! Bill thought. The other two women dropped protectively and squirmed back behind a rise of ground that hid them from the booth but not from Bill.

He could have got them both, but he waited. Maybe they could tell him about Betty.

He watched them as they consulted. He was too far away to overhear them, but from their gestures he assumed they were considering whether to retreat, possibly for reinforcements, or to attack the booth.

Bill made his decision. Sighting carefully, he shot the darker of the two women. There wasn't a chance in a thousand that the other was Betty but he had to play the odds.

His shot was good enough; his target crumpled. The other woman looked around in alarm.

"I've got you covered," he said. "Don't try anything."

She made a tentative movement to raise her anagun, then dropped it.

"All right," she said. "Now what?" It wasn't Betty, of course.

"Come over to me. Easy."

She crawled toward him and stopped half a dozen feet away. From where they were the projection booth was out of sight.

Bill asked: "You from Bear Mountain?"

"Yes."

"You know Betty Leslie?"

"I— Name, rank and serial number is all I have to give you," she said. "It's the rule."

"Damn the rules," Bill said. He could see her plainly

now. A plump girl, scared, biting her lip. She wore lipstick, he noticed. Funny, he thought; just the way he'd shaved before he went on patrol.

"What about her?" the girl said.

"You know her?" Bill's heart pounded again. "Is she in your outfit?"

"Maybe she is and maybe she ain't. What's it to you?"

"I've got the gun; I'll ask the questions. Do you?"

"Yes. I think so. Betty Manson Leslie. She uses all three names."

Bill couldn't speak for a moment. Finally he asked: "Did she come out on patrol tonight?"

"You got no right to ask me all this. Take me to an officer."

"Don't get me mad, now. Nobody knows you're alive and I can fix that easy enough. Now answer me—did she?"

"No." The girl's lips quivered. She wasn't more than twenty. "No, she didn't."

"How far is Bear Mountain? How did you get here?"

"In a weapons carrier," she said. "It's ten miles, about. Who are you? Do you know Betty?"

"Never mind that. How were you going to get back—in the weapons carrier again?"

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

Her look of fear ebbed and took on a tinge of sullenness. "Why should I tell you anything? You'd shoot me anyway."

"Maybe not." He hadn't even considered shooting her. You didn't shoot prisoners. "I'm going to Bear Mountain. You can help me get there. You'd better. If not—" he fingered the trigger of his anagun ostentatiously.

"It's over there—the weapons carrier," she said quickly. "Off the road. We came in it, just the three of us."

"We're going back in it," he told her. "You and me. You drive. And if you make one funny move—" He gestured again with the anagun. "Keep down. Don't let the man in the projection booth see you."

"I'd sure like to know what you're up to, mister," she said. But she started moving through the brush, keeping her head down.

Before they went out of sight, Bill noticed some flicker-

ing from the booth. But it didn't seem aimed at them and he figured Wally was merely letting loose a few bursts to keep his courage up.

Bill's courage, which consisted entirely of a trembling trigger finger, managed to sustain him as far as the gully where the weapons carrier was hidden. Once there he felt easier. He got in the back, covering her while he braced himself against the tailgate, then ordered her into the driver's seat. He wondered vaguely about the vehicle's name ; he'd never seen one carry a weapon.

"No funny stuff, now," he warned. "Drive back the way you came." He asked in inspiration: "Are there any sentries on the way?"

"No." She started the engine. "Not before the camp."

"Well, stop a good distance away from it. I'll tell you what to do next when we get there."

"All right, *sir*," she said with a trace of contempt.

"Keep a civil tongue. I got no bars but I got just as good." He slapped the stock of his anagun.

The plump girl put the vehicle into gear and the long, bumping ride began. Once they saw figures in the distance but whether they were soldiers of either sex was impossible to tell. At Bill's command she stopped the weapons carrier in the shadow of some trees until they were out of sight.

She drove carefully, sometimes on deserted back roads, sometimes over rough ground parallel to busier roads, stopping whenever anything else moved.

"Very nice," he complimented her. "You're a smart girl."

She turned and gave him a searching look. "You must be Betty's husband. Aren't you?"

"Just drive," he told her. "Don't talk."

"I had a husband, too. I wonder if he'd try to see me if he had the chance. I wonder if he'd even want to see me. Or me him."

"Shut up!" Bill barked at her. "I don't give a damn about your husband."

"Sometimes I wonder if I do, myself. But I guess I do. It's a crazy war, ain't it?"

"Yeah." He was sorry he'd hollered at her. "Crazy."

She drove in silence for a while, then said, half turning to him: "I could get word to Betty."

"What do you mean?"

"She's in a corner room, ground floor. I could call her from outside the window."

"Where would I be? How about the guard?"

"Don't worry about that. There's only one, and she only goes by every half hour. This time of night you could climb in the window yourself and nobody'd see you. My husband's name is Bert—Bert Caulfield. You don't know him by any chance?"

"No. I'm sorry. I wish I did—Mrs. Caulfield."

"I didn't think you would, but you never know."

"Is Betty all right?" he asked. "I mean, is she taking it all right? You know what I mean."

"She's all right, I guess. Everybody's so mixed up, nobody's normal. But I think she's all right."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"She works hard—like she was throwing herself into a job to forget. I don't know her too well but that's the impression I get. She's a PBX operator—you know, on the switchboard. It's a good deal for her, not having to go out and shoot people, or get shot at."

"That's good. I guess I wish I had a chairborne job, too. I mean, I'm sorry I had to shoot your friends. I'm glad I didn't shoot you."

"So am I, believe me. Though sometimes I think that'd be the easiest way—just to get put to sleep till it's all over." She slowed down. "We're getting close now. We'll have to be careful."

"Funny your saying that. Sounds like you're on my side."

"Maybe I am, part way. Far enough to help you see your wife, anyway." She brought the weapons carrier to a stop and pointed. "See that chimney through the trees? That's the Inn. We better walk the rest of the way."

He'd had to trust his captive, Mrs. Caulfield. Odd to think of her by her married name, but he knew no other.

Wary at every step, half fearing a trap, he followed her in a crouching run across the open space of the lawn to the shadowy corner of the Inn.

The plump girl tapped at a ground-floor window and after a long moment Betty was there.

She looked out sleepily at first, then incredulously and with sudden tears.

Betty opened the window wide and he slid over the sill. She clutched at him, and he at her, and only after the first long embrace and the panting kisses did he remember his prisoner. But she had gone and he must either trust her or leave at once. But to leave Betty again was out of the question. He would have to take her with him.

"Get dressed," he said. "We've got to go."

"Go where? Into the woods? To the damp ground?"

"Not here. We can't stay here."

"Why not? We have hours. Precious hours not to be wasted. We have a bed. We've never had a bed, Bill."

"There are two beds. Whose is the other one?"

"Tillie's. She's on the board till eight a.m. I can lock the door."

He looked out the window in indecision. "Mrs. Caulfield—"

"Rose? If she was going to do anything she'd have done it by now, wouldn't she?"

"I guess she would have."

"Well, she isn't. She's very romantic. You wouldn't know it to look at her, but she is."

"Betty, how are you? Has it been terrible for you? It's been terrible for me."

She said a funny thing.

"I like it, Bill," she said. "I really do."

"You *like* it?"

"I think it's right. You have to believe in something and I believe in this. I'm sorry it's come between us, of course, but women have rights, too. It's a bigger thing than I thought and I'm for it, Bill."

He said nothing when she paused, and she went on.

"We're going to win and then there'll be peace. But we've got to win first. We can't let you win, or it'll be the same thing all over again. It's not your fault, but you're on the other side and I can't blame you. You've got to be, until you surrender."

That stung him. "We're not going to surrender. *We're*

going to win. I've got one Anna already." His patriotic little speech surprised him. It boiled out of him unbidden. He, the unwilling conscript, was lecturing his feminist wife.

She looked at him levelly in the dim light.

"I love you, Bill," she said, "but I hate your sex."

Now he felt confused and uncomfortable. She had always made him uncomfortable when she got intellectual. This wasn't the way he'd hoped it would be.

He tried to answer her on her own ground.

"There's no war between us, Betty."

"No? No, I guess there isn't. Not between you, Bill, and me, Betty. Not tonight, anyway. Come to bed, Bill. Come to your bride."

She frightened him a little, talking like that. But she *was* his bride, his Betty. He hungered for her and if her mind was unfathomable her body was not. He didn't want to theorize or wait. He wanted to love, simply and without thought.

So inevitably they went to bed.

He hadn't meant to sleep afterwards but he did. And when he woke up in daylight he was alone in the bed, his left wrist handcuffed to it.

Betty was in the open doorway, in a dressing gown, behind two women officers who stood over the bed. Bright sunlight came through the window. It glinted on the bars of the older women's uniforms and on Betty's yellow hair.

He tried to sit up but the handcuffs pulled him back.

"Betty!" he cried. "Who did this? That Caulfield girl! I knew I shouldn't have trusted her!"

"Rose Caulfield didn't do it," his wife told him. "I did."

She was looking at him with an expression he couldn't figure out. Later, in his agony, he decided it had been contempt.

The officers unlocked the handcuffs. He sat up slowly and rubbed his wrist. He looked at his wife, trying to understand.

"*You* did? You? Why? Why, Betty?"

"You wouldn't understand, Bill." She was still standing in the doorway, not going near him. "You never did understand. This isn't a comic opera war, in spite of some of its

aspects. The loyalties it demands are more than you have to give."

"Loyalty!" He lurched up and the officers grabbed him by his arms. "You talk about loyalty after what you did! To me—your own husband!"

"I told you you wouldn't understand. When you deserted to come to see me, Bill, you betrayed more than your own side. You betrayed *us*, the two of us. What little we had for each other should have waited, and been strengthened in the waiting."

There was no need for the officers to restrain him now. He was beaten. They looked from man to wife, observing their private battle in neutral silence.

"You're talking like a nut," Bill said, shaking his head slowly. "You talk about me betraying you when you're the one who betrayed me. What about last night? If you're such a holy shining example, what about last night? Why did you let me make love to you? Why?"

"Because," she said, looking at him now with an utter lack of expression; "because even though you're not a whole man, I'm a woman."

He cursed her then. He gave up trying to understand and cursed her in a strangely old-fashioned way.

Though it was a highly unsuperstitious age, many remembered the extravagant curse he uttered against her. He delivered it with the panicked intensity of an actor who has forgotten his lines and who, desperately improvising, overuses the burning eye and the pointing finger.

Pityingly, the officers let him rant, then took him away to await formal charges and anaesthetizing.

But Bill didn't live for the court martial. He escaped from his cell and, closely pursued, climbed to the roof of the Inn, where he lost his footing and fell to irrevocable death.

