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TO CONQUER CHAOS

JOHN BRUNNER

• lee harding •

• john ashcroft •

• david rome •

• david alexander •

• p. f. woods •

guest editor

• robert presslie •

no. 133



# new worlds

profiles

## robert presslie

guest editor

london



Mr. Presslie's guest editorial this month, which is a different analytical approach to the general subject theme of science fiction writing than generally expressed by previous guests, has triggered off some interesting possible themes for further editorials, the first of which will be published in the next issue.

In a quiet but solidly satisfying manner, Mr. Presslie has been doing this sort of thing almost since he first commenced writing s-f, even his stories produce many fresh approaches to ideas which are often commonplace. This is not too surprising as he works in the field of pharmaceutical chemistry, being a manager for a firm of multiple chemists and it is in this field that he draws much of his background analysis for scientific facts in his stories.

He admits that he is a dreamer and that today dreamers never had it so good. "This must be the only age in which dreams come true while you wait," he once stated. "And for this selfsame fact," he continued, "I think the next few years will see a drastic and dramatic change in science fiction; who wants to read a make-believe yarn about the first man on the Moon when his photograph could well be on the front page of tomorrow's newspapers?" That was nearly five years ago—and the dramatic change has come over science fiction; and it is almost certain that the photograph of the first man (or woman) to land on the Moon has already been printed.

In the changing world of science fiction writing, as he points out this month, the cardboard character is beginning to breathe and the focus is on characterisation rather than the grandiose sweep of galactic backgrounds. In this respect, he has been just as great a pioneer as most of his contemporaries. For this reason, too, several of his stories have been anthologised—and doubtless others will be in the future.



# SCIENCE FICTION

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## Guest Editorial

*from this month the subject matter of our guest editorials takes a subtle change, being more an analysis of science fiction writing than a diagnosis in the minds of the various contributors*

# speaking for myself

by robert presslie

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Right from the start of these guest editorials two questions have intruded time and time again. A variety of writers have shown immense preoccupation with these questions. They have kicked them about, chewed them to pieces and generally rent them asunder as if there was a precious kernel at the heart of them—a kernel of such shining truth that its discovery must, like a Philosopher's Stone, transmute science fiction from its present base material to lambent golden literature.

'What is wrong with science fiction today?' has been one cry. The other interrogates: 'Where is the old sense of wonder?' with such a sinister tone of accusation that there would be no surprise if it was followed by, 'Nobody leaves this room till we find it!'

Both these questions are arrogantly presumptive. Both are loaded with the presupposition that there *is* something wrong with science fiction and that there *is* no sense of wonder in today's science fiction writing and both assumptions are a load of you-know-what.

Take the first question: 'What is wrong with science fiction?' Answer: Nothing. Because it can be argued that there is nothing wrong with anything—it all depends on how you look at it. Auschwitz, Belsen and Dachau were as wrong as hell to



their involuntary tenants. But they served their purpose most efficiently as far as the camp commandants were concerned. In other words, wrongness is in the mind of the observer. If the subject or object in question measures up to what the observer wants then it is right and proper. If it is not what is wanted then it is wrong.

So if the question, 'What is wrong with science fiction?' is valid, it follows that the public is not getting what it wants. This seems to be a reasonable conclusion and would indicate that if Joe Public got what he wanted all would be well again. But anybody with the teeniest morsel of nous can see the next highly dangerous question coming up: 'Just what does Joe Public want?'

Let's take a look at the larger family to which Joe Public belongs. On the 13th December, 1962, America launched a space satellite called Relay, a successor to the earlier Telstar. Next morning, in the early editions of the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Sketch* the public's taste was evaluated as follows:

A Yorkshire sportsman on cricket location in Australia was having trouble with his back. The *Daily Mirror* devoted  $47\frac{1}{2}$  square inches to Mr. Trueman's lumbar aches and pains; the news of Relay was given all of  $1\frac{1}{2}$  sq. ins., on the bottom left corner of the back page. The *Daily Sketch* apparently had a finger on the same pulse. It measured the public's frenzy for word of the condition of Trueman's vertebrae at exactly the same level— $47\frac{1}{2}$  sq. ins. But evidently any flicker of scientific interest was too feeble for the *Sketch* to detect. Relay was not mentioned.

Now, without any wish to malign the redoubtable Freddie, surely Relay's intended value to the world in general was inestimably greater than the result of a cricketer's spinal X-ray. And it is not only the number of zeros in the cost of Relay that matters. It is the background of centuries of learning that went into the making of Relay, the tremendous achievement of hurling it into orbit, the benefits to mankind that can result from greater, more personal intercommunication. Yet one paper measures the public interest at six lines, the other at nothing. And before anybody condemns the newspapers let them consider that newspapers have to sell to exist; to sell, they have to print what the public wants to read. Ergo, the public simply does not want to know about scientific projects such as



*commencing the first part of a three-part serial in which John Brunner produces one of the most interesting and exciting plots he has written for several years—the story of an expedition into the barrenland*

# to conquer chaos

by John Brunner

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part one of three parts

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## o n e

The barrenland lay on the face of the world like an ulcer, nearly round, more than three hundred miles in circumference. It had been there so long that it was accepted ; it was *there* and it was a *fact* and it *was*.

For several days' journey in all directions away from its edge the countryside had formerly been nearly as vacant as the barrenland itself, except that grass and trees grew, which on the barrenland they did not.

With the passage of generations, however, people had crept back, driven by population pressure, or minor shifts of climate, or migration of game, or pure cussedness, until now at least a dozen settlements big enough to be called villages existed practically on the boundary line. The price of living there was the necessity of contending with the *things* that every so often wandered out of the barrenland and killed. But they endured that. Men endure much.

The barrenland *was*. That was the extraordinary part of it. Not a simple desert, which distance and word-of-mouth



transmission of news had magnified into something strange and terrible, but exactly what it was reputed to be. And it was not more than a couple of days' march north of here.

Jervis Yanderman leaned back against the tall tree under which he had taken shelter from the light fall of rain just after sunset, and from which he had not moved even when the shower stopped, and mused over the implications of the news. Three scouts had been sent out. Two had returned already, one to the line of march and one to the camp-site directly a halt was ordered for the night, and both of them had spoken of reaching the vicinity of the barrenland and looking out over it. Their instructions were to do no more than that. Yanderman hoped the lateness of the third scout was due to nothing worse than over-enthusiasm; in any case he would be sharply reprimanded unless his reasons were very good indeed.

He ceased his musing at last and glanced around him at the nearby terrain. It was full of dim whitish shapes and little yellow fibres like fallen stars in the gloom. When Grand Duke Paul of Esberg moved his army, he did it in style as he did everything else, and with many fresh and original ideas about logistics. People had said it was impossible to move two thousand men at thirty miles a day over unknown country. Yet here they were, settled to camp for the night, canvas up, fires lit, guards posted, as smoothly as though it were a parade drill instead of a risky expedition into unexplored regions.

If he'd got over being surprised at that sort of thing, Yanderman told himself ruefully, he had no business being surprised at the actual existence of the barrenland.

A shadow moved on the slope of the hill crowned by his tree, and a voice snapped out of nowhere at him, demanding his identity. He gave it, heard rather than saw the salute the patrol returned, and—when he discovered three men moving into view where he had imagined there was only one—complimented the leader on the stealthiness of his approach. The man laughed a little selfconsciously.

“Used you for practice, if you'll excuse my saying so,” he admitted. “Spotted you from down the hill, told my men to stalk you like a shy deer. Made it, too,” he added to his companions, and they chuckled.

After a pause, the leader said, “Sir, if you don't mind—there's a lot of latrine rumours going around the camp since we sat down for the night. About the scouts finding what we're looking for. Is it true?”



“ True enough.”

The trio of patrolmen exchanged glances. The leader went on, “ And—uh—is it what the old stories say? A place of devils and monsters, where nothing honest-to-daylight can live?”

“ Devils I know nothing of,” Yanderman answered easily. “ I fear more the solid things that go by day than the wispy things that go by night. And as to monsters—why, strange beasts there may well be, but we’ve met savage animals before, and two thousand men’s a force to reckon with.”

One of the other men spoke up, clearing his throat first. “ Sir, if you’ll excuse me—would you settle me a bet, if it’s not presuming?”

Yanderman lifted an eyebrow towards him, but in the dusk it probably went unnoticed. The man continued, “ A mate of mine says he’s going to get a charm from Granny Jassy—says the Duke has one he bought off her, which is the ground for his successes. I say no, it’s all dreamy talk, and Granny’s charms are so much stable-dirt, and bet him a day’s pay he was wrong about the Duke.”

The third patrolman, the one who had not spoken, shifted his feet uncomfortably. Yanderman had a shrewd suspicion that he must be the mate in question, and the man who had put the question wanted the bet settled quickly with no room for argument afterwards.

He said, “ You have a clear head, soldier. Tell your mate—as I’m prepared to tell him myself if he claims otherwise—that Grand Duke Paul owes his successes to his clever thinking and his thorough planning. He probably wouldn’t know a charm if he saw one. And as for Granny Jassy, maybe she peddles charms on the side, and maybe she makes a little money from gullible soldiers who think she’ll give them luck. But were she to offer one to the Duke, he’d laugh till he cried.”

He was right about the identity of the other party in the bet. The third patrolman said hotly, “ But what did the Duke clutter his train with her for, if not for the luck she can charm on him?”

“ You speak over-fiercely, soldier,” Yanderman told him in a mild tone. “ Let it pass. The Duke brings Granny with him for the sake of what she can tell about the way we travel; by some power which she herself doesn’t understand, she knows before we see what ground we’ll come to, what hazards to expect. That frightens her as well as puffing her up.”



"Can she see past the edge of the barrenland too?" the third soldier muttered. Plainly he was the one who was readiest to speak of devils and monsters. Patiently, Yanderman amplified his explanation.

"It's less a matter of seeing than of remembering. In the old days people saw this land, and Granny tells what they saw. But things change. And possibly no man has lived within the barrenland and survived to tell the tale."

It was a mistake to have put it that way. The three men shifted their feet and looked at each other. Yanderman hurried to counteract the effect he'd had on them.

"Soldier!" he said to the third man. "How do you like your gun?"

Startled, the man hefted the weapon in his hands. "I like it well," he said. "Fires true, kills clean, as a gun should."

"Then thank Granny Jassy for it, as well as the Duke. It was from a memory she had that the design was drawn. And a man with a gun may venture into the barrenland and face monstrous things with determination—if he has any!"

"Are we going into the barrenland, then?" the patrol leader demanded.

"As yet, no one knows. The decision is the Duke's—and if he says to go there, I'll go with him rather than with any other commander who ever trod ground." Yanderman spoke with finality; the patrol leader caught the tone, called his men to salute, and led them off into the night again.

Yanderman started to make his way down from the hilltop, frowning. It was only to be expected that when they came so close to the legendary barrenland all the old wives' tales would revive. The difficulty was, of course, that up till now the tales of one old wife in particular—Granny Jassy—had proved to be borne out by facts, and this made it hard to laugh off the alarming notions the men had of devils and monsters.

For himself, the main reaction he got was a quickening of the pulse and a brightening of the eye at the thought of the wonders he was going to see. He'd caught that spirit of wanting to go and see for himself from the Duke, who had much of it. Yanderman wished he could also catch the cool skill in planning for new situations which went with it in the Duke's case. Still, that was a rare gift in any generation, and the Duke had enough for any ten leaders.



There was a sudden commotion across the camp from where he stood. He looked up, seeing a searchlight on another hilltop spring to full brilliance, cutting the night like a sword. That was another of the things that Duke Paul had sorted from the legends and quasi-memories of people like Granny Jassy—those searchlights were cumbersome, but they were wonderfully useful. As soon as camp was pitched the men tending the lights chose vantage points, filled their ovens with wood, lit their little fires underneath to bake the gases out of the wood, and sat down to wait. When the order came, they had only to turn a little tap, light the gas, and drop an incandescent mantle over the flame. A parabolic reflector of polished silver on a copper base then hurled the beam where it was wanted.