Those who had known about him thought it an ironic coincidence, therefore, nine months later, with peace near, that Betty should die in childbirth and that the child should happen to be a male, who survived.

The sisters who took the orphan, knowing nothing of the curse, named the child William, for his father.

— RICHARD WILSON

THE SECRET

by Jack Vance

Sun-beams slanted through chinks in the wall of the hut; from the lagoon came shouts and splashing of the village children. Rona ta Inga at last opened his eyes. He had slept far past his usual hour of arising, far into the morning. He stretched his legs, cupped hands behind his head, stared absently up at the ceiling of thatch. In actuality he had awakened at the usual hour, to drift off again into a dreaming doze—a habit to which lately he had become prone. Only lately. Inga frowned and sat up with a jerk. What did this mean? Was it a sign? Perhaps he should inquire from Takti-Tai. . . . But it was all so ridiculous. He had slept late for the most ordinary of reasons: he enjoyed lazing and drowsing and dreaming.

On the mat beside him were crumpled flowers, where Mai-Mio had lain. Inga gathered the blossoms and laid them on the shelf which held his scant possessions. An enchanting creature, this Mai-Mio. She laughed no more and no less than other girls; her eyes were like other eyes, her mouth like all mouths; but her quaint and charming mannerisms made her absolutely unique: the single Mai-Mio in all the universe. Inga had loved many maidens. All in some way were singular, but Mai-Mio was a creature delightfully, exquisitely apart from the others. There was considerable difference in their ages. Mai-Mio only recently had become a woman—even now from a distance she might be mistaken for a boy—while Inga was older by at least five or six seasons. He was not quite sure. It mattered little, in any event. It mattered very little, he told himself again, quite emphatically. This was his village, his island; he had no desire to leave. Ever!

The children came up the beach from the lagoon. Two or three darted under his hut, swinging on one of the poles, chanting nonsense-words. The hut trembled; the outcry

jarred upon Inga's nerves. He shouted in irritation. The children became instantly silent, in awe and astonishment, and trotted away looking over their shoulders.

Inga frowned; for the second time this morning he felt dissatisfied with himself. He would gain an unenviable reputation if he kept on in such a fashion. What had come over him? He was the same Inga that he was yesterday. . . . Except for the fact that a day had elapsed and he was a day older.

He went out on the porch before his hut, stretched in the sunlight. To right and left were forty or fifty other such huts as his own, with intervening trees; ahead lay the lagoon blue and sparkling in the sunlight. Inga jumped to the ground, walked to the lagoon, swam, dived far down among the glittering pebbles and ocean growths which covered the lagoon floor. Emerging he felt relaxed and at peace—once more himself: Rona ta Inga, as he had always been, and always would be!

Squatting on his porch he breakfasted on fruit and cold baked fish from last night's feast and considered the day ahead. There was no urgency, no duty to fulfil, no need to satisfy. He could join the party of young bucks now on their way into the forest hoping to snare fowl. He could fashion a brooch of carved shell and goana-nut for Mai-Mio. He could lounge and gossip; he could fish. Or he could visit his best friend Takti-Tai—who was building a boat. Inga rose to his feet. He would fish. He walked along the beach to his canoe, checked equipment, pushed off, paddled across the lagoon to the opening in the reef. The winds blew to the west as always. Leaving the lagoon Inga turned a swift glance downwind—an almost furtive glance —then bent his neck into the wind and paddled east.

Within the hour he had caught six fine fish, and drifted back along the reef to the lagoon entrance. Everyone was swimming when he returned. Maidens, young men, children. Mai-Mio paddled to the canoe, hooked her arms over the gunwhales, grinned up at him, water glistening on her cheeks. "Rona ta Inga! Did you catch fish? Or am I bad luck?"

"See for yourself."

She looked. "Five—no, six! All fat silver-fins! I am good luck! May I sleep often in your hut?"

"So long as I catch fish the following day."

She dropped back into the water, splashed him, sank out of sight. Through the undulating surface Inga could see her slender brown form skimming off across the bottom. He beached the canoe, wrapped the fish in big sipi-leaves and stored them in a cool cistern, then ran down to the lagoon to join the swimming.

Later he and Mai-Mio sat in the shade; she plaiting a decorative cord of coloured bark which later she would weave into a basket, he leaning back, looking across the water. Artlessly Mai-Mio chattered—of the new song Ama ta Lalau had composed, of the odd fish she had seen while swimming underwater, of the change which had come over Takti-Tai since he had started building his boat.

Inga made an absent-minded sound, but said nothing.

"We have formed a band," Mai-Mio confided. "There are six of us: Ipa, Tuiti, Hali-Sai-Iano, Zoma, Oiu-Ngo and myself. We have pledged never to leave the island. Never, never, never. There is too much joy here. Never will we sail west—never. Whatever the secret we do not wish to know."

Inga smiled, a rather wistful smile. "There is much wisdom in the pledge you have made."

She stroked his arm. "Why do you not join us in our pledge? True, we are six girls—but a pledge is a pledge."

"True."

"Do you want to sail west?"

"No."

Mai-Mio excitedly rose to her knees. "I will call together the band, and all of us, all together: we will recite the pledge again, never will we leave our island! And to think, you are the oldest of all at the village!"

"Takti-Tai is older," said Inga.

"But Takti-Tai is building his boat! He hardly counts any more!"

"Vai-Ona is as old as I. Almost as old."

"Do you know something? Whenever Vai Ona goes out to fish, he always looks to the west. He wonders."

"Everyone wonders."

"Not I!" Mai-Mio jumped to her feet. "Not I—not any of the band. Never, never, never—never will we leave the island! We have pledged ourselves!" She reached down, patted Inga's cheek, ran off to where a group of her friends were sharing a basket of fruit.

Inga sat quietly for five minutes. Then he made an impatient gesture, rose and walked along the shore to the platform where Takti-Tai worked on his boat. This was a catamaran with a broad deck, a shelter of woven withe thatched with sipi-leaf, a stout mast. In silence Inga helped Takti-Tai shape the mast, scraping a tall well-seasoned pasiao-tui sapling with sharp shells. Inga presently paused, laid aside the shell. He said, "Long ago there were four of us. You, me Akara and Zan. Remember?"

Takti-Tai continued to scrape. "Of course I remember."

"One night we sat on the beach around a fire—the four of us. Remember?"

Takti-Tai nodded.

"We pledged never to leave the island. We swore never to weaken, we spilled blood to seal the pact. Never would we sail west."

"I remember."

"Now you sail," said Inga. "I will be the last of the group."

Takti-Tai paused in his scraping, looked at Inga, as if he would speak, then bent once more over the mast. Inga presently returned up the beach to his hut, where squatting on the porch he carved at the brooch for Mai-Mio.

A youth presently came to sit beside him. Inga, who had no particular wish for companionship, continued with his carving. But the youth, absorbed in his own problems, failed to notice. "Advise me, Rona ta Inga. You are the oldest of the village and very sage." Inga raised his eyebrows, then scowled, but said nothing.

"I love Hali Sai Iano, I long for her desperately, but she laughs at me and runs off to throw her arms about the neck of Hopu. What should I do?"

"The situation is quite simple," said Inga. "She prefers Hopu. You need merely select another girl. What of Talau Io? She is pretty and affectionate, and seems to like you."

The youth vented a sigh. "Very well. I will do as you

suggest. After all one girl is much like another." He departed, unaware of the sardonic look Inga directed at his back. He asked himself, why do they come to me for advice? I am only two or three, or at most four or five, seasons their senior. It is as if they think me the fount and source of all sagacity!

During the evening a baby was born. The mother was Omei Ni Io, who for almost a season had slept in Inga's hut. Since it was a boy-child she named it Inga ta Omei. There was a naming ceremony at which Inga presided. The singing and dancing lasted until late, and if it were not for the fact that the child were his own, with his name, Inga would have crept off early to his hut. He had attended many naming ceremonies.

A week later Takti-Tai sailed west, and there was a ceremony of a different sort. Everyone came to the beach to touch the hull of the boat and bless it with water. Tears ran freely down all cheeks, including Takti-Tai's. For the last time he looked around the lagoon, into the faces of those he would be leaving. Then he turned, signalled; the young men pushed the boat away from the beach, then jumping into the water, towed it across the lagoon, guided it out into the ocean. Takti-Tai cut brails, tightened halyards; the big square sail billowed in the wind. The boat surged west. Takti-Tai stood on the platform, gave a final flourish of the hand, and those on the beach waved farewell. The boat moved out into the afternoon, and when the sun sank, it could be seen no more.

During the evening meal the talk was quiet; everyone stared into the fire. Mai-Mio finally jumped to her feet. "Not I," she chanted. "Not I—ever, ever, ever!"

"Nor I," shouted Ama ta Lalau, who of all the youths was the most proficient musician. He reached for the guitar which he had carved from a black soa-gum trunk, struck chords, began to sing.

Inga watched quietly. He was now the oldest on the island, and it seemed as if the others were treating him with a new respect. Ridiculous! What nonsense! So little older was he that it made no difference whatever! But he noticed that Mai-Mio was laughingly attentive to Ama ta Lalau, who responded to the flirtation with great gallantry.

Inga watched with a heavy feeling around the heart, and presently went off to his hut. That night, for the first time in weeks Mai-Mio did not sleep beside him. No matter, Inga told himself: one girl is much like another.

The following day he wandered up the beach to the platform where Takti-Tai had built his boat. The area was clean and tidy, the tools were hung carefully in a nearby shed. In the forest beyond grew fine makara trees, from which the staunchest hulls were fashioned.

Inga turned away. He took his canoe out to catch fish, and leaving the lagoon looked to the west. There was nothing to see but empty horizon, precisely like the horizon to east, to north and to south—except that the western horizon concealed the secret. And the rest of the day he felt uneasy. During the evening meal he looked from face to face. None were the faces of his dear friends; they all had built their boats and had sailed. His friends had departed; his friends knew the secret.

The next morning, without making a conscious decision, Inga sharpened the tools and felled two fine makara trees. He was not precisely building a boat—so he assured himself—but it did no harm for wood to season.

Nevertheless the following day he trimmed the trees, cut the trunk to length, and the next day assembled all the young men to help carry the trunks to the platform. No one seemed surprised; everyone knew that Rona ta Inga was building his boat. Mai-Mio had now frankly taken up with Ama ta Lalau and as Inga worked on his boat he watched them play in the water, not without a lump of bitterness in his throat. Yes, he told himself, it would be pleasure indeed to join his true friends—the youths and maidens he had known since he dropped his milk-name, whom he had sported with, who now were departed, and for whom he felt an aching loneliness. Diligently he hollowed the hulls, burning, scraping, chiseling. Then the platform was secured, the little shelter woven and thatched to protect him from rain. He scraped a mast from a flawless pa-siao-tui sapling, stepped and stayed it. He gathered bast, wove a coarse but sturdy sail, hung it to stretch and season. Then he began to provision the boat. He gathered nutmeats, dried fruit, smoked fish wrapped in sipi-leaf. He

filled blow-fish bladders with water. How long was the trip to the west? No one knew. Best not to go hungry, best to stock the boat well: once down the wind there was no turning back.

One day he was ready. It was a day much like all the other days of his life. The sun shone warm and bright, the lagoon glittered and rippled up and down the beach in little gushes of play-surf. Rona ta Inga's throat felt tense and stiff; he could hardly trust his voice. The young folk came to line the beach; all blessed the boat with water. Inga gazed into each face, then along the line of huts, the trees, the beaches, the scenes he loved with such intensity. . . . Already they seemed remote. Tears were coursing his cheeks. He held up his hand, turned away. He felt the boat leave the beach, float free on the water. Swimmers thrust him out into the ocean. For the last time he turned to look back at the village, fighting a sudden maddening urge to jump from the boat, to swim back to the village. He hoisted the sail, the wind thrust deep into the hollow. Water surged under the hulls and he was coasting west, with the island astern.

Up the blue swells, down into the long troughs, the wake gurgling, the bow raising and falling. The long afternoon waned and became golden; sunset burned and ebbed and became a halcyon dusk. The stars appeared, and Inga, sitting silently by his rudder held the sail full to the wind. At midnight he lowered the sail and slept, the boat drifting quietly.

In the morning he was completely alone, the horizons blank. He raised the sail and scudded west, and so passed the day, and the next, and others. And Inga became thankful that he had provisioned the boat with generosity. On the sixth day he seemed to notice that a chill had come into the wind; on the eighth day he sailed under a high overcast, the like of which he had never seen before. The ocean changed from blue to a grey which presently took on a green tinge, and now the water was cold. The wind blew with great force, bellying his bast sail, and Inga huddled in the shelter to avoid the harsh spray. On the morning of the ninth day he thought to see a dim dark shape loom ahead, which at noon became a line of tall cliffs with surf beating against

jagged rocks, roaring back and forth across coarse shingle. In mid-afternoon he ran his boat up on one of the shingle beaches, jumped gingerly ashore. Shivering in the whooping gusts, he took stock of the situation. There was no living thing to be seen along the foreshore but three or four grey gulls. A hundred yards to his right lay a battered hulk of another boat, and beyond was a tangle of wood and fibre which might have been still another.

Inga carried ashore what provisions remained, bundled them together, and by a faint trail climbed the cliffs. He came out on an expanse of rolling grey-green downs. Two or three miles inland rose a line of low hills, toward which the trail seemed to lead.

Inga looked right and left; again there was no living creature in sight other than gulls. Shouldering his bundle he set forth along the trail.

Nearing the hills he came upon a hut of turf and stone, beside a patch of cultivated soil. A man and a woman worked in the field. Inga peered closer. What manner of creatures were these? They resembled human beings; they had arms and legs and faces—but how seamed and seared and grey they were! How shrunken were their hands, how bent and hobbled as they worked! He walked quickly by, and they did not appear to notice him.

Now Inga hastened, as the end of the day was drawing on and the hills loomed before him. The trail led along a valley grown with gnarled oak and low purple-green shrubs, then slanted up the hillside through a stony gap, where the wind generated whistling musical sounds. From the gap Inga looked out over a flat valley. He saw copses of low trees, plots of tilled land, a group of huts. Slowly he walked down the trail. In a nearby field a man raised his head. Inga paused, thinking to recognize him. Was this not Akara ta Oma who had sailed west ten or twelve seasons back? It seemed impossible. This man was fat, the hair had almost departed his head, his cheeks hung loose at the jawline. No, this could not be lithe Akara ta Oma! Hurriedly Inga turned away, and presently entered the village. Before a nearby hut stood one whom he recognized with joy. "Takti-Tai!"

Taki-Tai nodded. "Rona ta Inga. I knew you'd be coming soon."

"I'm delighted to see you! But let us leave this terrible place; let us return to the island!"

Takti-Tai smiled a little, shook his head.

Inga protested heatedly, "Don't tell me you prefer this dismal land? Come! My boat is still seaworthy. If somehow we can back it off the beach, gain the open sea. . . ."

The wind sang down over the mountains, strummed through the trees. Inga's words died in his throat. It was clearly impossible to work the boat off the foreshore.

"Not only the wind," said Takti-Tai. "We could not go back now. We know the secret."

Inga stared in wonderment. "The secret? Not I."

"Come. Now you will learn."

Takti-Tai took him through the village to a structure of stone with a high-gabled roof shingled with slate. "Enter, and you will know the secret."

Hesitantly Rona ta Inga entered the stone structure. On a stone table lay a still figure surrounded by six tall candles. Inga stared at the shrunken white face, at the white sheet which lay motionless over the narrow chest. "Who is this? A man? How thin he is. Does he sleep? Why do you show me such a thing?"

"This is the secret," said Takti-Tai. "It is called 'death'."

— JACK VANCE

PAVANE

by Keith Roberts

THE SIGNALLER

On either side of the knoll the land stretched in long, speckled sweeps, paling in the frost smoke until the outlines of distant hills blended with the curdled milk of the sky. Across the waste a bitter wind moaned, steady and chill, driving before it quick flurries of snow. The snow squalls flickered and vanished like ghosts, the only moving things in a vista of emptiness.

What trees there were grew in clusters, little coppices that leaned with the wind, their twigs meshed together as if for protection, their outlines sculpted into the smooth, blunt shapes of ploughshares. One such copse crowned the summit of the knoll; under the first of its branches, and sheltered by them from the wind, a boy lay face down in the snow. He was motionless but not wholly unconscious; from time to time his body quivered with spasms of shock. He was maybe sixteen or seventeen, blond-haired, and dressed from head to feet in a uniform of dark green leather. The uniform was slit in many places; from the shoulders down the back to the waist, across the hips and thighs. Through the rents could be seen the cream-brown of his skin and the brilliant slow

twinkling of blood. The leather was soaked with it, and the long hair matted. Beside the boy lay the case of a pair of binoculars, the Zeiss lenses without which no man or apprentice of the Guild of Signallers ever moved, and a dagger. The blade of the weapon was red-stained; its pommel rested a few inches beyond his outflung right hand. The hand itself was injured, slashed across the backs of the fingers and deeply through the base of the thumb. Round it blood had diffused in a thin pink halo into the snow.

A heavier gust rattled the branches overhead, raised from somewhere a long creak of protest. The boy shivered again and began, with infinite slowness, to move. The outstretched hand crept forward, an inch at a time, to take his weight beneath his chest. The fingers traced an arc in the snow, its ridges red-tipped. He made a noise halfway between a grunt and a moan, levered himself onto his elbows, waited gathering strength. Thrashed, half turned over, leaned on the undamaged left hand. He hung his head, eyes closed; his heavy breathing sounded through the copse. Another heave, a convulsive effort, and he was sitting upright, propped against the trunk of a tree. Snow stung his face, bringing back a little more awareness.

He opened his eyes. They were terrified and wild, glazed with pain. He looked up into the tree, swallowed, tried to lick his mouth, turned his head to stare at the empty snow round him. His left hand clutched his stomach; his right was crossed over it, wrist pressing, injured palm held clear of contact. He shut his eyes again briefly; then he made his hand go down, grip, lift the wet leather away from his thigh. He fell back, started to sob harshly at what he had seen. His hand, dropping slack, brushed tree bark. A snag probed the open wound below the thumb; the disgusting surge of pain brought him round again.

From where he lay the knife was out of reach. He leaned forward ponderously, wanting not to move, just stay quiet and be dead, quickly. The knife was still beyond his grip. He lunged sideways. His fingers touched the blade; he worked his way back to the tree, made

himself sit up again. He rested, gasping; then he slipped his left hand under his knee, drew upward till the half-paralysed leg was crooked. Concentrating, steering the knife with both hands, he placed the tip of its blade against his trews, forced down slowly to the ankle cutting the garment apart. Then round behind his thigh till the piece of leather came clear.

He was very weak now; it seemed he could feel the strength ebbing out of him, faintness flickered in front of his eyes like the movements of a black wing. He pulled the leather toward him, got its edge between his teeth, gripped, and began to cut the material into strips. It was slow, clumsy work; he gashed himself twice, not feeling the extra pain. He finished at last and began to knot the strips round his leg, trying to tighten them enough to close the long wounds in the thigh. The wind howled steadily; there was no other sound but the quick panting of his breath. His face, beaded with sweat, was nearly as white as the sky.

He did all he could for himself, finally. His back was a bright torment, and behind him the bark of the tree was streaked with red, but he couldn't reach the lacerations there. He made his fingers tie the last of the knots, shuddered at the blood still weeping through the strappings. He dropped the knife and tried to get up.

After minutes of heaving and grunting his legs still refused to take his weight. He reached up painfully, fingers exploring the rough bole of the tree. Two feet above his head they touched the low, snapped-off stump of a branch. The hand was soapy with blood; it slipped, skidded off, groped back. He pulled, feeling the tingling as the gashes in the palm closed and opened. His arms and shoulders were strong, ribboned with muscle from hours spent at the semaphores; he hung tensed for a moment, head thrust back against the trunk, body arced and quivering; then his heel found a purchase in the snow, pushed him upright.

He stood swaying, not noticing the wind, seeing the blackness surge round him and ebb back. His head was pounding now, in time with the pulsing of his blood. He felt fresh warmth trickling on stomach and thighs, and

the rise of a deadly sickness. He turned away, head bent, and started to walk, moving with the slow ponderousness of a diver. Six paces off he stopped, still swaying, edged round clumsily. The binocular case lay on the snow where it had fallen. He went back awkwardly, each step requiring now a separate effort of his brain, a bunching of the will to force the body to obey. He knew foggily that he daren't stoop for the case; if he tried he would fall headlong, and likely never move again. He worked his foot into the loop of the shoulder strap. It was the best he could do; the leather tightened as he moved, riding up round his instep. The case bumped along behind him as he headed down the hill away from the copse.

Slowly, with endless pain, the moving speck separated itself from the trees. They loomed behind it, seeming through some trick of the fading light to increase in height as they receded. As the wind chilled the boy the pain ebbed fractionally; he raised his head, saw before him the tower of a semaphore station topping its low cabin. The station stood on a slight eminence of rising ground; his body felt the drag of the slope, reacted with a gale of breathing. He trudged slower. He was crying again now with little whimperings, meaningless animal-noises, and a sheen of saliva showed on his chin. When he reached the cabin the copse was still visible behind him, grey against the sky. He leaned against the plank door gulping, seeing faintly the texture of the wood. His hand fumbled for the lanyard of the catch, pulled; the door opened, plunging him forward onto his knees.