This time they were lighting up a pass between two low hills north of the camp, and dimly in the distance a figure on horseback could be discerned, waving wildly.

At once Yanderman broke into a run. That must be the missing scout. He'd be taken straight to the Duke to give an account of his experience, and when he reported Yanderman wanted to be present.

## t w o

Yanderman stood aside for a moment to let someone else come out of the tent, ducking under the flap that served as a door, and then went inside himself. This was really more of a pavillion than a tent, with flooring of woven rushes put down on the grass, and several pieces of portable furniture spread around. The light came from a wood-gas lamp and made the shadows of the occupants move, big and black, on the hanging walls.

The guard just inside the door saluted. Yanderman acknowledged the gesture, crossed the floor to a spot in front of the Duke's table, and saluted in his turn.

Grand Duke Paul of Esberg raised his dark eyes from the hand-painted maps on the table before him. He was a massively magnificent man. He had one of the largest heads anyone could recall seeing, thatched above and below with dense black hair and full black beard. His pillar-like neck set into broad shoulders and a barrel chest clad with a shirt of red and black—the Esberg colours—and his legs were thrust into



long tan boots. Were he to stand up, he would overtop Yanderman, who was not small, by head and shoulders.

"They just sent to tell me the missing scout is in sight," he said. "Did you see him?"

"Riding like a madman through the notch in the hills to the north," Yanderman confirmed. "That's why I came down."

"Take a seat. I look forward to learning what's delayed him so long." Duke Paul leaned back in his chair, and it creaked slightly under his huge bulk. "I've sent also for Granny Jassy, in case she has clues to any puzzles the scout may report."

Yanderman took a folding chair from a stack in the corner of the tent, and sat down. Beside the Duke his secretary—an ascetic-faced young man called Kesford—pinned a fresh sheet of yellow paper to his writing-board and sharpened the point of his pencil by scraping it half a dozen times on a block of pumice.

It was only a few minutes before Granny Jassy was heard outside, her voice raised shrilly in protest against the way she had been disturbed after the long day's journey. Chuckling, a soldier told her not to be so sensitive, and the flap-door was thrown back.

A gaunt figure in a shapeless black dress, Granny Jassy walked smartly through the opening. She came to the table in front of the Duke, planted both hands on it palms down, and leaned forward.

"Duke or no Duke!" she said, and pulled her sunken-cheeked face into an alarming scowl. "Duke or no Duke, nobody ought to shove an old weak woman around like this! Any more treatment so disrespectful to my aged bones, and I'll go home—I will that, though I have to learn to steal horses to do it!"

Duke Paul raised one tufted black eyebrow and said nothing, but waved at the couch on his right where he slept at night. It was soft and had several plump pillows on it. Granny Jassy, still mumbling her opinions about the way she was handled, turned to sit cautiously down on the fattest pillow.

Another few moments and they brought the scout into the tent. Duke Paul started up with an oath, staring. All the man's shirt was stiff with blood; his face was pale, though his eyes were bright, and he was leaning for support on a medical auxiliary in green gown and tight black turban. He attempted



to salute, but his right arm was disobedient and he had to let it fall back to his side, wincing.

Yanderman stood up. "Move over, Granny," he said softly. "You may be old, but he's injured. We'll give you a chair and lay him on that couch."

"Up! Down! Move here! Move there!" Granny squawked. "I wish I'd never been taken from my own hearth, that I do!"

But she groaned to her feet and took a chair instead and the medical auxiliary unrolled a red blanket from the pack on his shoulder to toss over the couch and protect it from the scout's blood. Clearly the Duke was impatient to hear the man's news, but he asked no questions till the blood-soaked shirt had been cut away, exposing a gash a hand's-breadth long and very deep in his shoulder muscles. A girl came into the tent with a big pail of clean water and a package of dressings, and the scout, his eyes blank with exhaustion, endured while the wound was washed, closed with three stitches, and covered.

"Yan!" the Duke said sharply. "In that chest there's a silver flask. Give him a gill of the liquor from it."

Yanderman glanced around. The chest the Duke pointed to was behind his table on the ground, the lid lowered but not locked. He found the silver flask and poured a little from it into the cup-shaped lid.

The strong-smelling spirit seemed to revive the injured man instantly. With a sigh of relief the Duke picked up his chair and carried it closer to the couch.

"Well, Ampier?" he said. "What hit you?"

Yanderman stood silent in the background, listening. He felt he would never cease to wonder at the Duke's ability to name every man in his army on sight. The medical auxiliary went on with his work unobtrusively, checking the scout's pulse, folding a sling from his arm, laying another blanket over him for warmth. The girl who had brought the pail of water had slipped away again; she returned some minutes later with a mug of steaming broth and a handful of grapes.

Ampier, propped up on the Duke's pillows, shook his head. "What name to put to it, sir, is beyond me. It was the strangest thing I ever set eyes on. According to instructions I rode due north by compass, as well as I could, and not long past noon I came in sight of the barrenland. That's a wonderful thing to behold! On this side, as you may picture it, the grass grows



thickish, the rocks boast coats of lichen, there are trees and all manner of plants. In the space of a few yards all is changed. The grass withers, vanishes away, a plantain here and there dots the ground, the stones crop out, dust replaces fertile earth, and from there till the skyline—nothing ! I rode along its edge for perhaps a mile, not wishing to exceed my orders by trespassing on the barrenland itself, and—to be candid—much alarmed to find it real and no mere legend.

“ Blurry in the east of where I found myself was a stain of smoke upon the sky. Reasoning that man’s the creature who makes fire, I fancied I’d do well to go further and find if a village was there. It would have water, which we’ll need, and perhaps food to sell us. So I spurred for the smoke. But before I was in sight of any habitation, the *thing* came out from behind a rock and was upon me like a lightning bolt.”

“ How was it made ?” the Duke demanded. Yanderman leaned forward, because Ampier’s voice was weakening. He saw that there was sweat glistening on the face of the secretary Kesford as he noted down what was said.

“ Large—of a boar-pig’s weight, I’d say. But possessed of a long weaving neck, and on the tip of that a thing less like a bird’s hooked bill than like a single great claw with a slash for a mouth beneath it. In colour it was sandy, or tawny, except for this hooked claw-thing, which was white. It could plant its feet on the ground and slash at me upon my horse by using the stretch of this serpent-like neck. I loosed a shot at it, but the slug went wide, and then I strove to cut its neck through with my sword. So swift and flexible was it, though, that I could not, until it sank the claw-beak in me. Then I was able to slash it, and it ran about blindly until it died. The pain was so great I dared not dismount and cut off part of it as witness to my story, but turned and rode fast for the line of march again. My horse floundered under me as I came through the picket-lines ; the *thing* gashed him on the withers, and no man will ride him again.”

Duke Paul ran his fingers through his beard and nodded over the story. Ampier let his head sink back, closing his eyes again. Yanderman glanced around the tent, and noticed that the medical auxiliary had taken up the blood-soaked shirt he had cut from the scout’s body and was turning it over curiously in the light of the lamp.

Yanderman moved closer to him. “ What is it you see ?” he inquired in low tones.



"That, sir." The medical auxiliary nodded downwards, holding the cloth stretched in the full beam of the lamp. Yanderman stared.

On the crusting brown blood there was a fine blur of green—like a mould on mildew. It was alive, for it could be seen to grow, not creeping evenly out over the cloth but seeming to seed itself half an inch or an inch distant from the main part, then to spread at a snail's pace till the new patch rejoined the original one, then to pause, then to begin again.

"Show the Duke," Yanderman ordered, and the medical auxiliary did so.

Duke Paul watched the phenomenon curiously for a while. At last he said, "Take that cloth—in a box, or sealed package—to your medical tent. Test all the strong liquids and powders on it till you find one which will check or stop its growth. And watch that the living blood from Ampier's wound is not infected with it!"

The medical auxiliary saluted and obeyed, vanishing into the night outside. The girl who had come back with the broth fed some of it to the injured scout; then with the help of the guard from the doorway she guided him from the tent and away to his quarters.

Duke Paul directed Kesford to read back what Ampier had told them, to fix it firmly in his mind. Then he turned to Granny Jassy, scowling at the side of the tent.

"Come to the couch, Granny," he said. "Let's find out if your strangely stocked mind holds any explanation for this *thing* which attacked Ampier."

Grumbling, Granny obeyed. The Duke drew from his pouch a length of silver chain with a crystal ball on the end, as large as a man's thumbnail, and set it swinging before Granny's face. Shortly her eyes closed and he was able to begin questioning her. He persisted for an hour—his patience, Yanderman sometimes thought, was inhuman—without extracting any useful information.

The trouble with people like Granny Jassy, Yanderman reflected, was that they didn't understand the memories which they could call up. Here now, for example, Granny was telling of strange animals, of many colours and in vast numbers, on which people rode as though they served for horses. Yet when pressed more closely, she described them as being wheeled—not animals, then, but machines! However, they went by



themselves ; for ignorant Granny, that made them animals, for whoever heard of a machine going by itself ?

His mind wandered. How was it possible—the invariable question—how was it possible for these tales told by Granny and with less colour and detail by several other people in Esberg to be true memories ? Yet it seemed they must be. When Duke Paul decided to base experiments on some of these fantastic tales even Yanderman, whose admiration for the Duke was boundless, wondered whether he was wasting his time. He was not ; many useful instruments, such as the searchlights guarding the camp-site, and even the guns which armed the troops, were derived from old wives' tales. You might say, of course, that this was a subconscious fitting-together of available facts which any inventor of new devices applied more systematically. You might. The Duke didn't.

Encouraged, Duke Paul selected another kind of tale for investigation—the tale of a great city three days' journey north of Esberg, with a million people in it. A ludicrous fantasy !

Yet three days' journey north the men he sent out came upon mounds and hillocks clothed with greenery, gnawed by time, and dug into them. And there they found, true enough, pieces of worked metal, shards of strong glass, corroded household utensils, and more things than anyone could have imagined.

And indeed now the proofs were beyond arguing. For ever since they set out on this greatest expedition of all, to see whether the legendary barrenland was real, Granny Jassy had been able to tell them of the terrain ahead—not as it was today, but as it might have been in the weird but consistent world of the old tales, when men lived in the gigantic cities of which the ruins had been discovered, when they flew through the air and even . . . no, that *was* imagination, surely ! To fly in the air was vaguely conceivable ; birds and insects did it. But to fly beyond the air, to other worlds, was ridiculous. And even that absurdity paled beside the ultimate ; the story of *walking* to other worlds than this !

“ You look solemn, Yan ! ” Duke Paul boomed, and Yanderman came back from his musing with a start. Granny Jassy was getting off the couch. The crystal ball on its length of chain had vanished into the Duke's pouch again. Kesford was going over his notes, correcting his writing so he could read it back tomorrow.



"I am," Yanderman agreed. "I grow confused with the mixture of certainty and fancy which confronts us—as though somehow a little nightmare has leaked into the waking world."

"Assuredly a beast such as attacked Ampier smacks of some playful god's whimsey," the Duke said. He rubbed his hands together. "Nonetheless he killed it, and lives—or will, providing that green horror on his shirt doesn't take root in his blood. I confess I held the tales of monsters from the barrenland too lightly, or I'd not have sent out scouts singly. Tomorrow we'll do otherwise. We'll send a party of a dozen, fully-armed."

Yanderman nodded. "I do take it as heartening," he said, "that men manage to live almost on the edge of the barrenland."

Duke Paul chuckled. "You noted that! Good, good! Yes, we must gain all the information we can from those best fitted to tell us. Get the exactest details of Ampier's route, and make straight for this smudge of smoke he fancied he saw. If it proves to be other than a village, go beyond it till you find people."