After the snow light outside, the interior of the hut was dark. The boy worked his way on all fours across the board floor. There was a cupboard; he searched it blindly, sweeping glasses and cups aside, dimly hearing them shatter. He found what he needed, drew the cork from the bottle with his teeth, slumped against the wall and attempted to drink. The spirit ran down his chin, spilled across chest and belly. Enough went down his throat to wake him momentarily. He coughed and tried to vomit. He pulled himself to his feet, found a knife to replace the one he'd dropped. A wooden chest by the wall held blankets and bedlinen, he pulled a sheet free and haggled it into strips,

longer and broader this time, to wrap round his thigh. He couldn't bring himself to touch the leather tourniquets. The white cloth marked through instantly with blood; the patches elongated, joined and began to glisten. The rest of the sheet he made into a pad to hold against his groin.

The nausea came again; he retched, lost his balance and sprawled on the floor. Above his eye level, his bunk loomed like a haven. If he could just reach it, lie quiet till the sickness went away . . . He crossed the cabin somehow, lay across the edge of the bunk, rolled into it. A wave of blackness lifted to meet him, deep as a sea.

He lay a long time; then the fragment of remaining will reasserted itself. Reluctantly, he forced open gummy eyelids. It was nearly dark now; the far window of the hut showed in the gloom, a vague rectangle of greyness. In front of it the handles of the semaphore seemed to swim, glinting where the light caught the polished smoothness of wood. He stared, realizing his foolishness; then he tried to roll off the bunk. The blankets, glued to his back, prevented him. He tried again, shivering now with the cold. The stove was unlit; the cabin door stood ajar, white crystals fanning in across the planking of the floor. Outside, the howling of the wind was relentless. The boy struggled; the efforts woke pain again and the sickness, the thudding and roaring. Images of the semaphore handles doubled, sextupled, rolled apart to make a glistening silver sheaf. He panted, tears running into his mouth; then his eyelids closed. He fell into a noisy void shot with colours, sparks and gleams and washes of light. He lay watching the lights, teeth bared, feeling the throb in his back where fresh blood pumped into the bed. After a while, the roaring went away.

The child lay couched in long grass, feeling the heat of the sun strike through his jerkin to burn his shoulders. In front of him, at the conical crest of the hill, the magic thing flapped slowly, its wings proud and lazy as those of a bird. Very high it was, on its pole on top of its hill; the faint wooden clattering it made fell remote from the blueness of the summer sky. The movements of the arms had half hypnotized him; he lay nodding and blinking, chin

propped on his hands, absorbed in his watching. Up and down, up and down, *clap* . . . then down again and round, up and back, pausing, gesticulating, never staying wholly still. The semaphore seemed alive, an animate thing perched there talking strange words nobody could understand. Yet words they were, replete with meanings and mysteries like the words in his Modern English Primer. The child's brain spun. Words made stories; what stories was the tower telling, all alone there on its hill? Tales of kings and shipwrecks, fights and pursuits, Fairies, buried gold . . . It was talking, he knew that without a doubt; whispering and clacking, giving messages and taking them from the others in the lines, the great lines that stretched across England everywhere you could think, every direction you could see.

He watched the control rods sliding like bright muscles in their oiled guides. From Avebury, where he lived, many other towers were visible; they marched southwards across the Great Plain, climbed the westward heights of the Marlborough Downs. Though those were bigger, huge things staffed by teams of men whose signals might be visible on a clear day for ten miles or more. When they moved it was majestically and slowly, with a thundering from their jointed arms; these others, the little local towers, were friendlier somehow, chatting and pecking away from dawn to sunset.

There were many games the child played by himself in the long hours of summer; stolen hours usually, for there was always work to be found for him. School lessons, home study, chores about the house or down at his brothers' smallholding on the other side of the village; he must sneak off, evenings or in the early dawn, if he wanted to be alone to dream. The stones beckoned him sometimes, the great gambolling diamond-shapes of them circling the little town. The boy would scud along the ditches of what had been an ancient temple, climb the terraced scarps to where the stones danced against the morning sun; or walk the long processional avenue that stretched eastward across the fields, imagine himself a priest or a god come to do old sacrifice to rain and sun. No-one knew who first placed the stones. Some said the Fairies, in

the days of their strength; others the old gods, they whose names it was a sin to whisper. Others said the Devil.

Mother Church winked at the destruction of Satanic relics, and that the villagers knew full well. Father Donovan disapproved, but he could do very little; the people went to it with a will. Their ploughs gnawed the bases of the markers, they broke the megaliths with water and fire and used the bits for patching drystone walls; they'd been doing it for centuries now, and the rings were depleted and showing gaps. But there were many stones; the circles remained, and barrows crowning the windy tops of hills, *hows* where the old dead lay patient with their broken bones. The child would climb the mounds, and dream of kings in fur and jewels; but always, when he tired, he was drawn back to the semaphores and their mysterious life. He lay quiet, chin sunk on his hands, eyes sleepy, while above him Silbury 973 chipped and clattered on its hill.

The hand, falling on his shoulder, startled him from dreams. He tensed, whipped round and wanted to bolt; but there was nowhere to run. He was caught; he stared up gulping, a chubby little boy, long hair falling across his forehead.

The man was tall, enormously tall it seemed to the child. His face was brown, tanned by sun and wind, and at the corners of his eyes were networks of wrinkles. The eyes were deep-set and very blue, startling against the colour of the skin; to the boy they seemed to be of exactly the hue one sees at the very top of the sky. His father's eyes had long since bolted into hiding behind pebble-thick glasses; these eyes were different. They had about them an appearance of power, as if they were used to looking very long distances and seeing clearly things that other men might miss. Their owner was dressed all in green, with the faded shoulder lacings and lanyard of a Serjeant of Signals. At his hip he carried the Zeiss glasses that were the badge of any Signaller; the flap of the case was only half secured and beneath it the boy could see the big eyepieces, the worn brassy sheen of the barrels.

The Guildsman was smiling; his voice when he spoke was drawling and slow. It was the voice of a man who knows about Time, that Time is for ever and scurry and

bustle can wait. Someone who might know about the old stones in the way the child's father did not.

"Well," he said, "I do believe we've caught a little spy. Who be you, lad?"

The boy licked his mouth and squeaked, looking hunted. "R-Rafe Bigland, sir . . ."

"And what be 'ee doin'?"

Rafe wetted his lips again, looked at the tower, pouted miserably, stared at the grass beside him, looked back to the Signaller and quickly away. "I . . . I . . ."

He stopped, unable to explain. On the top of the hill the tower creaked and flapped. The Serjeant squatted down, waiting patiently, still with the little half-smile, eyes twinkling at the boy. The satchel he'd been carrying he'd set on the grass. Rafe knew he'd been to the village to pick up the afternoon meal; one of the old ladies of Avebury was contracted to supply food to the Signallers on duty. There was little he didn't know about the working of the Silbury station.

The seconds became a minute, and an answer had to be made. Rafe drew himself up a trifle desperately; he heard his own voice speaking as if it was the voice of a stranger, and wondered with a part of his mind at the words that formed themselves on his tongue without it seemed the conscious intervention of thought. "If you please, sir," he said pipingly, "I was watching the t-tower . . ."

"Why?"

"I . . ."

Again the difficulty. How explain? The mysteries of the Guild were not to be revealed to any casual stranger. The codes of the Signallers and other deeper secrets were handed down, jealously, through the families privileged to wear the Green. The Serjeant's accusation of spying had had some truth to it; it had sounded ominous.

The Guildsman helped him. "Canst thou read the signals, Rafe?"

Rafe shook his head, violently. No commoner could read the towers. No commoner ever would. He felt a trembling start in the pit of his stomach but again his voice used itself without his will. "No, sir" it said in a firm treble. "But I would fain learn . . ."

The Serjeant's eyebrows rose. He sat back on his heels, hands lying easy across his knees, and started to laugh. When he had finished he shook his head. "So you would learn . . . Aye, and a dozen kings, and many a highplaced gentleman, would lie easier abed for the reading of the towers." His face changed itself abruptly into a scowl. "Boy" he said, "you mock us . . ."

Rafe could only shake his head again, silently. The Serjeant stared over him into space, still sitting on his heels. Rafe wanted to explain how he had never, in his most secret dreams, ever imagined himself a Signaller; how his tongue had moved of its own, blurting out the impossible and absurd. But he couldn't speak any more; before the Green, he was dumb. The pause lengthened while he watched inattentively the lurching progress of a rain beetle through the stems of grass. Then, "Who's thy father, boy?"

Rafe gulped. There would be a beating, he was sure of that now; and he would be forbidden ever to go near the towers or watch them again. He felt the stinging behind his eyes that meant tears were very close, ready to well and trickle. "Thomas Bigland of Avebury, sir," he said. "A clerk to Sir William M—Marshall."

The Serjeant nodded. "And thou wouldst learn the towers? Thou wouldst be a Signaller?"

"Aye, sir . . ." The tongue was Modern English of course, the language of artisans and tradesmen, not the guttural clacking of the landless churls; Rafe slipped easily into the old-fashioned usage of it the Signallers employed sometimes among themselves.

The Serjeant said abruptly, "Canst thou read in books, Rafe?"

"Aye, sir . . ." Then falteringly, "if the words be not too long . . ."

The Guildsman laughed again, and clapped the boy on the back. "Well Master Rafe Bigland, thou would be a Signaller, and can read books if the words be but short, my booklearning is slim enough as God he knows; but it may be I can help there, if thou hast given me no lies. Come" And he rose and began to walk away toward the tower. Rafe

hesitated, blinked, then roused himself and trotted along behind, head whirling with wonders.

They climbed the path that ran slantingly round the hill. As they moved, the Serjeant talked. Silbury 973 was part of the C Class chain that ran from near Londinium, from the great relay station at Pontes, along the line of the road to Aquae Sulis. Its complement . . . but Rafe knew the complement well enough. Five men including the Serjeant; their cottages stood apart from the main village, on a little rise of ground that gave them seclusion. Signallers' homes were always situated like that, it helped preserve the Guild mysteries. Guildsmen paid no tithes to local demesnes, obeyed none but their own hierarchy; and though in theory they were answerable under Common Law, in practice they were immune. They governed themselves according to their own high code; and it was a brave man, or a fool, who squared with the richest Guild in England. There had been deadly accuracy in what the Serjeant said; when kings waited on their messages as eagerly as commoners they had little need to fear. The Popes might cavil, jealous of their independence, but Rome herself leaned too heavily on the continent-wide networks of the semaphore towers to do more than adjure and complain. In so far as such a thing was possible in a hemisphere dominated by the Church Militant, the Guildsmen were free.

Although Rafe had seen the inside of a signal station often enough in dreams he had never physically set foot in one. He stopped short at the wooden step, feeling awe rise in him like a tangible barrier. He caught his breath. He had never been this close to a semaphore tower before; the rush and thudding of the arms, the clatter of dozens of tiny joints, sounded in his ears like music. From here only the tip of the signal was in sight, looming over the roof of the hut. The varnished wooden spars shone orange like the masts of a boat; the semaphore arms rose and dipped, black against the sky. He could see the bolts and loops near their tips where in bad weather or at night when some message of vital importance had to be passed, cressets could be attached to them. He'd seen such fires once, miles out over the Plain, the night the old King died . . .

The Serjeant opened the door and urged him through it.

He stood rooted just beyond the sill. The place had a clean smell that was somehow also masculine, a compound of polishes and oils and the fumes of tobacco; and inside too it had something of the appearance of a ship. The cabin was airy and low, roomier than it had looked from the foot of the hill. There was a stove, empty now and gleaming with blacking, its brasswork brightly polished. Inside its mouth a sheet of red crêpe paper had been stretched tightly; the doors were parted a little to show the smartness. The plank walls were painted a light grey; on the breast that enclosed the chimney of the stove duty rosters were pinned neatly. In one corner of the room was a group of diplomas, framed and richly coloured; below them an old Daguerreotype, badly faded, showing a group of men standing in front of a very tall signal tower. In one corner of the cabin was a bunk, blankets folded into a neat cube at its foot; above it a hand-coloured pin-up of a smiling girl wearing a cap of Guild green and almost nothing else. Rafe's eyes passed over it with the faintly embarrassed indifference of childhood

In the centre of the room, white-painted and square, was the base of the signal mast; round it a little podium of smooth, scrubbed wood, on which stood two Guildsmen. In their hands were the long levers that worked the semaphore arms overhead; the control rods reached up from them, encased when they passed through the ceiling in white canvas grommets. Skylights opened to either side, let in the warm July air. The third duty signaller stood at the eastern window of the cabin, glasses to his eyes, speaking quietly and continuously. "Five . . . eleven . . . thirteen . . . nine . . ." The operators repeated the combinations, working the big handles, leaning the weight of their bodies against the pull of the signal arms overhead, letting each downward rush of the semaphores help them into position for their next cypher. There was an air of concentration but not of strain; it all seemed very easy and practised. In front of the men, supported by struts from the roof, a tell-tale repeated the positions of the arms, but the Signallers rarely glanced at it. Years of training had given a fluidness to their movements that made them almost like the steps and posturings of a ballet. The bodies

swung, checked, moved through their arabesques; the creaking of wood and the faint rumbling of the signals filled the place, as steady and lulling as the drone of bees.

No-one paid any attention to Rafe or the Serjeant. The Guildsman began talking again quietly, explaining what was happening. The long message, that had been going through now for nearly an hour, was a list of current grain and fatstock prices from Londinium. The Guild system was invaluable for regulating the complex economy of the country; farmers and merchants, taking the Londinium prices as a yardstick, knew exactly what to pay when buying and selling for themselves. Rafe forgot to be disappointed; his mind heard the words, recording them and storing them away, while his eyes watched the changing patterns made by the Guildsmen, so much a part of the squeaking, clacking machine they controlled.

The actual transmitted information, what the Serjeant called the payspeech, occupied only a part of the signalling; a message was often almost swamped by the codings necessary to secure its distribution. The current figures for instance had to reach certain centres, Aquae Sulis among them, by nightfall. How they arrived, their routing on the way, was very much the concern of the branch Signallers through whose stations the cyphers passed. It took years of experience coupled with a certain degree of intuition to route signals in such a way as to avoid lines already congested with information; and of course while a line was in use in one direction, as in the present case with a complex message being moved from east to west, it was very difficult to employ it in reverse. It was in fact possible to pass two messages in different directions at the same time, and it was often done on the A Class towers. When that happened every third cypher of a northbound might be part of another signal moving south; the stations transmitted in bursts, swapping the messages forward and back. But co-axial signalling was detested even by the Guildsmen. The line had to be cleared first, and a suitable code agreed on; two lookouts were employed, chanting their directions alternately to the signallers, and even in the best-run station total confusion could result from the smallest slip, necessitating re-clearing of the route and a fresh start.

With his hands, the Serjeant described the washout signal a fouled-up tower would use; the three horizontal extensions of the semaphores from the sides of their mast. If that happened he said, chuckling grimly, a head would roll somewhere; for a Class A would be under the command of a Major of Signals at least, a man of twenty or more years experience. He would be expected not to make mistakes, and to see in turn that none were made by his subordinates. Rafe's head began to whirl again; he looked with fresh respect at the worn green leather of the Serjeant's uniform. He was beginning to see now, dimly, just what sort of thing it was to be a Signaller.

The message ended at last, with a great clapping of the semaphore arms. The lookout remained at his post but the operators got down, showing an interest in Rafe for the first time. Away from the semaphore levers they seemed far more normal and unfrightening. Rafe knew them well; Robin Wheeler, who often spoke to him on his way to and from the station, and Bob Camus, who'd split a good many heads in his time at the Feast-day cudgel playing in the village. They showed him the code books, all the scores of cyphers printed in red on numbered black squares. He stayed to share their meal; his mother would be concerned and his father annoyed, but home was almost forgotten. Toward evening another message came up from the west; they told him it was police business, and sent it winging and clapping on its way. It was dusk when Rafe finally left the station, head in the clouds, two unbelievable pennies jinking in his pocket. It was only later, in bed and trying to sleep, he realized a long-submerged dream had come true. He did sleep finally, only to dream again of signal towers at night, the cressets on their arms roaring against the blueness of the sky. He never spent the coins.

Once it had become a real possibility, his ambition to be a Signaller grew steadily; he spent all the time he could at the Silbury Station, perched high on its weird prehistoric hill. His absences met with his father's keenest disapproval. Mr. Bigland's wage as an estate clerk barely brought in enough to support his brood of seven boys; the family had of necessity to grow most of its own food, and for that every pair of hands that could be mustered was valuable.

But nobody guessed the reason for Rafe's frequent disappearances; and for his part he didn't say a word.

He learned, in illicit hours, the thirty-odd basic positions of the signal arms, and something of the commonest sequences of grouping; after that he could lie out near Silbury Hill and mouth off most of the numbers to himself, though without the codes that informed them he was still dumb. Once Serjeant Gray let him take the observer's place for a glorious half hour while a message was coming in over the Marlborough Downs. Rafe stood stiffly, hands sweating on the big barrels of the Zeiss glasses, and read off the cyphers as high and clear as he could for the signallers at his back. The Serjeant checked his reporting unobtrusively from the other end of the hut, but he made no mistakes.

By the time he was ten Rafe had received as much formal education as a child of his class could expect. The great question of a career was raised. The family sat in conclave; father, mother and the three eldest sons. Rafe was unimpressed; he knew, and had known for weeks, the fate they had selected for him. He was to be apprenticed to one of the four tailors of the village, little bent old men who sat like cross-legged hermits behind bulwarks of cloth bales and stitched their lives away by the light of penny dips. He hardly expected to be consulted on the matter; however he was sent for, formally, and asked what he wished to do. That was the time for the bombshell. "I know exactly what I want to be" said Rafe firmly. "A Signaller."

There was a moment of shocked silence; then the laughing started, and swelled. The Guilds were closely guarded; Rafe's father would pay dearly even for his entry into the tailoring trade. As for the Signallers . . . No Bigland had ever been a Signaller, no Bigland ever would. Why, that . . . it would raise the family status! The whole village would have to look up to them, with a son wearing the Green. Preposterous . . .

Rafe sat quietly until they were finished, lips compressed, cheekbones glowing. He'd known it would be like this, he knew just what he had to do. His composure discomfited the family; they quietened down enough to

ask him, with mock seriousness, how he intended to set about achieving his ambition. It was time for the second bomb. "By approaching the Guild with regard to a Common Entrance Examination" he said, mouthing words that had been learned by rote. "Serjeant Gray, of the Silbury Station, will speak for me . . ."

Into the fresh silence came his father's embarrassed coughing. Mr. Bigland looked like an old sheep, sitting blinking through his glasses, nibbling at his thin moustache. "Well" he said. "Well, I don't know . . . *Well* . . ." But Rafe had already seen the glint in his eyes at the dizzying prospect of prestige. That a son of his should wear the Green . . .

Before their minds could change Rafe wrote a formal letter which he delivered in person to the Silbury Station; it asked Serjeant Gray, very correctly, if he would be kind enough to call on Mr. Bigland with a view to discussing his son's entry to the College of Signals in Londinium.

The Serjeant was as good as his word. He was a widower, and childless; maybe Rafe made up in part for the son he'd never had, maybe he saw the reflection of his own youthful enthusiasm in the boy. He came the next evening, strolling quietly down the village street to rap at the Biglands' door; Rafe, watching from his shared bedroom over the porch, grinned at the gaping and craning of the neighbours. The family was all a-flutter; the household budget had been scraped for wine and candles, silverware and fresh linen were laid out in the parlour, everybody was anxious to make the best possible impression. Mr. Bigland of course was only too agreeable; when the Serjeant left, an hour later, he had his signed permission in his belt. Rafe himself saw the signal originated asking Londinium for the necessary entrance papers for the College's annual examination.

The Guild gave just twelve places per year, and they were keenly contested. In the few weeks at his disposal Rafe was crammed mercilessly; the Serjeant coached him in all aspects of Signalling he might reasonably be expected to know about while the village dominie, impressed in spite of himself, brushed up his bookwork, even

trying to instil into his aching head the rudiments of Norman French. Rafe won admittance; he had never considered the possibility of failure, mainly because such a thought was unbearable. He sat the examination in Sorviodunum, the nearest regional centre to his home; a week later a message came through offering him his place, listing the clothes and books he would need and instructing him to be ready to present himself at the College of Signals in just under a month's time. When he left for Londinium, well muffled in a new cloak, riding a horse provided by the Guild and with two russet-coated Guild servants in attendance, he was followed by the envy of a whole village. The arms of the Silbury tower were quiet; but as he passed they flipped quickly to Attention, followed at once by the cyphers for Origination and Immediate Locality. Rafe turned in the saddle, tears stinging his eyes, and watched the letters quickly spelled out in plaintalk. "*Good luck . . .*"

After Avebury, Londinium seemed dingy, ugly and noisy. The College was housed in an ancient, ramshackle building just inside the City walls; though Londinium had long since overspilled its former limits, sprawling out across the river and north nearly as far as Tyburn Tree. The Guild children were the usual crowd of brawling, snotty-nosed brats that comprised the apprentices of any trade. Hereditary sons of the Green, they looked down on the Common Entrants from the heights of an unbearable and imaginary eminence; Rafe had a bad time till a series of dormitory fights, one spectacularly bloody, proved to his fellows once and for all that young Bigland at least was better left alone. He settled down as a more or less accepted member of the community.