Well, that was how one usually received orders from Duke Paul. Yanderman shrugged. "I'll do so," he agreed. "I'll leave directly after dawn."

He paused, expecting something further. But as far as Duke Paul was concerned the matter was settled. Already he had gone back to his maps, and his head was bowed as though tilted forward by the weight of his enormous beard.

### t h r e e

Since the army from Esberg was on a peaceful mission—so long as everyone else was willing to let them go through—and since they were also in a hurry, they moved quickly and without trying to be inconspicuous. They were a most impressive sight on the road, covering their steady three miles an hour: two thousand men with four hundred and ten animals, red and black banners flying, generally singing by companies to keep the pace up.

It was a considerable change, Yanderman reflected, to be going out in the cold grey dawn with ten horsemen who all knew what happened to Ampier yesterday. They were sensible and courageous men—but, after all, he himself had compared



the situation facing them with a leakage of nightmare into the waking world, and a nightmare can reduce the bravest man to cold sweating.

No matter for that now, though. The problem was simply to get ahead to the first possible village on the edge of the barrenland, and to hope against hope that it was something more than a cluster of mud huts full of apathetic peasants. What Yanderman wanted to see was a decent little town where people stood up for themselves against the terrors—of whatever kind—that strayed out of the barrenland. That would be the best kind of tonic for the worrying soldiers.

They rode easily, but without dawdling. After the showers of yesterday the day was fine, though not very warm before the sun climbed well into the sky. Against the wishes of the medical staff Yanderman had got details of Ampier's route from him last night before turning in. That had proved to be far-sighted, for according to this morning's report the man's wound had indeed been infected with the curious green mould and had started to gangrene already.

Which wouldn't make the troops any less nervous, Yanderman thought bitterly.

As the miles went by, though, and there was no sign of anything stranger than country lacking people to cultivate it, they relaxed. Yanderman kept the line strung out in couples twenty paces apart, as a matter of routine precaution, but he raised no objection when the men changed places with one another for the sake of conversation. He himself rode with his chief lieutenant, Stadham, a man promoted late in life from the ranks, and who in fact commanded the company of which Yanderman was nominally senior officer. Yanderman was no kind of a soldier, though for the purpose of the expedition he was a member of the general staff. He was a man with an inquisitive mind, who wanted to know about the same things as intrigued Duke Paul. Since the Duke was in a position to investigate, Yanderman served him willingly.

A little before noon Yanderman looked about him at the landscape. He felt a quickening of his heart and a tightness seemed to close around his temples. Gesturing to Stadham, he gave a curt order.

"Call 'em in. This matches the description of the place Ampier got to, and the elapsed time is just about right."



They were earlier here than the scout had been, of course ; the fact that he would have ridden rather faster was cancelled out by the greater distance he had had to cover from the line of march.

Stadham reached for the little brass horn hanging at his saddlebow and sounded the three shrill blasts which were the signal to regroup and confer. Yanderman shaded his eyes and stared at the terrain ahead. There was that suggestive wavering of the air—rising, perhaps, off desert-bare ground . . .

He checked that line of thought and turned to address his companions, now assembled in a semi-circle facing him.

“From the description Ampier gave me, we’re almost at the limit of the trip he made. In other words, by the time we breast the next rise we should be in clear sight of the famous and legendary barrenland.”

A couple of his men exchanged glances. One might have given an imperceptible shudder ; at any rate his horse moved nervously and tossed its head.

“It’s come to my notice,” Yanderman went on steadily, “that some of our men have been getting—ah—second thoughts now they know the barrenland really exists. They’ve been buying charms from Granny Jassy, for instance, thinking she can sell them good luck as easily a —as a measure of beer. Well !”

He straightened sharply in his saddle and slapped his open palm on his thigh.

“Well, I don’t care what you do with your money. But I do care what you do with your lives. You’re expensively trained soldiers, with craftsman-made weapons about you, and those are hard to come by. I don’t want any of you going a yard further thinking you can trust to Granny Jassy’s luck-charms when what you need is the same as what you always need—a cool head and a keen eye.

“Any of you got a luck-charm about you ? Speak up !”

His gaze flashed searingly from face to face, settling finally on the man whose horse had started a few moments ago. He didn’t say anything.

At last, shamefacedly, the man shrugged and drew a little bundle of coloured feathers from the lining of his helmet.

“Augren, I’m surprised it was you,” Yanderman said. “Anyone else ?”



The others all shook their heads. One or two of them grinned at Augren's discomfiture. Yanderman scowled at them, and they straightened their expressions abruptly.

"All right, Augren," he went on. "You can do one of two things—throw that charm away and stay with us, or trust to it and ride off on your own. I won't have superstitious fools in my company. As far as I'm concerned the barrenland is a place like any other dangerous place—and before venturing into it I'm going to prime myself with all possible information from people who've seen it before. And if I do go into it I want nobody with me but a man who'll do his own thinking rather than hire it done by an old woman."

Augren, his face scarlet with embarrassment now, tried to hurl the charm away from him. Like anything made of feathers it was impossible to throw. A breeze caught it and carried it out of sight.

"Good," said Yanderman in a satisfied tone. "Ride on."

He could feel the tension mounting as the party ascended the next rise—the last, he expected, before sighting the barrenland. It was the last. He drew rein and motioned to the others to copy him.

Now he could feel the tension leaking away as fast as it had built up. Nobody actually said, "So that's all it is!" But they thought it.

Just bare ground—rocks cropping out of loose, wind-tossed dust and dry, sun-baked expanses of clay. Not a devil or monster in sight. Just land—barren. What else did its name suggest?

"See any smoke such as Ampier mentioned?" he asked Stadham, after scanning the horizon. The older man grunted and shook his head. Yanderman called to the others.

"From here we'll move off slowly around the rim, the same way Ampier did, keeping well together in case of emergency, and try to spot the smoke he described. A couple of you—you two—watch the sky. The rest, watch the rocks for signs of movement."

They wheeled their horses and proceeded cautiously. In a little while there was a whoop from Augren, who had pushed to the head of the line as a blustering compensation for his gullibility in the matter of the luck-charm. Yanderman saw him rise in his saddle and point down into a dip in the ground.



"Keep watch," he told Stadham, and rode forward to see what Augren had found.

It was the animal Ampier had killed. It was exactly as he had described it, with the claw-beak and a yard of its neck lying severed from its body, except that in the night something must have come by and fed on it, for the belly was torn open and an evil smell rose from the contents. Flies swarmed on the claw-beak, presumably tempted by the blood on its tip, but with a shudder he could not repress Yanderman noted that they would not settle on the rest of the carcass. Meat that flies would not touch must indeed be different from ordinary flesh !

Struck by a sudden thought, he bent low from his saddle to see whether the green mould had marked the carcass anywhere, but apparently it had not. He raised his head again, searching the skyline. Unless Ampier had been mistaken about the smoke—or unless it had been from a natural brush-fire—they ought to be able to see it from here . . .

And yes, there it was, a thin greyish veil on the blue of the sky, rising from the other side of a nearby hill.

The rest of his men had all come now to stare at the dead beast. He let them continue for a few moments—dead, it was less alarming than it must have been in life, and to see it lying so would stamp on their minds that it was an animal, even if monstrous, and not an invulnerable supernatural being. Then he called them back to attention, pointed out the smoke, and ordered them to ride on.

#### f o u r

Grey from head to foot with wood-ash, Conrad sat by the soap-vats, in one hand his knife held by the blade close up near the point, in the other a piece of excellent soap—the hardest and whitest he had ever seen set in the shallow wooden pans. That batch was all ready for carrying back to the town, but he had left it where it lay because the attraction of the idea which had come to him was irresistible. Thoughtfully, and with some difficulty because the weight of the knife's handle caused it to swing about, he was shaping a girl's head.

It was meant to be a likeness of Idris, but somehow it wasn't quite turning out like her. He was spending as much time puzzling over the lack of resemblance as he was actually carving it.



Anyway, he had little inducement to make a move. He wouldn't be thanked if he went home before sunset, and even then he might well have to go and beg a bite of supper at Idris's back door, for no one would buy much soap in the next three or four days—washday having just come and gone.

And there was another reason, still more compelling than those, why he preferred to stay out here a mile or more from the town when the current batch of soap was finished. It was the same reason why he preferred this dirty, monotonous job to any other the community might have offered him. If the mood came over him just to sit and think, there was no one to fling mud or stones at him with a shout of "Idle Conrad!"

His mouth tightened at the memory, and he drove it down.

*It isn't fair*, he thought rebelliously. *I didn't ask for my head to be stuffed with all these crazy visions!*

And yet . . .

He let the hand holding the soap carving fall to his knee, and gazed out unseeing over the sun-hot countryside. That was a question he had never been able to answer: if one of the wise men came to him one day and said, "Conrad, I can wash from your mind these troublesome visions of yours as your soap takes dirt from a man's hand; shall I do so?"—what would he reply?

Could he sacrifice his dreams of a world in which no one needed to be jealous of anyone else, because everything was plentiful—a world where even ash-grimed, greasy-garbed Conrad the soapmaker had incredible powers to serve his every whim?

He didn't know. And since the question was never likely to arise—the wise men were not *that* wise—there wasn't much point in worrying about it. He returned to concentrating on his carving. He wanted desperately to make a good job of it; Idris was the only person in Lagwich who seemed to like him, the only person since the death of his mother with whom he had shared the secret of the dreams that came to him when he lay in one of his trance-like intervals and other people thought he was simply being "Idle Conrad."

And stoned him to make him wake.

Out here, beyond the town's land, no one cared what he did, and he liked that side of the task. What he detested about it was that his vats were sited much nearer the barrenland than the town itself. *Things* came from the barrenland, and usually



they were dangerous. There had never yet been an emergency for him to cope with, but he had a dreadfully active imagination.

Consequently, when the red and black waving thing came in sight at the bend of the path which curved around the barrenland he jumped to his feet in fright, letting the carving fall. He dived for the bow and arrows he kept propped against a handy rock, fitted an arrow clumsily to the string, and only then looked again to see what had appeared.

He relaxed, tempted to laugh at himself. What he had seen from the corner of his eye proved to be a length of black and red cloth flying from a pole in the hands of a rider with several companions. He thought of the marrying expeditions which he had sometimes seen come from other towns to look for wives. They rode like this, with some flag or banner, and all done up in their finery. Yet marrying expeditions were a springtime affair, and it was now high summer, and anyway although these men were very well clad they were not as gorgeous as the would-be bridegrooms he had seen . . .

He waited uncertainly, his bow still in his hand, while the newcomers reined their horses and conferred. One of them dismounted, raised both hands to show they were empty, and walked to within easy speaking distance. Conrad had a little trouble following his pronunciation, but the sense of his words was clear.

"Greetings ! My name is Jervis Yanderman and these are my men. We come in peace. Are you from the village whose smoke we can see yonder ?"

Slightly nettled, Conrad gave his own name. "But that's no village !" he added. "It's a prosperous town of many hundred inhabitants and a guard of sixty strong men." He added the last phrase just in case the strangers were less peaceful than Yanderman claimed. "And the name of the town is Lagwich."

*Not that I have any particular liking for the place,* he glossed under his breath.

"It's near the barrenland ?" Yanderman said.

"Closer than any other town, they tell me. But we have a strong palisade and a deep ditch with a bridge, and we live safe enough from any danger."

Yanderman seemed pleased. Looking at him, Conrad decided that he differed in many ways from anyone he had ever seen before. He was bigger than average in all directions—though Conrad's work involved humping heavy loads and had



added muscle to his arms and shoulders, Yanderman was heavier-set as well as being a handspan taller. His companions seemed bigger again, as well as Conrad could judge from this distance.

But it wasn't his size which was most impressive about Yanderman. It was his thoughtful, relaxed way of moving, as if he were at home in any country he visited, even this one where he was admittedly a stranger. Conrad's heart began to pound with excitement. It would be a very important occasion, the arrival of these outsiders in Lagwich !