The Guild, particularly of recent years, had been tending to place more and more value on theoretical knowledge, and the two-year course was intensive. The apprentices had to become adept in Norman French, for their further training would take them inevitably into the houses of the rich. A working knowledge of the other tongues of the land, the Cornish. Gaelic and Middle English, was also a requisite; no Guildsman ever knew where he would finally be posted. Guild history was taught too, and the

elements of mechanics and coding, though most of the practical work in those directions would be done in the field, at the training stations scattered along the south and west coasts of England and through the Welsh Marches. The students were even required to have a nodding acquaintance with thaumaturgy; though Rafe for one was unable to see how the attraction of scraps of paper to a polished stick of amber could ever have an application to Signalling.

He worked well nonetheless, and passed out with a mark high enough to satisfy even his professors. He was posted directly to his training station, the A Class complex atop Saint Adhelm's Head in Dorset. To his intense pleasure he was accompanied by one real friend he had made at College; Josh Cope, a wild, black-haired boy, a Common Entrant and the son of a Durham mining family.

They arrived at Saint Adhelm's in the time-honoured way, hooking a lift from a road train drawn by a labouring Fowler compound. Rafe never forgot his first sight of the station. It was far bigger than he'd imagined, sprawling across the top of the great blunt promontory. For convenience, stations were rated in accordance with the heaviest towers they carried; but Saint Adhelm's was a clearing centre for B, C and D lines as well, and round the huge paired structures of A Class towers ranged a circle of smaller semaphores, all twirling and clacking in the sun. Beside them, establishing rigs displayed the codes the towers spoke in a series of bright-coloured circles and rectangles; Rafe, staring, saw one of them rotate, displaying to the west a yellow Bend Sinister as the semaphore above it switched in midmessage from plaintalk to the complex Code Twenty-three. He glanced sidelong at Josh, got from the other lad a jaunty thumbs-up; they swung their satchels onto their shoulders and headed up toward the main gate to report themselves for duty.

The station surpassed Rafe's wildest dreams. Its standing complement including the dozen or so apprentices always in training was well over a hundred, of whom some fifty or sixty were always on duty or on call. The

big semaphores, the Class A's, were each worked by teams of a dozen men, six to each great lever, with a Signalmaster to control co-ordination and pass on the cyphers from the observers. With the station running at near capacity the scene was impressive; the lines of men at the controls, as synchronised as troupes of dancers; the shouts of the Signalmaster, scuffle of feet on the white planking, rumble and creak of the control rods, the high thunder of the signals a hundred feet above the roofs. Though that according to the embittered Officer in Charge was not Signalling but 'unscientific bloody timber-hauling'! Major Stone had spent most of his working life on the little Class C's of the Pennine Chain before an unlooked-for promotion had given him his present position of trust.

The A messages shorthopped from Saint Adhelm's to Swyre Head and from thence to Gad Cliff, built on the high land overlooking Warbarrow Bay. From there along the coast to Golden Cap, the station poised six hundred sheer feet above the fishing village of Wey Mouth, to fling themselves in giant strides into the West, to Somerset and Devon and far-off Cornwall, or northwards again over the heights of the Great Plain *en route* for Wales. Up there Rafe knew they passed in sight of the old stone rings of Avebury. He often thought with affection of his parents and Serjeant Gray; but he was long past home-sickness. His days were too full for that.

Two years after their arrival at Saint Adhelm's, and four after their induction into the Guild, the apprentices were first allowed to lay hands on the semaphore bars. Josh in fact had found it impossible to wait and had salved his ego some months before by spelling out a frisky message on one of the little local towers in what he hoped was the dead of night. For that fall from grace he had made intimate and painful contact with the buckle on the end of a green leather belt, wielded by none other than Major Stone himself. Two burly Corporals of Signals held the miner's lad down while he threshed and howled; the end result had convinced even Josh that on certain points of discipline the Guild stood adamant.

To learn to signal was like yet another beginning. Rafe found rapidly that a semaphore lever was no passive thing to be pulled and hauled at pleasure; with the wind under the great black sails of the arms an operator stood a good chance of being bowled completely off the rostrum by the backwhip of even a thirty foot unit, while to the teams of the A Class towers lack of co-ordination could prove, and had proved in the past, fatal. There was a trick to the thing, only learned after bruising hours of practice; to lean the weight of the body against the levers rather than just using the muscles of back and arms, employ the jounce and swing of the semaphores to position them automatically for their next cypher. Trying to fight them instead of working with the recoil would reduce a strong man to a sweatsoaked rag within minutes; but a trained Signaller could work half the day and feel very little strain. Rafe approached the task assiduously; six months and one broken collarbone later he felt able to pride himself on mastery of his craft. It was then he first encountered the murderous intricacies of co-axial signalling . . .

After three years on the station the apprentices were finally deemed ready to graduate as full Signallers. Then came the hardest test of all. The site of it, the arena, was a bare hillock of ground some half mile from Saint Adhelm's Head. Built onto it, and facing each other about forty yards apart, were two Class D towers with their cabins. Josh was to be Rafe's partner in the test. They were taken to the place in the early morning, and given their problem; to transmit to each other in plaintalk the entirety of the Book of Nehemiah in alternate verses, with appropriate Attention, Acknowledgement and End-of-Message cyphers at the head and tail of each. Several ten-minute breaks were allowed, though they had been warned privately it would be better not to take them; once they left the rostrums they might be unable to force their tired bodies back to the bars.

Round the little hill would be placed observers who would check the work minute by minute for inaccuracies and sloppiness. When the messages were finished to their satisfaction the apprentices might leave, and call them-

selves Signallers; but not before. Nothing would prevent them deserting their task if they desired before it was done. Nobody would speak a word of blame, and there would be no punishment; but they would leave the Guild the same day, and never return. Some boys, a few, did leave. Others collapsed; for them, there would be another chance.

Rafe neither collapsed nor left, though there were times when he longed to do both. When he started, the sun had barely risen; when he left it was sinking toward the western rim of the horizon. The first two hours, the first three, were nothing; then the pain began. In the shoulders, in the back, in the buttocks and calves. His world narrowed; he saw neither the sun nor the distant sea. There was only the semaphore, the handles of it, the text in front of his eyes, the window. Across the space separating the huts he could see Josh staring as he engaged in his endless, useless task. Rafe came by degrees to hate the towers, the Guild, himself, all he had done, the memory of Silbury and old Serjeant Gray; and to hate Josh most of all, with his stupid white blob of a face, the signals clacking above him like some absurd extension of himself. With fatigue came a trance-like state in which logic was suspended, the reasons for actions lost. There was nothing to do in life, had never been anything to do but stand on the rostrum, work the levers, feel the jounce of the signals, check with the body, feel the jounce . . . His vision doubled and trebled till the lines of copy in front of him shimmered unreadably; and still the test ground on.

At any time in the afternoon Rafe would have killed his friend had he been able to reach him. But he couldn't get to him; his feet were rooted to the podium, his hands glued to the levers of the semaphore. The signals grumbled and creaked; his breath began to sound in his ears harshly, like an engine. His sight blackened; the text and the opposing semaphore swam in a void. He felt disembodied; he could sense his limbs only as a dim and confused burning. And somehow, agonizingly, the transmission came to an end. He clattered off the last verse of the book, signed End of Message, leaned on the

handles while the part of him that could still think realized dully that he could stop. And then, in black rage, he did the thing only one other apprentice had done in the history of the station; flipped the handles to Attention again, spelled out with terrible exactness and letter by letter the message *'God Save the Queen.'* Signed End of Message, got no acknowledgement, swung the levers up and locked them into position for Emergency-Contact Broken. In a signalling chain the alarm would be flashed back to the originating station, further information re-routed and a squad sent to investigate the breakdown.

Rafe stared blankly at the levers. He saw now the puzzling bright streaks on them were his own blood. He forced his raw hands to unclamp themselves, elbowed his way through the door, shoved past the men who had come for him and collapsed twenty yards away on the grass. He was taken back to Saint Adhelm's in a cart, and put to bed. He slept the clock round; when he woke it was with the knowledge that Josh and he now had the right to put aside the cowled russet jerkins of apprentices for the full green of the Guild of Signallers. They drank beer that night, awkwardly, gripping the tankards in both bandaged paws; and for the second and last time, the station cart had to be called into service to get them home . . .

The next part of training was a sheer pleasure. Rafe made his farewells to Josh and went home on a two month leave; at the end of his furlough he was posted to the household of the Fitzgibbons, one of the old families of the Southwest, to serve twelve months as Signaller-Page. The job was mainly ceremonial, though in times of national crisis it could obviously carry its share of responsibility. Most well-bred families, if they could afford to do so, bought rights from the Guild and erected their own tiny stations somewhere in the grounds of their estate; the little Class E towers were even smaller than the Class D's on which Rafe had graduated.

In places where no signal line ran within easy sighting distance, one or more stations might be erected across the surrounding country and staffed by Journeyman-Signallers without access to coding; but the Fitzgibbons'

great aitch-shaped house lay almost below Swyre Head, in a sloping coombe open to the sea. Rafe, looking down on the roofs of the place the morning he arrived, started to grin. He could see his semaphore perched up among the chimney stacks; above it a bare mile away was the A repeater, the shorthop tower for his old station of Saint Adhelm's just over the hill. He touched heels to his horse, pushing it into a canter. He would be signalling direct to the A Class, there was no other outroute; he couldn't help chuckling at the thought of its Major's face when asked to hurl to Saint Adhelm's or Golden Cap requests for butter, six dozen eggs or the services of a cobbler. He paid his formal respects to the station, and rode down into the valley to take up his new duties.

They proved if anything easier than he had anticipated. Fitzgibbon himself moved in high circles at Court and was rarely home, the running of the house being left to his wife and two teenage daughters. As Rafe had expected, most of the messages he was required to pass were of an intensely domestic nature. And he enjoyed the privileges of any young Guildsman in his position; he could always be sure of a warm place in the kitchen at nights, the first cut off the roast, the prettiest serving wenches to mend his clothes and trim his hair. There was sea bathing within a stone's throw, and Feast day trips to Durnovaria and Bourne Mouth. Once a little fair established itself in the grounds, an annual occurrence apparently; and Rafe spent a delicious half hour signalling the A Class for oil for its steam engines, and meat for a dancing bear.

The year passed quickly; in late autumn the boy, promoted now to Signaller-Corporal, was re-posted, and another took his place. Rafe rode west, into the hills that crowd the southern corner of Dorset, to take up what would be his first real command.

The station was part of a D Class chain that wound west over the high ground into Somerset. In winter, with the short days and bad seeing conditions, the towers would be unused; Rafe knew that well enough. He would be totally isolated; winters in the hills could be severe, with snow making travel next to impossible and frosts for weeks on end. He would have little to fear from the

routiers, the footpads who legend claimed haunted the West in the cold months; the station lay far from any road and there was nothing in the cabins, save perhaps the Zeiss glasses carried by the Signallers, to tempt a desperate man. He would be in more danger from wolves and Fairies, though the former were virtually extinct in the south and he was young enough to laugh at the latter. He took over from the bored Corporal just finishing his term, signalled his arrival back through the chain and settled down to take stock of things.

By all reports this first winter on a one-man station was a worse trial than the endurance test. For a trial it was, certainly. At some time through the dark months ahead, some hour of the day, a message would come along the dead line, from the west or from the east; and Rafe would have to be there to take it and pass it on. A minute late with his acknowledgement and a formal reprimand would be issued from Londinium; that might peg his promotion for years, maybe for good. The standards of Guild were high, and they were never relaxed; if it was easy for a Major in charge of an A Class station to fall from grace, how much easier for an unknown and untried Corporal! The duty period of each day was short, a bare six hours, five through the darkest months of December and January; but during that time, except for one short break, Rafe would have to be continually on the alert.

One of his first acts on being left alone was to climb to the diminutive operating gantry. The construction of the station was unusual. To compensate for its lack of elevation a catwalk had been built across under the roof; the operating rostrum was located centrally on it, while at each end double-glazed windows commanded views to west and east. Between them, past the handles of the semaphore, a track had been worn half an inch deep in the wooden boards. In the next few months Rafe would wear it deeper, moving from one window to the other checking the arms of the next towers in line. The match-sticks of the semaphores were barely visible; he judged them to be a good three miles distant. He would need all his eyesight, plus the keenness of the Zeiss lenses, to make them out at all on a dull day; but they would have

to be watched minute by minute through every duty period because sooner or later one of them would move. He grinned and touched the handles of his own machine. When that happened, his acknowledgement would be clattering before the tower had stopped calling for Attention.

His life settled into a pattern of sleeping and waking and watching. As the days grew shorter the weather worsened; freezing mists swirled round the station, and the first snow fell. For hours on end the towers to east and west were lost in the haze; if a message was to come now, the signallers would have to light their cressets. Rafe prepared the bundles of faggots anxiously, wiring them into their iron cages, setting them beside the door with the paraffin that would soak them, make them blaze. He became obsessed by the idea that the message had in fact come, and he had missed it in the gloom. In time the fear ebbed. The Guild was hard, but it was fair; no Signaller, in winter of all times, was expected to be a superman. If a Captain rode suddenly to the station demanding why he had not answered this or that he would see the torches and the oil laid ready and know at least that Rafe had done his best. Nobody came; and when the weather cleared the towers were still stationary.

Each night after the light had gone Rafe tested his signals, swinging the arms to free them from their wind-driven coating of ice; it was good to feel the pull and flap of the thin wings up in the dark. The messages he sent into blackness were fanciful in the extreme; notes to his parents and old Serjeant Gray, lurid suggestions to a little girl in the household of the Fitzgibbons to whom he had taken more than a passing fancy. Twice a week he used the lunchtime break to climb the tower, check the spindles in their packings of grease. On one such inspection he was appalled to see a hairline crack in one of the control rods, the first sign that the metal had become fatigued. He replaced the entire section that night, breaking out fresh parts from store, hauling them up and fitting them by the improvised light of a headlamp. It was an awkward, dangerous job with his fingers freezing and the wind plucking at his back, trying to tug him from his perch onto the roof below. He could have pulled the

station out of line in daytime, signalled repairs and given himself the benefit of light, but pride forbade him. He finished the job two hours before dawn, tested the tower, made his entry in the log and went to sleep, trusting in his Signaller's sense to wake him at first light. It didn't let him down.

The long hours of darkness began to pall. Mending and laundering only filled a small proportion of his off-duty time; he read through his stock of books, re-read them, put them aside and began devising tasks for himself, checking and rechecking his inventories of food and fuel. In the blackness, with the long crying of the wind over the roof, the stories of Fairies and were-things on the heath didn't seem quite so fanciful. Difficult now even to imagine summer, the slow clicking of the towers against skies bright blue and burning with light. There were two pistols in the hut; Rafe saw to it their mechanisms were in order, loaded and primed them both. Twice after that he woke to crashings on the roof, as if some dark thing was scrabbling to get in; but each time it was only the wind in the skylights. He padded them with strips of canvas; then the frost came back, icing them shut, and he wasn't disturbed again.

He moved a portable stove up onto the observation gallery and discovered the remarkable number of operations that could be carried out with one eye on the windows. The brewing of coffee and tea were easy enough; in time he could even manage the production of hot snacks. His lunch hours he preferred to use for things other than cooking. Above all else he was afraid of inaction making him fat; there was no sign of it happening but he still preferred to take no chances. When snow conditions permitted he would make quick expeditions from the shack into the surrounding country. On one of these the hillock with its smoothly shaped crown of trees attracted his eye. He walked towards it jauntily, breath steaming in the air, the glasses as ever bumping his hip. In the copse, his Fate was waiting.

The catamount clung to the bole of a fir, watching the advance of the boy with eyes that were slits of hate in the vicious mask of its face. No-one could have read its

thoughts. Perhaps it imagined itself about to be attacked; perhaps it was true what they said about such creatures, that the cold of winter sent them mad. There were few of them now in the West; mostly they had retreated to the hills of Wales, the rocky peaks of the far north. The survival of this one was in itself a freak, an anachronism.

The tree in which it crouched leaned over the path Rafe must take. He ploughed forward, head bent a little, intent only on picking his way. As he approached the catamount drew back its lips in a huge and silent snarl, showing the wide pink vee of its mouth, the long needle-sharp teeth. The eyes blazed; the ears flattened, making the skull a round, furry ball. Rafe never saw the wild-cat, its stripes blending perfectly with the harshness of branches and snow. As he stepped beneath the tree it launched itself onto him, landed across his shoulders like a spitting shawl; his neck and back were flayed before the pain had travelled to his brain.

The shock and the impact sent him staggering. He reeled, yelling; the reaction dislodged the cat but it spun in a flash, tearing upward at his stomach. He felt the hot spurting of blood, and the world became a red haze of horror. The air was full of the creature's screaming. He reached his knife but teeth met in his hand and he dropped it. He grovelled blindly, found the weapon again, slashed out, felt the blade strike home. The cat screeched, writhing on the snow. He forced himself to push his streaming knee into the creature's back, pinning the animal while the knife flailed down, biting into its mad life; until the thing with a final convulsion burst free, fled limping and splashing blood, died maybe somewhere off in the trees. Then there was the time of blackness, the hideous crawl back to the signal station; and now he lay dying too, unable to reach the semaphore, knowing that finally he had failed. He wheezed hopelessly, settled back farther into the crowding dark.

In the blackness were sounds. Homely sounds. A regular *scrape-clink, scrape-clink;* the morning noise of a rake being drawn across the bars of a grate. Rafe tossed muttering, relaxed in the spreading wormth. There was

light now, orange and flickering; he kept his eyes closed, seeing the glow of it against the insides of the lids. Soon his mother would call. It would be time to get up and go to school, or out into the fields.

A tinkling, pleasantly musical, made him turn his head. His body still ached, right down the length of it, but somehow the pain was not quite so intense. He blinked. He'd expected to see his old room in the cottage at Avebury; the curtains stirring in the breeze perhaps, sunshine coming through open windows. It took him a moment to readjust to the signal hut; then memory came back with a rush. He stared; he saw the gantry under the semaphore handles, the rods reaching out through the roof; the whiteness of their grommets, pipeclayed by himself the day before. The tarpaulin squares had been hooked across the windows, shutting out the night. The door was barred, both lamps were burning; the stove was alight, its doors open and spreading warmth. Above it, pots and pans simmered; and bending over them was a girl.

She turned when he moved his head and he looked into deep eyes, black-fringed, with a quick nervousness about them that was somehow like an animal. Her long hair was restrained from falling round her face by a band or ribbon drawn behind the little pointed ears; she wore a rustling dress of an odd light blue, and she was brown. Brown as a nut, though God knew there had been no sun for weeks to tan her skin like that. Rafe recoiled when she looked at him, and something deep in him twisted and needed to scream. He knew she shouldn't be here in this wilderness, amber-skinned and with her strange summery dress; that she was one of the Old Ones, the half-believed, the Haunters of the Heath, the possessors of men's souls if Mother Church spoke truth. His lips tried to form the word "Fairy" and could not. Blood-smeared, they barely moved.

His vision was failing again. She walked toward him lightly, swaying, seeming to his dazed mind to shimmer like a flame; some unnatural flame that a breath might extinguish. But there was nothing ethereal about her touch. Her hands were firm and hard; they wiped his

mouth, stroked his hot face. Coolness remained after she had gone away and he realized she had laid a damp cloth across his forehead. He tried to cry out to her again; she turned to smile at him, or he thought she smiled, and he realized she was singing. There were no words; the sound made itself in her throat, goldenly, like the song a spinning wheel might hum in the ears of a sleepy child, the words always nearly there ready to well up through the surface of the colour and never coming. He wanted badly to talk now, tell her about the cat and his fear of it and its paws full of glass, but it seemed she knew already the things that were in his mind. When she came back it was with a steaming pan of water that she set on a chair beside the bunk. She stopped the humming. or the singing, then and spoke to him; but the words made no sense, they banged and splattered like water falling over rocks. He was afraid again, for that was the talk of the Old Ones; but the defect must have been in his ears because the syllables changed of themselves into the Modern English of the Guild. They were sweet and rushing, filled with a meaning that was not a meaning, hinting at deeper things beneath themselves that his tired mind couldn't grasp. They talked about the Fate that had waited for him in the wood, fallen on him so suddenly from the tree. *'The Norns spin the Fate of a man or of a cat'* sang the voice. *'Sitting beneath Yggdrasil, great World Ash, they work; one Sister to make the yarn, the next to measure, the third to cut it at its end . . .'* And all the time the hands were busy, touching and soothing.

Rafe knew the girl was mad, or possessed. She spoke of Old things, the things banished by Mother Church, pushed out forever into the dark and cold. With a great effort, he lifted his hand, held it before her to make the sign of the Cross; but she gripped the wrist, giggling, and forced it down, started to work delicately on the ragged palm, cleaning the blood from round the bases of the fingers. She unfastened the belt across his stomach, eased the trews apart; cutting the leather, soaking it, pulling it away in little twitches from the deep tears in groin and thighs. "*Ah . . .*" he said, "*Ah . . .*" She stopped at that, frowning, brought something from the stove, lifted his

head gently to let him drink. The liquid soothed, seeming to run from his throat down into body and limbs like a trickling anaesthesia. He relapsed into a warmness shot through with little coloured stabs of pain, heard her crooning again as she dressed his legs. Slid deeper, into sleep.