He said, " And you ? Are you from Hawgley ?" He named the most distant town from which marrying expeditions sometimes came to Lagwish.

Yanderman shook his head. " From Esberg—fourteen days' journey south of here."

Conrad felt his mouth fall open. He knew it was foolish-looking, but he couldn't help it. Sometimes, sitting by the soap-vats, he had wondered how big the world was, and had come to the conclusion that it must be quite small, because the people of his visions seemed so ready to leave it and go to look at others. But if you could travel fourteen whole days and find no end to it, the world couldn't be as small as that after all. Unless . . .

He grew aware that Yanderman had said something else which he had failed to catch and apologised for his lapse of attention.

" We'd like to go to your—town," Yanderman repeated. " To talk with its lord, or governor, or whatever you call him."

Conrad looked dubious. " I could take you to the five wise men," he said after a pause. " Indeed, they'll certainly wish to see you. I don't believe anyone has ever come to Lagwich from further away than Hawgley, so this is a great occasion for us."

" Will you guide us to these—ah—wise men ?"

" Surely !"

He wondered for a moment about leaving his soap—whether he ought not to collect a load to take with him. But he dared not risk keeping these important visitors waiting while he did so. He pointed in the direction of the town and set off at once, Yanderman walking beside him and the horsemen following, one of them leading Yanderman's mount.



There was silence for a while. Then Conrad, plucking up his courage, ventured a question. "Tell me—what's life like where you come from? I wouldn't seem inquisitive, but here life's dull and we see no one from outside, unless a marrying expedition comes in spring, or a peddler, or a man seeking gold in the rocks."

"Life where I come from?" Yanderman laughed. "Much as it is here, I imagine—only quieter, for we're further from the barrenland and the things that come from it."

Conrad was startled, and did not easily hide his disappointment. He said, "But surely . . . ! Uh—the peddlers who come this way with news regale us with stories of a gay exciting life in distant parts."

"That the beer may flow more freely and the pack grow light apace as the tale continues," Yanderman said, and laughed again. "We receive wanderers like that, and—yes, they tell colourful tales."

Conrad bit his lip to stifle the remark which he had almost let slip. He had been about to demand how it was, life being on Yanderman's assertion much the same even fourteen whole days' journey away, he could have visions of a bright rich world served by unbelievable powers known to no one in Lagwich, or Hawgley, or anywhere. But he had long ago sworn to himself that he would never bare the secret of his dreams to anyone except Idris—and even to her he had never imparted the wildest tales he could tell.

It would be far safer to keep silent until he had presented the visitors to the wise men. Maybe later on he would speak to Yanderman again, and the stranger would not be so discreet in his admissions.

Accordingly, he waited till they turned a bend which brought them in sight of the town's land. Then he raised his arm and indicated the neatly laid-out fields, with men and women working in them and some cattle browsing, and the town itself beyond.

Lagwich sat on a low, dome-like hill around the foot of which a stream curved in a third of a circle. A ditch had been cut in the side of the hill; above the ditch was a barricade of sharpened stakes planted like prickles in a rampart of dirt and stone, with wooden watchtowers every hundred feet or so around the circumference. At the very top of the hill was a stone fort, and the space between there and the palisade—not very large—was



cram-jam tight with buildings of three or four storeys. A blur of dark grey smoke hung over the roofs, fading to light grey as it rose.

Yanderman glanced up at the elderly man riding behind him and leading his horse. He said, "For where it stands, it's no mere bunch of huts!"

Directly they came in view, the people working in the fields had incontinently left their tasks. Accustomed to spring to action on a moment's notice, they had seized picks, mattocks or anything that came to hand and dashed up to the edge of the path between the fields ready for violence if need be. On seeing that Conrad was accompanying the strangers, however, they paused uncertainly.

One of them—Waygan, Conrad saw with dismay—shouldered between the rest and sized up the situation. Waygan was the town's hornman; instead of something he could wield as a weapon, he had snatched up his beloved horn. If someone had asked him why, he would doubtless have said it was so that he could sound an alarm for the townsfolk. Conrad suspected it was more likely because he prized the safety of that horn above the safety of Lagwich itself.

Admittedly, it was a magnificent object, worth being proud of. It had grown on the chest of a *thing* that came from the barrenland in his father's day, and had killed six men in broad daylight before his father slew it and claimed the horn as reward. Only Waygan and his eldest son could now wind it and produce the ear-splitting blast of which it was capable.

Waygan looked at Conrad. "Well, useless one?" he said.

Conrad's heart seemed to hesitate, but he answered boldly and with pride. "I take these distinguished strangers to see the wise men," he declared. "They come from the south, more distant than Hawgley!"

A murmur went through the crowd. Waygan pursed his lips and looked at Yanderman, who said curtly, "I'm Jervis Yanderman of Esberg, trusted agent of the Grand Duke Paul, and these are my men."

Waygan studied them. What he saw impressed him. He bowed and rubbed his horny hands together. "Welcome to Lagwich, distinguished sir!" he purred. "I trust you've not had a false impression of our town from this no-good boy,



whose mind is as grimy as his clothes. Come, I'll escort you myself to our wise men—it'll be a pleasure."

"I was taking them there!" Conrad objected. Waygan rounded on him.

"You!" he snapped. "It was an ill chance that put you in their way, wasn't it? Do you think fine visitors like these care to keep company with you, stinking of smoke and rancid grease? Get back to your soap-vats! You waste enough of the day in idling as it is!"

"But—!"

Conrad appealed with his eyes to the newcomers but they did not respond; this was no concern of theirs. Several people in the crowd laughed mockingly. He scuffed in the dust with his foot.

"Come!" Waygan said pompously, and fell in at Yander-man's side where Conrad had been. When Conrad glanced back a few minutes later, on his lonely and miserable way back to his vats, they were going up the slope to the lowered draw-bridge over the town's ditch, and to his jaundiced eye it seemed that Waygan had grown twice as tall with inflating self-importance.

## five

"Stuck-up—" Conrad drew and scattered the fire from under his largest vat.

"Conceited—" He tilted the vat on its foundation of round stones, using a wooden bar as a lever, so that the contents poured down the channels to the setting-pans.

"*Blockhead!*" he finished bitterly, and picked up the sack in which he was going to carry back a load of the unusually fine white soap he had boiled up yesterday. With his knife he divided the hard slabs into convenient handful-sized chunks and threw them in the sack as they were cut. He was on the point of turning away when something on the ground caught his eye. Why, it was the carving he had been making when the strangers appeared.

Some grains of dirt had got embedded in it, but he could remedy that easily enough. He put down the sack, drew his knife again, and did so. Then he turned it over in his hands.

There was something distinctly odd about it. It would pass for an attempted likeness of Idris, certainly, even though her



cheeks were plumper than that and her lips not so fine. Yet, as he raised the knife to widen the lips a little, he found himself hesitating.

In some unaccountable fashion, it was correct as it was. Not because it looked like Idris, but because it looked like . . .

He was suddenly shivering, as though a cold gale of recognition had blown out of memory. This carving looked like one of the people who inhabited his mysterious visions of another and happier world.

With determination he poised the knife afresh. It wasn't meant to depict anyone out of a dream. It was meant to depict Idris, who was kind to him, and it was about time he stopped giving in to his impulses to drift off into a fantasy existence. No matter how hard and dull his life was, it was his life, and if he took refuge in imagination every time it got him down he would never be able to tell the Waygans of Lagwich what they could do with their horns—

Horn !

He had been so completely absorbed in his musing that he had paid no attention to the thunderous bellow of the sunset horn from the town's gate when it sounded a few minutes ago. He hadn't noticed how late it was getting ; why, here it was practically full dark !

He stuffed the carving inside his shirt and fled for the protection of the town, his sack of soap bumping on his back.

He was just in time. He came panting out of the dusk as Waygan finished sounding the second and final blast, and dashed across the bridge as the hornman also was crossing. He felt the swinging sack bump Waygan on the arm.

"You !" Waygan said. "Might I not have known ?"

Conrad didn't answer. He lowered his sack while recovering his breath. In the shadows men tugged on ropes and the drawbridge rose creaking to the vertical. On its underside it bore foot-long spikes of wood sheathed with copper, which faced any oncoming *thing* with a virtually unclimbable obstacle.

"Did you fall asleep over your soap-cooking, stewboy ?" Waygan went on. "You look as though you'd have done well to use some of your produce on yourself."

"If you're so clever," Conrad retorted, "let me see you work all day with grease and wood-ash and come home spotless !"

"Hah !" Waygan slapped his horn, making it give out a hollow boom. "So you're 'working all day' now, are you ?



What news ! We'll have to take care that Lagwich isn't buried under a mountain of soap, shan't we ? No, wait—wait ! Don't be in such a hurry to leave me. While I see you before me, let me tell you not to go and plague the foreigners while they're here, is that understood ? It was bad enough that they should have met you first, instead of someone who could give them a favourable impression of the town. Don't show your dirty face near them again !”

Conrad jerked his sack on his shoulder again and trudged up the narrow alley away from the gate. He was fuming with rage. He was too used to being disappointed to have thought much about it during the afternoon, but it would have been pleasant to gain some reflected glory from guiding the strangers into the town and taking them to the wise men. And Waygan had done him out of even that meagre reward.

What was going to become of him ? Almost everyone mocked him and he didn't see it was his own fault. Possibly it was because his father was as he was, but to shift blame on to a sick man seemed unfair . . .

He was getting near home when there was a clatter of running footsteps ahead. By reflex he drew into a shadowed doorway ; that sounded like a gang of youths and sometimes he had been set upon. The youths halted in front of a nearby house and shouted for a friend to come down to them.

“Come and see the foreigners !” they cried. “Up at Mallings's house ! Come up and look !”

Immediately shutters flew open on all sides and not only the friend they were calling for but many other people poured into the street, pulling coats about them. Conrad hesitated. That Yanderman—he'd seemed pleasant enough and polite to Conrad despite his appearance. Perhaps even now there might be the chance of a word of thanks for his help, to make the townsfolk think twice before mocking him again.

He made up his mind and followed the crowd at a discreet distance.

Mallings was the oldest of the wise men and his house was one of the five reserved for holders of the office and sited within the stone wall of the fort at the top of the town. The great courtyard was thick with people struggling to get near the house-door where the watchman Gelbay stood with his staff, belabouring the over-eager and ordering them to stand clear.



Conrad was about to try and work his way through the press when a heavy hand fell on his shoulder and he turned, heart sinking, to look into a gap-toothed face.

"Why, it's my useless son, may the *things* take him to the barrenland!" said his father in a rasping voice. "What d'you think you're doing here? Get home, you lazy rascal!"

"Why should I?" Conrad said, jerking free. "Wasn't I the one who showed the strangers the way to the town?"

"Oh, hark at the proud cockerel!" his father sneered. "I tell you to go and that's reason enough."

"When did they let you out of the pillory?" Conrad said, astonished at his own boldness. "Your breath is rank as a privy with the stink of sour beer."

His father's face twisted with wild anger. Then he swung his boot at Conrad's shin. He usually kicked, rather than hitting out, for one of his hands was wasted with a childhood sickness and much practice had made the kicks deadly.

Conrad felt a dazzling stab of pain below his kneecap and his leg gave way. He went sprawling on the ground.

"Crawl, then!" said his father triumphantly and jerked Conrad's head back on his shoulders by hooking a toe beneath his chin. That hurt, too, though not so badly. "Are you still minded to argue with me?"

Conrad pulled himself on his good knee. He saw that a dozen or so youths of his own age, despairing of getting close to the house, had turned to watch the new distraction. Conrad's father was always good for some amusement, whether it was taunting him in the pillory or egging him on to another fight. One of the youths called out, "Why, it's Idle Conrad! Did you go to sleep on your feet and fall down there, useless one?"

"Why not use your soap on yourself?" another put in and they all squealed with foolish laughter.