Day came slowly, faded slower into night that turned to day again, and darkness. He seemed to be apart from Time, lying dozing and waking, feeling the comfort of bandages on his body and fresh linen tucked round him, seeing the handles of the semaphores gleam a hundred miles away, wanting to go to them, not able to move. Sometimes he thought when the girl came to him he pulled her close, pressed his face into the mother-warmth of her thighs while she stroked his hair, and talked, and sang. All the time it seemed, through the sleeping and the waking, the voice went on. Sometimes he knew he heard it with his ears, sometimes in fever dreams the rods rang in his mind. They made a mighty saga; such a story as had never been told, never imagined in all the lives of men.

It was the tale of Earth; Earth and a land, the place her folk called Angle-Land. Only once there had been no Angle-Land because there had been no planets, no sun. Nothing had existed but Time; Time, and a void. Only Time was the void, and the void was Time itself. Through it moved colours, twinklings, sudden shafts of light. here were hummings, shoutings perhaps, musical tones like the notes of organs that thrummed in his body until it shook with them and became a melting part. Sometimes in the dream he wanted to cry out; but still he couldn't speak, and the beautiful blasphemy ground on. He saw the brown mists lift back waving and whispering, and through them the shine of water; a harsh sea, cold and limitless, ocean of a new world. But the dream itself was fluid; the images shone and altered, melding each smoothly into each, yielding place majestically, fading into dark. The hills came, rolling, tentative, squirming, pushing up dripping flanks that shuddered, sank back, returned to silt. The silt, the sea bed, enriched itself with a million-year snowstorm of little dying crea-

tures. The piping of the tiny snails as they fell was a part of the chorus and the song, a thin, sweet harmonic.

And already there were Gods; the Old Gods, powerful and vast, looking down, watching, stirring with their fingers at the silt, waving the swirling brownness back across the sea. It was all done in a dim light, the cold glow of dawn. The hills shuddered, drew back, thrust up again like golden, humped animals, shaking the water from their sides. The sun stood over them, warming, adding steam to the fogs, making multiple and shimmering reflections dance from the sea. The Gods laughed; and over and again, uncertainly, unsurely, springing from the silt, sinking back to silt again, the hills writhed, shaping the shapeless land. The voice sang, whirring like a wheel; there was no "forward", no "back"; only a sense of continuity, of massive development, of the huge Everness of Time. The hills fell and rose; strange creatures slithered on them and flopped and barked; tree leaves brushed away the sun, their reflections waved in water, the trees themselves sank, rolled and heaved, were thrust down to rise once more dripping, grow afresh. The rocks formed, broke, reformed, became solid, melted again until from the formlessness somehow the land was made; Angle-Land, nameless still, with its long pastures, its fields and silent hills of grass. Rafe saw the endless herds of animals that crossed it, wheeling under the wheeling sun; and the first shadowy Men. Rage possessed them; they hacked and hewed, rearing their stone circles in the wind and emptiness, finding again the bodies of the Gods in the chalky flanks of downs. Until all ended, the Gods grew tired; and the ice came flailing and crying from the north, the sun sank dying in its blood and there was coldness and blackness and nothingness and winter.

Into the void, He came; only He was not the Christos, the God of Mother Church. He was Balder, Balder the Lovely, Balder the Young. He strode across the land, face burning bright as the sun, and the Old Ones grovelled and adored. The wind touched the stone circles, burning them with frost; in the darkness men cried for spring. So he came to the Tree Yggdrasil—*What Tree,* Rafe's mind cried despairingly, and the voice checked and laughed

and said without anger *'Yggdrasil, great World Ash, whose branches pierce the layers of Heaven, whose roots wind through all Hells . . .'* Balder came to the Tree, on which he must die for the sins of Gods and Men; and to the Tree they nailed him, hung him by the palms. And there they came to adore while His blood ran and trickled and gouted bright, while he hung above the Hells of the Trolls and of the Giants of Frost and Fire and Mountain, below the Seven Heavens where Frig and Freyha and old Wo-Tan trembled in Valhalla at the mightiness of what was done.

And from His blood sprang warmth again and grass and sunlight, the meadow flowers and the calling, mating birds. And the Church came at last, stamping and jingling out of the east, lifting the brass wedding cakes of her altars while men fought and roiled and made the ground black with their blood, while they raised their cities and their signal towers and their glaring castles. The Old Ones moved back, the Fairies, the Haunters of the Heath, the People of the Stones, taking with them their lovely bleeding Lord; and the priests called despairingly to Him, calling Him the Christos, saying he did die on a tree, at the Place Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. Rome's navies sailed the world; and England woke up, steam jetted in every tiny hamlet, and clattering and noise; while Balder's blood, still raining down, made afresh each spring. And so after days in the telling, after weeks, the huge legend paused, and turned in on itself, and ended.

The stove was out, the hut smelled fresh and cool. Rafe lay quiet, knowing he had been very ill. The cabin was a place of browns and clean bright blues. Deep brown of woodwork, orange brown of the control handles, creamy brown of planking. The blue came from the sky, shafting in through windows and door, reflecting from the long-dead semaphore in pale spindles of light. And the girl herself was brown and blue; brown of skin, frosted blue of ribbon and dress. She leaned over him smiling, all nervousness gone. "*Better*" sang the voice. "*You're better now. You're well . . .*"

He sat up. He was very weak. She eased the blankets aside, letting the air tingle like cool water on his skin.

He swung his legs down over the edge of the bunk and she helped him stand. He sagged, laughed, stood again swaying, feeling the texture of the hut floor under his feet, looking down at his body, seeing the pink criss-crossing of scars on stomach and thighs, the jaunty penis thrusting from its nest of hair. She found him a tunic, helped him into it laughing at him, twitching and pulling. She fetched him a cloak, fastened it round his neck, knelt to push sandals on his feet. He leaned against the bunk panting a little, feeling stronger. His eye caught the semaphore; she shook her head and teased him, urging him toward the door. *'Come'* said the voice. *'Just for a little while . . .'*

She knelt again outside, touched the snow while the wind blustered wetly from the west. Round about, the warming hills were brilliant and still. "*Balder is dead*" she sang. "*Balder is dead . . .*" And instantly it seemed Rafe could hear the million chuckling voices of the thaw, see the very flowers pushing coloured points against the translucency of snow. He looked up at the signals on the tower. They seemed strange to him now, like the winter a thing of the past. Surely they too would melt and run, and leave no trace. They were part of the old life and the old way; for the first time he could turn his back on them without distress. The girl moved from him, low shoes showing her ankles against the snow; and Rafe followed, hesitant at first then more surely, gaining strength with every step. Behind him, the signal hut stood forlorn.

The two horsemen moved steadily, letting their mounts pick their way. The younger rode a few paces ahead, muffled in his cloak, eyes beneath the brim of his hat watching the horizon. His companion sat his horse quietly, skin tanned by the wind. In front of him, over the pommel of the saddle, was hooked the case of a pair of Zeiss binoculars. On the other side was the holster of a musket; the barrel lay along the neck of the horse, the butt thrust into the air just below the rider's hand.

Away on the left a little knoll of land lifted its crown of trees into the sky. Ahead, in the swooping bowl of

the valley, was the black speck of a signal hut, its tower showing thinly above it. The officer reined in quietly, took the glasses from their case and studied the place. Nothing moved, and no smoke came from the chimney. Through the lenses the shuttered windows stared back at him; he saw the black vee of the semaphore arms folded down like the wings of a dead bird. The Corporal waited impatiently, his horse curvetting and blowing steam, but the Captain of Signals was not to be hurried. He lowered the glasses finally, and clicked to his mount. The animal moved forward again at a walk, picking its hooves up and setting them down with care.

The snow here was thicker; the valley had trapped it, and the day's thaw had left the drifts filmed with a brittle skin of ice. The horses floundered as they climbed the slope to the hut. At its door the Captain dismounted, leaving the reins hanging slack. He walked forward, eyes on the lintel and the boards.

The mark. It was everywhere, over the door, on its frame, stamped along the walls. The circle, with the crab pattern inside it; rebus or pictograph, the only thing the People of the Heath knew, the only message it seemed they had for men. The Captain had seen it before, many times; it had no power left to surprise him. The Corporal had not. The older man heard the sharp intake of breath, the click as a pistol was cocked; saw the quick, instinctive movement of the hand, the gesture that wards off the Evil Eye. He smiled faintly, almost absentmindedly, and pushed at the door. He knew what he would find, and that there was no danger.

The inside of the hut was cool and dark. The Guildsman looked round slowly, hands at his sides, feet apart on the boards. Outside a horse champed, jangling its bit, and snorted into the cold. He saw the glasses on their hook, the swept floor, the polished stove, the fire laid neat and ready on the bars; everywhere, the Fairy mark danced across the wood.

He walked forward and looked down at the thing on the bunk. The blood it had shed had blackened with the frost; the wounds on its stomach showed like leaf-shaped

mouths. The eyes were sunken now and dull; one hand was still extended to the signal levers eight feet above.

Behind him the Corporal spoke harshly, using anger as a bulwark against fear. "The . . . People that were here. They done this. . . ."

The Captain shook his head. "No", he said slowly, "T'was a wildcat."

The Corporal said thickly, "They were here though . . ." The anger surged again as he remembered the unmarked snow. "There weren't no tracks, sir. *How could they come . . .?*"

"How come the wind?" asked the Captain, half to himself. He looked down again at the corpse in the bunk. He knew a little of the history of this boy, and of his record. The Guild had lost a good man.

He took the pad from his belt, scribbled, tore off the top sheet. "Corporal," he said quietly. "If you please . . . Route through Golden Cap."

He walked to the door, stood looking out across the hills at the matchstick of the eastern tower just visible against the sky. In his mind's eye a map unrolled; he saw the message flashing down the chain, each station picking it up, routing it, clattering it on its way. Down to Golden Cap, where the great signals stood gaunt against the cold crawl of the sea; north up the A line to Aquae Sulis, back again along the Great West Road. Within the hour it would reach its destination at Silbury Hill; and a grave-faced man in green would walk down the village street of Avebury, knock at a door . . .

The Corporal climbed to the gantry, clipped the message in the rack, eased the handles forward lightly testing against the casing ice. He flexed his shoulders, pulled sharply. The dead tower woke up, arms clacking in the quiet. *Attention. Attention* . . . Then the signal for Origination, the cypher for the easter line. The movements dislodged a little cloud of ice crystals; they fell quietly, sparkling against the greyness of the sky.

— KEITH ROBERTS

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