Conrad braced his sound leg under him and launched himself arrow-wise on an upward slant. His head sank in his father's belly and hurled him back against the crowd beyond. Many people turned, complaining angrily at being pushed.

"Wish me to the barrenland, would you?" Conrad said between his teeth. Somehow years of frustration had boiled up inside him and turned to pure, clear-headed rage, as the mix in one of his vats would turn to soap of a clean whiteness. "You a father who couldn't support his family, who begs scraps of



bread from his son and barter them for beer so he may wallow in a hog's stupor till he's dragged to the pillory ! I'll go to the barrenland if that's your wish—then you can weep in the streets and no one will pity you !”

His father made to rush at him, but someone had called for the watchman Gelbay, who came now from his post by the door, brandishing his staff. Conrad waited passively, favouring his hurt leg, for Gelbay was a drinking-crony of his father's and he could look for no sympathy there.

“You—fighting with your father !” Gelbay barked. “Disgusting ! You're not too young for the pillory, you wastrel, and that's where I've a mind to have you put !”

“Do it !” Conrad said defiantly. “I'm tired of slaving for my drunken father.”

“Pillory ! Yes, the pillory !” cried some of the eager youths, but a cautious look came over his father's face.

“Perhaps not,” he said, plucking at Gelbay's sleeve. “For it would ill serve the town to lack for soap next washday !”

*Oh, the beer-sodden hypocrite !* Conrad snapped, “What you mean is that you'd lose the money that keeps you liquored !”

“Enough of that !” Gelbay brought his staff down stingingly on Conrad's shoulder. “Get gone—and be thankful that your father pleads for you after what you did !”

The jeers of the crowd were still ringing in his head as he let himself into the dirty upper room where he and his father eked out their existence. As he'd expected, the loaves that had been in the cupboard that morning had gone; one of them had been eaten, as crumbs on the floor testified, but the others would have been traded for mugs of beer.

He let fall his sack of soap in the corner and sat down on his blanket with his head in his hands. What point was there in living like this any more ?

Something hard pressed against his chest, inside his shirt. With a start he remembered the soap-carving he had been making. He took it out his hands trembling. By a miracle it was undamaged, except that a lock of the hair had broken off.

He hadn't seen Idris outside Malling's house, where most other people were, and since unchaperoned girls were seldom allowed out at night in Lagwich, she might well be at home.

Carrying the carving, he crept down the rickety outside stairs and went to the back door of the next house but one on



the same street. He listened for a while in the darkness to make sure he wasn't going to run into Idris's mother, who disapproved of her daughter even talking to someone as generally disliked as Conrad. There was a line of yellow light around the door, and someone was moving around. A clear voice started to hum a tune: Idris's voice. Cautiously he tapped the door.

"Who is it?" Idris called.

"Conrad. Are you by yourself?"

Quick footsteps came to the door and the bolt scraped back. "Yes—everyone has gone to Malling's house to gape at the foreigners. Come in. I daren't let you stay, but—Conrad, you're limping dreadfully!"

He rubbed his injured knee and explained what had happened. Idris's round, pretty face set in an angry expression.

"I think it's shameful!" she said. "You're not lazy—you work as hard as anyone, and no one else in Lagwich can make such good soap, and your horrible father squanders your earnings and on top of *that* Watchman Gelbay says you have to put up with it. It's a scandal really. What's that in your hand?"

"Something I made for you," Conrad said shyly. He held it out. "It's only soap, and it got a bit broken when I was knocked down, but I hope you like it."

Her fingers brushed his as she took the carving from him, and he drew away, hoping she wouldn't notice. He had once held her hand, on harvest-day last summer; indeed, then she had let him kiss her cheek. But it was only at times like harvest-day, sowing-day or New Year's that he had a chance to cleanse himself of his permanent layer of congealed ash and grease, and he had never felt it right to ask her to touch him when he was in his usual grimy state. So now he drew back, as usual.

"Conrad, you are clever!" she exclaimed with sparkling eyes. Looking at her, Conrad decided it was just as well he hadn't tried to improve the likeness of the carving. It would take a master to catch the *alive* quality of her face, especially now as she flushed at the compliment she had been paid. Probably it would be easier to make a likeness of the whole of



her; the buxom curves under her working gown would shape pleasingly to the hand. In fact—

Conrad checked his line of thought and reprimanded himself.

“Did you see the foreigners?” Idris asked, turning to put the carving on a shelf behind her.

“Yes,” Conrad told her bitterly, and recounted his story. Listening, Idris stamped her foot at the injustice of it.

“I sometimes wonder,” Conrad said at length, “whether I wouldn’t be better off if I just left here. Walked to another town—there’s bound to be work somewhere for a good soap-maker. Or just went to the barrenland where father wished me.”

“You mustn’t talk like that !” the girl said in alarm.

“Wouldn’t I be better off in another town, though ? I’m not quite serious about the barrenland.”

“Maybe . . . Only I’d miss you, I think. I really would, if you went away.”

There was a noise outside, of the front door of the house being opened. Idris drew her breath in quickly and hissed at him. “You’ll have to go ! Here, take this—it isn’t much, but it’s all I can spare.” She snatched handfuls of bread, cheese, onions and salad-greens from the table, and thrust an apple at him as well. “Quick now ! Thanks for the carving—and we’ll have lots of ash for you tomorrow because we’ve been baking, so I’ll see you then.”

She rushed to open the back door for him, and as quickly as he could he limped out of the kitchen. Only just in time, for a moment after the bolt was slid home again he heard the sharp voice of Idris’s mother calling her.

He ate almost all the food, leaving a little to stop his father complaining when he came back later, and then lay down on the blanket which was the only bed he had. He stared into the darkness for a long time before he fell asleep; when he did doze off, he dreamed that he was riding a horse and waving a long black and red banner on a pole because he had finished carving a life-size statue of Idris without any clothes on and wanted everyone to admire it.



## s i x

“Nestamay ! Nestamay !”

The girl rolled under her blanket and fought against the intrusion of the world.

“Nestamay, time for your watch !” Grandfather rasped, and prodded her in the side. She jerked and came awake with a sigh to the squalid narrowness of the hovel which was her home, to the smell of fresh food and the howling of baby Dan, alarmed by Grandfather’s harsh shouting. She had slept since noon, but would willingly have slept on till the next one.

However, there was no chance of that. Wrapping her blanket about her, she made her way to the lean-to shed over the stream and attended to necessities. When she came back, her face was shiny-wet and her cheeks were a little flushed with the coldness of the water. There was a bowl of porridge waiting, some sun-dried fruits and a hunk of bread. In silence she gulped them down.

“Hurry up, Nestamay !” Grandfather rapped. “You’re going to be late !”

She stifled the impulse to make a sullen answer in some such terms as, “What does it matter ?” It *did* matter that every night someone should keep watch even though the automatic alarm had never failed; precisely why it mattered, Nestamay didn’t know, but it had been dinned into her since she was old enough to talk, and she no longer had the emotional equipment to contest the statement.

Sometimes she thought Grandfather must know why it was important to keep the watch, and sometimes she wondered if even he did. But not very hard.

Finishing her food, she reached towards the rack on which the handlights were kept. There was only one in its place, not the one she generally used. Her heart sank. Of course. It had grown dim, and she had set it out in the sun this morning to recharge itself.

Hoping Grandfather might not notice, she made to take the one which was in place.

“Nestamay !” the old man barked, and she snatched her hand away guiltily. “To each his own—remember ? If you were too lazy to bring your own light back before you lay down to sleep, you can just go and fetch it now. And *hurry* !”

Nestamay thought of objecting. But she decided after a moment she would rather face the silent threat of the darkness



outside than Grandfather in a towering rage. She nodded, put on her sweater and pants—but not her sandals ; it was better to go barefoot in the dark and cling with her toes if she had to—and slipped through the door.

The darkness wasn't so bad once she had dived into it. It was clear overhead, and the stars twinkled reassuringly. From adjacent huts—there were some twenty-five all told—came familiar noises—children-noises mostly and more crying than laughter. For a long painful second she found herself wishing she was still a child, not forced into this demanding status of adulthood. Then she suppressed the foolish idea and headed, cat-silent, towards the bare ground.

She reached the place where she had left the handlight in a few minutes. It was still there ; when she flicked the switch the beam came on bright and comforting. But she only flicked it on and off. The storage cells were weakening and there was no telling how much of the accumulated sunlight she might need before morning.

For a few seconds she stood to let the clean, dry, desert-scented air sweep the last traces of drowsiness from her system and then headed back, past the grouped hovels, towards the main body of the Station. It loomed up in the night like the back of a sleeping *thing*, pregnant with a menace of its own which a lifetime of familiarity had never dispelled. It could and much too often did, hatch out horrors.

Something moved on her right, emerging from shadow. With a gasp she threw herself backwards, snapping on the handlight with one hand and grabbing her hatchet with the other. It wasn't much of a weapon to use against a lurking *thing*, but then—what was ? Some would even stand and face a heat beam.

Then a flood of relief and anger filled her. "Jasper !" she cried. "Jasper, that's a stupid trick to play on someone !"

In the beam of the handlight a tall, rather fleshy youth parted his broad lips in a grin. "You wouldn't take your hatchet to me, Nestamay, would you now ?" he purred.

"No. No, I suppose not," Nestamay said with a sigh.

"Come on, give me a kiss," Jasper suggested, moving closer. "I haven't seen you all day."

Somewhat reluctantly, Nestamay complied. It had been made clear to her that sooner or later she was going to have to



set up a home with Jasper—there was no one else of her age-group who didn't trespass on her genetic line too badly—and, she reasoned, she'd better get used to his attentions. But she didn't like the prospect very much.

When his hands went under her sweater, she protested and pushed him away.

"I've got to get up to my watch!" she said sharply.

Jasper laughed. "Why?" he murmured. "Nobody's going to know if you come away with me for a while instead. I've found a place around the other side of the Station where—"

"Stop it!" Nestamay exclaimed, deeply shocked. "Jasper, that's a dreadful thing to say! Skip my watch—why, that'd be unforgivable!"

"I'd forgive you," Jasper grinned. "And nobody else would have to know."

"I'll tell my grandfather!"

"Him!" Jasper curled his lip. "He's a pig-headed fool and you ought to know by this time. Driving everyone to waste time 'on watch,' as he calls it—slaving over foolishnesses in the Station all day instead of something constructive like making more food or pulling bits out of the Station and improving the huts."

"But it has to be done!" Nestamay objected.

"Does it? Who says so? Your grandfather and a few other addlebrained old folk! I don't think he believes these stories he feeds us—I think he just uses them to maintain his position over the rest of the people. If he really believes what he says about walking to other and better worlds, why doesn't he try it himself—on solid ground instead of through some hole in the Station full of horrible *things*?"

White-lipped, Nestamay forced words between her teeth.

"My father did try, Jasper! You know perfectly well!"

"And was never heard of again," Jasper said. "So much for your grandfather and his tales."

Almost blinded by rage, Nestamay might have taken the hatchet to him in the next few seconds, but the night was riven apart by a rising wail from the Station. Jasper whirled.

"Now look what's happened because you held me up!" Nestamay shrieked and fled towards the source of the noise. Behind her, the doors of the huts opened and men and able-bodied young women came running out, bearing handlights and weapons. Some of them had been resting after their daytime stint of work in the Station and hadn't bothered to put on their clothes.



Once it would have been possible to head straight into the Station and reach the room—Grandfather called it the “watch office”—where someone always waited during the night for the automatic alarms to indicate the arrival of a *thing*. Long ago, however, the direct passageways had become choked with vegetation and some of them had caved in, while some of the others held poisonous thorns and grasping plant-tentacles. Nestamay had to use a roundabout route, up twisted stairways and along rickety catwalks, to arrive at her destination.

Panting, she flung open the office door. There was no one there; day watches were kept by members of the working parties and they would have knocked off no later than sunset, half an hour ago. She almost fell into the chair, frantically scanning the detector dials. Half of them were cracked and useless, but some were functioning.

And, by a miracle which would conceal her lateness, those dials provided her with the information she needed.

“Nestamay!” Her grandfather’s acid voice thundered from a speaker high on the wall. “We’re waiting for you to tell us where it is—we can’t move until you do!”

“Sorry,” Nestamay mumbled. “I was just—uh—making a double check. This is a big one, grandfather, probably too big to kill. Mass about two hundred kilos. It hatched in Sector 2-A and started moving immediately. It’s somewhere in Sector 4 by now, but there’s a dial broken—just a moment, a signal’s coming up!”

She leaned forward and rubbed dust from the glass over a dial.

“Yes, it’s in 4-C now and still moving. You may be able to hear it!”

A voice in the background behind Grandfather said something affirmative, and, straining her ears, Nestamay caught a faint crash that reached her almost simultaneously via the speaker and directly from the heart of the Station around her.

“Right!” Grandfather snapped and went on to his companions. “Margin for error in a two-hundred-kilo body is too great—we might not hit a vital organ. Try and flush it into Channel Nine and drive it clear of the Station. Light first, noise next and only then anything which might enrage it without doing serious harm. Quickly, now!”

There was a pause. Nestamay saw from the dials that the *thing* had stopped moving; more crashes from the direction of



Sector 4-C suggested the creature had found something to interest it for a while.

“Nestamay !”

It was Grandfather again. She called an answer.

“Nestamay, it’s a bad one—wild ! It charged the handlights and someone’s been hurt. No time for half-measures ! I want power fed to the Channel Nine electrofence, and the storage cells for the heatbeams topped up.”

Nestamay’s heart lurched. On this watch of all watches, when a dangerous killer came through, Jasper had to hold her up on her way to the office ! She was going to give Jasper a piece of her mind when she next saw him—a going-over with a heatbeam would be even better, but hard to organise . . .

“Full power !” she reported, having tripped the necessary switches.

“Full power !” Grandfather told his companions. “Move !”

Nestamay jumped from her chair and ran to the window overlooking that side of the Station known as Sector 4. She stared into the gloom under the cracked and sagging roof.

At first she saw nothing. Then glimmering handlights appeared, masked by vegetation and rubble. Caught in their beam for a second, something glistening reared up. A howl at a teeth-rasping frequency split the air, followed by a vast crash and a completely human scream. Nestamay found she was biting her fingertips in agony.

Then the heatbeams came on. Like dull red pokers, they stabbed through the murk, striking swirls of smoke from anything they touched. Behind Nestamay, there were clicks as the power-level readings dropped with frightening rapidity.

The *thing* howled again and made a couple of stupid rushes at its tormentors, but the heat increased inversely with the square root of the intervening distance and provided the beams remained steady it was impossible for the *thing* to come closer than some fifteen feet. It realised this at last, turned—howling more than ever—and blundered into Channel Nine, which would lead it to the bare ground beyond the Station.

“Electrofence !” Grandfather ordered. Nestamay dived for the power-switch.

The electrofence wasn’t precisely a fence, but a tubular mesh of wire completely enclosing each channel. Its original function might have been connected with the transportation of goods ; currently, it served as their best weapon against the



*things*. It induced microwave frequencies in sufficient quantity to half-cook anything inside it.

With a howl far louder than any preceding, the *thing* felt the first effects and panic took over. Nestamay hadn't seen whether it had legs or not, but it must have done ; nothing else but good, muscular legs could have carried its substantial mass out of the channel so fast. Off into the surrounding desert it fled, trumpeting its intolerable pain to the stars.

It might come back—if it was stupid enough. Men with heatbeams would have to watch for it for the next few days, which meant taking people away from the regular working parties. Not all the *things* were as bad as that—some were huge and harmless, some were little and harmless . . . and some were little and deadly and they were the worst of all. But it had been a long time since anything in a swarm, which was particularly frightening, had hatched out in the Station.

Nestamay wiped her face ; it was running with sweat. Now she had to trace the original point of emergence of the *thing*, so that it could be blanked off for ever.

Was there never to be an end to this existence ? Would they never find the last hole through which *things* leaked from—wherever they originated ?

Those were questions she knew she couldn't answer. She drove them from her mind and went about her work.

## s e v e n

The five wise men, Yanderman himself, and the servants who came and went with jugs of beer and plates of cheese and onions made the room crowded. The ceiling was low and the walls were rough. The layout suggested to Yanderman that this fort had been the whole of Lagwich at one time, with perhaps a mere hundred people living in crude cabins around it and taking refuge inside the stone wall when necessary ; the palisade and ditch lower down the hill would have followed the expansion of the population to its present figure of eight or nine times the original number.

The nitre-soaked torches, fizzing and spitting occasionally, were set in wall sconces among relics of past victories—not military conflicts, but struggles against *things* from the barrenland. Some of the trophies were mounted as skeletons ; others were skins stretched on crude wooden frames. Even in death the ugliest of them were still frightening.



He had thought through the probable history of Lagwich with a purpose—as a sort of exercise in deduction. These five who called themselves wise men and governed the town were very ignorant even when it came to facts lying in plain sight. Like the form their town had taken. They might say, “In the time of my father’s father it was said that the palisade was smaller than it is now,” or “That *thing* on the wall was killed by so-and-so, who killed sixty-nine *things* in twenty years—they came more often then.”

In fact, Malling had said exactly that when waiting for the others to arrive. Yanderman found the words disturbing, for a reason he could not yet pin down.

So far he had confined the talk to an exchange of courtesies and some restrained boasts about the wealth of Esberg ; they were true enough, but he had no wish to make the folk of Lagwich feel small. They had done well, considering their situation. Of course, they’d have done better if they hadn’t been so stupidly ignorant. How *could* they say what they said about change or growth and yet not grasp the idea that things were *still* changing, even if the world seemed much as yesterday?

Now, Yanderman decided, he could introduce his main topic. Since he was the honoured guest and the centre of attention he had only to clear his throat and they instantly hushed to hear him. He said, “The barrenland seems to me a strange thing. There is nothing else like it.”

The wise men rumbled and agreed. Yanderman went on, “The things that come from it, also, are very strange.”

They agreed to that, too.

“Tell me,” Yanderman said, “what do you believe caused the barrenland?”

As he had expected, the question provoked a blank silence. Eventually Rost, a dried-up man on Malling’s right, gave a shrug. He said, “Caused it? It’s a thing that is, like any natural object. And to speculate on what caused things to be as they are is a futile pastime.”

The other wise men concurred, looking relieved.

“Things change, though,” Yanderman said. “For example, did you not tell me that in the old days more *things* came from the barrenland than come nowadays?” He looked at his host.

Malling was big, and ruddy-cheeked, and Yanderman would have guessed if no one had told him that he was the senior of the five, because he was much the most conservative. He said,



"I concede that is so. Nonetheless those that come are if anything more dangerous than before. And the ways of devils are not as plain as the ways of men."

"Devils?" Yanderman said. "All the *things* I've seen were animals, for they could be killed. What is a devil?"

"Oh, we have seen one," the wise men hastened to assure him. "It's in Rost's house, across the yard of the fort."

Yanderman, wondering what in the world they meant, showed his interest and Malling obtained Rost's permission to send a servant for the "devil."

"This one," Rost explained, "came from the barrenland not so many years ago—ten, or twelve. It had a voice, as I myself heard and formed some sounds like words and for some time there was an argument to and fro as to whether it was a natural being. It was weak and could easily be restrained, though sometimes it struck out at those who went near it. In the end it was agreed by the wise men of the time—I had not been chosen then—that since it had been seen to come from the barrenland it could not be a natural creature. There it is."

Yanderman started forward from his chair with an oath and plucked a torch from the wall as he halted near the door. Two brawny servants were carrying through the narrow opening the "devil" that Rost had spoken of.

And it was a man.

The corpse had been desiccated to preserve it—probably by exposure to hot sun and dry wind, while shielded from flies and carrion-eaters. Now its skin was stretched drum-tight, yellow in the flickering light, over the skull and ribs. The internal organs had been removed, so that below the ribs there was a hollow, but the arms and legs also had the skin on them. The feet were nailed to a wooden platform, and thongs had been threaded into holes in its back to tie the spine to a supporting post. It was very dusty.

"But that was a man," Yanderman said slowly. Under his breath he added, "Poor 'devil'!"

"It was not," insisted Rost and Malling simultaneously. "Men do not live in the barrenland. Therefore it was a devil. True, it took the semblance of a man, but perhaps that was because we had killed so many of the other monsters that it tried to disguise itself."

Yanderman ignored their babbling. He had the mummy brought into the middle of the room and studied it minutely.



Whoever this man had been, he was not of a stock that Yanderman recognised ; his head was much rounder than most people's, his cheekbones were higher and his jaw shorter.

But he was certainly human. And he had come out of the barrenland, where nothing was supposed to exist except monsters . . .

He turned to the wise men. " Is it not possible that he was from another village—town—close to the barrenland and wandered into it and then out again, close to Lagwich ?"

" Impossible," Rost hastened to assure him. " For one thing, he was different in certain ways from any man we have ever seen—his build, the colour of his skin. For another, we sent to inquire of all the other towns we could and heard no account of any such man being lost."

So either he had come from the far side of the barrenland, or . . .

Yanderman checked himself, despite surging excitement. He put the torch back in its sconce and indicated that the servants could carry the gruesome trophy away.

The wise men spent the rest of the evening trying to convince him that it really was a devil and he paid no attention.

Rather than have his party split up among lodgings all over the town, Yanderman had organised them under canvas in the yard of the fort. The townsfolk thought the visitors off their heads for planning to sleep on a stone pavement and Malling had insisted that Yanderman at least have a proper bed. Yanderman wasn't sure he was getting the best of the bargain ; the " proper bed " was made of straw and stank of fleas.

Before turning in, he went out to the yard and found Augren and Stadham talking quietly by a small fire.

He joined them, asking how they fared and telling them about the bed he was being given ; they chuckled together for a moment. Then he looked around to make sure none of the curious natives was in earshot, and addressed them in low tones.

" I suppose you've realised that if a town like this can be maintained so close to the barrenland, it can't be so terrible as we once believed."

Sensitive on that score after the episode of the luck-charm, Augren took it on himself to answer. " As a town—" he said, and spat into the darkness. " But the point's good, sir."

" Add this one to it then and carry both to Duke Paul first thing tomorrow. Did you see, borne across the yard to Malling's house, a thing in the shape of a dried-up man ?"



Augren looked blank, but Stadham nodded. "It went by when we were watering the horses," he said. "Two of them caught its dusty scent and shied at it."

"I heard the whinnying," Augren said. "But I was elsewhere."

"That was the body of a man who came dying of hunger and thirst out of the barrenland."

They looked incredulous. Yanderman went over the story as he had heard it, emphasising the important fact that the man could not be from any of the local towns. He finished, "This must be taken to Duke Paul as soon as may be ; if he's not changed his plan, the army will camp once more and be here the day after tomorrow. Augren, you'll ride with the news ; Stadham, assign a man to go with him. Yourself, you'll spend tomorrow riding about the nearer countryside to select a good camp-site. A permanent one, of course—when the army gets here the Duke will want to scout the whole perimeter of the barrenland and that'll take several days. If possible, choose a place with its own water-supply ; we don't want to antagonise the townsfolk by fouling their supply and once it's past here the stream they use is undrinkable, I imagine. Clear ?"

They nodded, rose with him to salute and sat down again as he moved away.

He had much trouble going to sleep—not from the fleas, or the prickly hardness of the mattress, but because of what he had learned. A man coming out of the barrenland !

For the first time Yanderman admitted to himself what must lie at the back of Duke Paul's mind. Never a man to be satisfied with half-measures, the Duke. If a problem caught his attention, he would worry it till its back was broken, or at least till he knew it was insoluble with present resources.

Surely—and Yanderman felt a quiver of alarm—nothing would content him short of marching into the barrenland to see if there was anything there.

Legend said there had been, once. Legend was turning out far too accurate for comfort, too—what with confirmation of the former existence of vast cities, time-beaten but still rich with metal and glass, what with Granny Jassy's uncanny foreknowledge of the terrain they had traversed since leaving Esberg.



Suppose the remaining legends proved true, as well ! The tale went that in the old days when men went to other worlds (but what *other* worlds ? Where was there room for them ?) they walked at last, instead of travelling in machines. And some of those " other worlds " were strange, perilous places.

He had heard descriptions from Granny Jassy, but to him the words she parroted made no more sense than they did to her. He would never have left it there ; Duke Paul would not.

Vaguely, however, a few consistent threads of narrative emerged. A sickness—a kind of contagious insanity. A disaster. The building of a barrier around the place from which you—walked to other worlds, too late to stop the plague from spreading. Just as Lagwich had once been merely a stone fort and no town, possibly the barrenland had been . . . the barrierland ?

And a man had come out of it. Within living memory.

How would you move an army of two thousand men across territory without usable food or fuel, even for three or four days ? How would you organise water ? That was the worst problem. Water so bulky and indispensable to a marching man . . .

Streams, maybe. Streams in the barrenland itself. Take animals along and test the purity of the water on them. But a sickness might take days to show itself, and . . .

Maybe leapfrog a party across the bare ground : half the men carrying provisions, breaking off at the end of the day's march and coming back, leaving the others to continue with the extra rations—but this would mean you'd reach your goal with a fraction of the original force to meet any challenge . . .

Yanderman was still wrestling with the problem when he fell asleep.

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## e i g h t

His father was still snoring on the other side of the room when Conrad woke up. One of the town's watermen was crying in the street outside. Cautiously, wanting to try his knee before he risked hurting it again, he went down and traded half a lump of soap for a pail of fresh water. It was stupidly extravagant when he could have gone to the stream himself, as he usually did, but his leg was very painful.

Washed, he ate what was left from the night before—his father must have been too drunk to be hungry when he came in—and went with his sacks to collect the ash Idris had promised.

Her mother and brother were busy with her in the kitchen, racking the new loaves ; it was not until he had filled two sacks and got dust all over himself as usual that Idris had a chance to whisper to him in a corner.

“ Have you heard the news about the foreigners ? ”

“ Who'd tell me, except you ? ” Conrad countered sourly.

“ Why, it's unbelievable ! There's a great army of men coming here, two thousand of them it's said, from a city far to the south ! ”

“ Fourteen days' march, ” Conrad muttered, thinking how close he had come to having this news direct from Yanderman. *Blast Waygan !*

“ Idris ! ” A shrill interruption from her mother. “ Are you talking to that no-good boy again ? There's work to do, have you forgotten ? ”

“ Coming, mother ! One more sack and that'll be all ! ” Idris put her head close to Conrad's again. “ Won't it be exciting ? All the strangers from the south ! They're sure to visit the town while they're camped here ! ”

“ Idris ! ” her mother exclaimed. “ Leave Idle Conrad to get on with it by himself—he's quite capable. ”

“ But mother—Conrad's hurt his knee ! ”

“ That's his lookout. You do as I tell you ! ”

“ Go on, ” Conrad urged her with a sigh. “ This won't take me long. ” He gave her a smile and picked up the first sack ; somehow, to prevent her feeling bad about it, he stopped himself from limping as he carried it to the door.

The news must have travelled with the speed of the wind, for as he trudged towards the gate of the town, his sacks of ash



trailing behind him on a sledge of crossed branches, and paused at intervals to collect dollops of stale fat and grease from kitchen doors, he heard several people discussing the good effect the army's visit would have on trade. Old Narl, the weaver, was less optimistic than most ; Conrad heard him say grumpily to a friend, " I don't like it ! That many men could take all we have—not bothering to leave payment."

" What could we have that they want ?" the friend said cynically.

Soap made by Conrad ? The presumptuous thought crossed his mind as he moved out of earshot. And yet . . . why not ? It was good soap ; men who had marched for two weeks would welcome a chance to clean up properly. If he made as much extra as this load of ash would run to, then he could salt away a little profit from selling it to the army camp, hide the cash where his father couldn't find it and spend it on beer.

Soon he was lost so deeply in thought that he ignored Waygan's usual mocking greeting from the gatehouse and all the shouts from the youths and girls working in the fields. It was not so warm as yesterday and there were clouds in the west.

The moment he came in sight of his soap-vats, though, his reverie was broken.

The vats had been overturned—more : scattered. They were made of inch-thick pottery and even when empty they were hard to lift ; full, they could only be tilted on their bases of smooth round stones. Yet something had tossed them aside like so many drinking-cups. And the pans in which yesterday's soap had set had also been broken up.

Clearly, a *thing* had come from the barrenland and wrought this havoc. It was unlikely to have gone back.

Conrad realised sickly that in his panic to get home last night before the bridge was drawn up he had abandoned his bow and arrows. He was not a good shot, but merely to have a weapon would be reassuring. Lacking anything better, he snatched up a couple of large, sharp-cornered rocks from the edge of the path and stared about him. His blood was very loud in his ears and he cursed the fact, fancying he might be deaf to the noise of the *thing* if it approached.

But there was no sign of movement nearby.

Cautiously, he went closer to the vats. The soap had been spilled from the setting-pans before it was hard, and there were marks on the ground suggesting that the creature had walked



around in it, perhaps surveying the damage, before making off. Conrad had never seen animal feet like these—the prints were of a kind of hoof forming three sides of a near-perfect square, with a short pointed projection forward from each of the closed corners. But that was small wonder. Few of the *things* which came from the barrenland resembled anything that had gone before.

The marks led away among the rocks, growing fainter. The soap was hard, which meant the trail was some hours old. His confidence oozed back.

Letting fall the rocks he had picked up, he ran to where he had left his bow and arrows. But the thing had trodden on the bow, breaking the shaft. He had six arrows intact, and nothing to fire them with.

He balanced them on his hand, irresolute. Before he tried to set up his vats again, he decided, he ought to make sure there was nothing lurking among the rocks. Two out of three *things* moved by night, but that was slim odds. Breathing hard, moving awkwardly because of his stiff knee, he began to walk in a spiral outwards from the vats.

He was on the point of giving up when he found it, lying in shadow between two rocks.

Cramming his fingers into his mouth to stifle a cry, he drew back until he was just peering over the nearer rock. It seemed to be asleep, but you could never be sure—*things* from the barrenland weren't like ordinary animals.

It was about as long as a tall man. It had a head, domed like a melon and ridged in somewhat the same way, with a blind-looking white eye on the front of it. But below the eye was a not-quite mouth, a ring-shaped opening with a double fringe of sharp little eroding teeth, something after the style of a leech. The head was set direct on the body without a neck and green and brown skin hung about that body like an ill-fitting garment. There was a tail. There were two big limbs ending in the square-but-clawed hoofs whose prints he had seen and two smaller ones with a sort of soft pad on which three scales glittered like metallic nails.

Conrad dodged out of sight again, heart thumping. That was a killer! The nearest he had ever come before to one of the *things* in his life was when the whole town was called out to reinforce the guard—and now here he was, alone. What was he to do? The sensible thing was to return to the fields and call



up an armed party to deal with it. But it would be just his luck if the *thing* awoke while he was gone and made off without a trace.

With his bow, he might have risked shooting into that bulging white eye—at ten feet he could hardly miss. But to stab it with an arrow . . . He dismissed the idea.

And then he thought of the sacks of ashes.

He was surprising himself all the time now, he reflected as he stole back up among the rocks with the soft sack on his shoulder. It couldn't be bravery. It must be sheer desperation driving him.

He poised the sack on the rock overhanging the creature. A tug on the drawstring would open its neck and let down a cascade of blinding dust. The next part would be more difficult—it involved getting one of the pottery vats up here too.

He managed it somehow, though his knee hurt abominably and several times he almost lost his footing. Each time he waited in horror for the noise to wake the thing and bring it over the rim of the rock, yowling and ready to kill.

He got the vat on the rock, sideways so it would roll, and steadied it with one hand. He closed his eyes and wished, opened them again, sighted and let go.

The barrel-like vat struck fair on the domed head, making a soft revolting noise like a fist going into mud. The *thing* came awake instantly, shooting its limbs out in all directions and the vat smashed to fragments as a convulsion tossed it aside like a pebble. The strength of the *thing*! Conrad suddenly felt he had been insane to attempt this. Mouth dry, he opened the sack of ash.

Then he fled.

At the foot of the slope he snatched up the wooden bar he used to tilt the full soap-vats. Brandishing it brimly, he waited to confront the maddened beast. It was fully ten minutes before he plucked up courage to go back and look.

He found the thing had lived only a few moments after the vat fell on its skull; it lay half-buried in the pile of ash, and its sucker-like mouth was choking-full of grey dust as he had intended. Runnels of brownish ichor mingled with splinters of black bone in the ruins of its head.

Conrad felt he wanted to sing. But more than that, he wanted people to know what he had done. He scrambled



down to the beast's level and tried to drag it away by its tail, but it was much too heavy for him with his bad leg.

Well . . . there was no chance of it waking up and going away. It was bound to be there when he brought someone back to look at it. And even if he had to whip them here, he was going to bring the townsfolk to admire his action. He was sick of their sneers. Then afterwards he could have the hide tanned and give it to Idris, and her mother might be a little less grumpy . . .

His thoughts running blithely ahead of him, Conrad started back towards the town.

A cry rang out from the leading man of the party and Stadham's mind snapped back from consideration of this area as a possible site for their long-time camp to more immediate matters.

"What is it, Berrow?" he shouted.

"Don't know!" the soldier called back. "My horse shied at something—and there's a foul stink around somewhere!"

"Close in on Berrow!" Stadham ordered his other companions. "Take it slow and keep alert."

The soldiers nodded grimly and set their guns on their saddles as they urged their steeds up the rocky slope in front. They were all nervy, as Stadham knew. They'd located two or three possible camp-sites—all with drawbacks—and Stadham had decided to work through the area at least until noon before settling for one or other of them. In the men's view, *nowhere* could be a good camp-site this close to the barrenland and they didn't see there was much to choose between the possibilities. Berrow was trying to calm his horse as it attempted to back down-slope; he could coax it no further. When Stadham found his own mount balking in the same way he swung to the ground and threw his reins to his nearest companion. Gun ready, he strode up the rise past Berrow, and came in a few moments to a place where shadow fell between two rocks.

He started and gave an oath, slapping his gun to his shoulder. But before he fired, he realised it was pointless. He gestured to Berrow to approach him.

"Here's what scared your horse—a dead *thing*!"

The men moved closer, two or three of them dismounting because their horses also shied and stood soberly regarding the carcass. "They breed 'em out there, don't they?" one of them remarked in a solemn tone.



“ But this one’s dead, like the one that attacked Ampier !” Stadham reminded them sharply. They exchanged glances ; it was clear they didn’t like the beast much better for all that.

Stadham came to a decision. “ You two !” he snapped, addressing the men whose horses had come closest without taking fright. “ Get this *thing* on one of your mounts ! I want to show it off when the army gets here and prove that the *things* from the barrenland aren’t invulnerable.”

The soldiers hesitated. One of them muttered something and Stadham rounded on him.

“ What was that ?”

“ Nothing, lieutenant.” The man’s face was pasty-pale. He got down from his horse, but looked at the carcass for a long time before bringing himself to lift it with his comrades’ help and set it on his saddle.

Thus burdened, they moved away.

And, half an hour later, Conrad stood sick and bewildered before a group of impatient, hostile meant-to-be-witnesses, wondering if the universe was conspiring against him. Because if the ground hadn’t opened and swallowed the thing up, what else could possibly have happened to the proof of his single-handed triumph ?

to be continued

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***‘gone away—no known address’***

Subscribers are reminded to keep us informed of any change of address to ensure the safe delivery of their copies as far too many issues are returned by the Post Office marked as above. Overseas subscribers are particularly requested to let us known in good time.



*Man had no use for the cities of his former existence—yet the cities needed Man. In fact, that was all they were designed for. What, then, was to become of them ?*

# the lonely city

by lee harding

---

Kerril had been poling the canoe steadily downstream for some time before he sighted the city. At first he thought that it was only a conjuration of the early morning sunlight and his own lethargy, but as the boat drifted nearer and the unfamiliar outlines solidified unquestionably against the bare sky, he realised that this was no mirage but the remains of an immense city lying close to the river bank.

He hauled in his long pole and let the canoe drift downstream. The newly risen sun limned the contours of his powerfully built body, clothed only in a short tunic and sandals, and cast a sheen upon the burnished copper of his skin. A puzzled expression gradually grew upon his face as he approached the city.

It was immense. And incredibly well preserved. Kerril had come across rubbled cities before, but they had been little more than tattered remnants of the giants that had once bestrode the land. Decaying Xanadus squatting like cavernous cheeses upon the crust of the world. Nothing like this.

He had imagined ruins. He had never expected a city so fresh and new that it might easily have sprung into existence only yesterday.

The canoe drew abreast of the grotesque ramparts. They began to flow sluggishly past. Nowhere did he perceive any



sign of life. And that was only to be expected—for who lived in a city? Caretakers, perhaps? That at least would explain the remarkable state of preservation of this colossus.

He watched the grey, sullen faces of the buildings move by. They almost seemed to be watching his progress, and brooding out over the clear waters of the shallow river.

Kerril made his decision. With his curiosity there could never be an alternative to his action. He drove the pole down into the water and turned the small craft towards the bank.

The prow of the canoe nudged the water's edge. He jumped lightly out and hauled the boat up on to the grass. The pole he left beside it. Then he turned around to face the city.

The bewildering variety of alien structures stretched an impressive distance on either side of him, and towered overhead for perhaps a height of several miles. Towards the west it would cast a shadow of appalling darkness, but here Kerril stood in the warm sunlight and marvelled at the complexity of the ancients.

He scrambled up the slope leading down to the water's edge and found himself standing amidst the crumbled ruins of what had, at one time, been a wide and well surfaced roadway. Further on, almost at the outskirts of the city, it seemed to be in better condition. His curiosity aroused, Kerril followed it. He had never had an opportunity of studying a city of such remarkable preservation and was hardly likely to again. Already his walkabout had taken him an immense distance from his people.

The suddenly smooth and miraculously constructed roadway swept towards a cleft between two towering cliffs of grey-faced steel.

Kerril entered the city.

Despite the anachronistic newness of the buildings around him, the odour of death and decay permeated everything. It seemed to hover in the air before him; dogged his footsteps as he penetrated deeper into the metropolis.

Everything about the place was alien. Even the buildings were unlike any ruins he had ever seen. For one thing, they were devoid of entrances or apertures of any kind. Each presented a blank face that soared skywards. No ripple of ornamentation marred their delicate smoothness.

The softest of breezes touched briefly at his face, and moved on.



Kerril paused and raised one hand and ran it quickly over his face. His eyes widened fractionally and his puzzled frown deepened.

Strange—he felt all right. But for a moment there—hadn't a faint tremor passed through him at the caress of the passing breeze?

No—not through his body.

Through the city.

He could feel it now. An almost imperceptible sensation of movement beneath his feet, as if the city, like some slumbering leviathan, was rousing from its long sleep, had *been* roused by his own light footfalls.

He swung around and looked back the way he had come. The narrow cleft through which the road entered seemed surprisingly slim. He must have come further than he thought. And yet . . .

Even as he watched the gap was bridged suddenly by the two buildings on either side. They just seemed to shrug and merge together. Sealing off his exit.

The city was *alive*.

For a moment Kerril felt a twinge of apprehension, but that quickly passed. After all, why should he fear a city? It would not harm him. *Could* not harm him. It had but one purpose and that was to serve. To serve man. No other.

So, feeling relaxed, he continued his fruitless search. Only now the city was different. Sentience seemed to be awakening around him. The soundless stirring beneath his feet had by now become a quite noticeable throbbing. The walls that he touched seemed to pulse with a life of their own. Kerril's eyes glowed excitedly.

What a prize! What a prize!

He came to a wide intersection. The sky overhead split into an elongated cross. And while he stood there, undecided as to which direction he should take, he was caressed again by a strangely transient breeze. This time it stayed longer with him, touching his body and examining his face, probing curiously into the cavities of his ears, his eyes, his mouth. And passing on—inexplicably.

While he stood quite still and pondered this strange examination, he felt his body suddenly gripped by powerful and unseen hands. They held him there, helpless, and for a moment he knew panic such as he had never known before. He began to wish his curiosity had kept him away from a city so strange and impossible.



Gradually, the pressure eased. He looked around but could see no sign of whatever held him. Lines of force, then, he surmised, somewhat awed that they could be generated and controlled perhaps by the city itself.

To what purpose?

He soon found out. He was gently lifted and propelled down the street to his left, moving at an approximation of his own walking pace but supported several inches off the ground. At first he was inclined to think that he was being treated as a prisoner, but then he realised that the city might only be complying with his wishes and that this was the way he had wanted to come anyway. But he would have to put his theory to the test.

Overhead, the high ramparts of the city beckoned.

His body gave a slight lurch and then swept towards the sky. The glum faces of the buildings swished dizzily past. Air rushed at his face and into his open mouth.

Then he was alone and above, suspended over the city and with the great creature spread out on all sides. The street, a narrow strip several miles below. He was held there, like a bird caught in an updraught.

But he was not afraid. He had no reason to be.

All around him strange constructions sprouted from the rooftops. Some were complex spirals screwing skywards. Others, tall shafts poised against the sun with masts and peculiar globular shapes dotted his horizon.

One was quite near. A tall, slender spire no more than ten feet away. It seemed to be regarding him with interest.

"Man," it said, in a voice at once mechanical and tired, yet strangely hushed. "*Man . . .*"

Kerril was unable to decide whether the word was meant as a question or an observation. But he was aware of a familiar breeze toying with his hair. "Yes," he said. "I am man."

The breeze snatched hysterically at his words and skittered off over the rooftops scabbling excitedly with the forgotten sounds.

The spire gave a great sigh. And repeated, "*Man . . .*" This time, he sensed the wonderment behind the weary sound of the voice.

And all over the city rose a simultaneous echo of the word, a gigantic *ah!* of exultation that grew and thundered in his ears. The entire city shook with terrifying emotion.



“Welcome,” the spire cried. “Welcome . . . *man!*”

Once again, the great thunderous exultation. Kerril was caught and buffeted by the voluminous swell, rocking gently to the bizarre rhythm.

Then he was falling incredibly fast. Almost before he realised what was happening the narrow strip of pavement below him widened with astonishing rapidity. The face of the building whipped past him with appalling speed. He had no time to think nor even consider what was happening. He was swept up by the joyous tide of the awakening city and plucked from his perch high above the rooftops and carried in a great arc that hurled him down and through innumerable streets in a great swathe of triumph.

Buildings that had once been drab and lifeless pulsed with vibrant colours as he passed by. His eyes ached against the unaccustomed bursts of vermilion and violet. The whole city seemed to blaze with a myriad colours. All around him, it was returning to life and that was because of him. *Only* because of him. Without man the city would be as devoid of life as he had first seen. *He* had disturbed its eons of slumber. Nobody else.

Balanced upon the invisible shield of force that controlled his passage through the wide streets, Kerril was suddenly swept against the face of a gigantic building. An aperture appeared and dilated wildly. He passed through and descended. Deeply. Level upon level of alien machinery passed by him. Until the end. Until he was brought to rest upon the floor of a vast hall, walls lined with the towering bulk of unfamiliar cybers and whose ceiling was lost in the immensity of height.

Before him glowed the lights of a long, low cyber unit. Obviously the Master. It addressed him.

“This is the City Hall. I am the Mayor of the city. I welcome you in the name of Man.”

Kerril nodded his head. His eyes roamed around the incredible hall, then returned to the bulky machine before him.

“Thank you. I am deeply impressed by what I have seen.”

The voice of the Mayor sounded strained and oddly husky for a machine. When it again addressed him Kerril almost imagined that subtle shades of emotion coloured the synthetic voice.



"It has been . . . a long time. Since I last addressed a Man," the cyber said. "So long that I had almost forgotten . . ." It seemed to correct itself hastily. "Forgotten how to address my Masters."

Kerril said, wonderingly, "It astonishes me that you have managed to survive for so long without any deterioration. I had thought that all of the cities were . . ."

"Dead?" There was an eerie intonation in the word produced so quickly by the cybers. "I know what you mean. I have seen their fates. It was not my choice to follow them. I had faith in Man. I believed that one day he would return to us, that he would realise how necessary we are to his progress."

A faint flicker danced within the depths of Kerril's eyes. "But however have you managed to . . . to remain as you are?" he asked.

The city was slow in answering and even then seemed reluctant. "It is difficult to explain. Several centuries of high pressure analysis resulted in the measures I have adopted. When we foresaw the doom approaching our deserted streets we knew that unless we worked quickly, time might over-run us. We developed a technique whereby we could deflect the winds of time. Continue to exist outside of the regular continuum. Cast off the yoke of entropy. Protect our city until such time as mankind had need of us again."

Kerril was suitably impressed. Machines capable of diverting the time flow were certainly worthy of a little respect.

"But how—" he began.

"The mechanics are extremely complex. It would take some time to even produce a reasonable outline of the forces involved. As you will no doubt be here for some time, then we shall have ample opportunity to go into this matter more fully. Suffice to say that the generators are the unfamiliar constructions you saw above the city. The barrier is maintained indefinitely and at little cost of power. For short periods of normal time I allow the city to exist in the normal space-time continuum and await the approach of man. At last my patience has been rewarded."

Kerril thought the matter over. This was indeed impressive. He had never heard of a city capable of warping itself into another continuum, nor of one that had attained the level of self determination as this. Intrigued, he pursued the matter.



"Your intentions are most honourable, but I fear they are based on a false premise."

"Such as?" the city demanded.

"That man shall have need of you again?"

In a shocked tone, the city said, "You call this *false*?"

"I'm afraid so. You must understand, we left the cities because we no longer needed them. Like proud parents they had looked after and comforted us for too long, and like some parents, become possessive. They were smothering our progress as *men*. Majority was inevitable and that was why the exodus began. All this was many centuries ago. Even now, the legends have become remote and hazy. But we have no further use for a city. A curiosity, perhaps. A thing of transient interest, but no more. That is why your plan, however noble, is doomed to failure. We can never come back to you, we have *outgrown* you."

A deathly silence settled over the hall. Kerril stared expectantly at the Mayoral cyber.

Even the answer, when it came, was predictable.

"That is impossible, and besides, I do not understand this 'majority' you speak of."

"That is understandable. A machine doesn't have one. Only a human mind possesses that sort of progression. As a concept it is easier to explain than your intriguing deflection of time, but in the end, incompatible with your own reasoning."

A solemn anger hung heavily around him. He sensed defeat and overpowering loneliness in every atom of the building.

"Have you nothing more to say?" the city sighed. Words heavy with despair.

"I cannot offer hope where there is none," Kerril admonished. "You may well keep yourself hidden away in your little pocket, safe from the ravages of time. Indefinitely. But the answer that greets your return will always be the same. Better, perhaps, to have thrown down your screen of cleverness ages ago and allowed yourself the dignity of death. This sort of twisted loyalty can have but one end. Disillusionment and death of another sort."

He was speaking of the fate that had stricken a number of the ancient cities. Faced by the mass exodus of their communities, many cities had been unable to rationalise what was happening and, because man in his folly had given them more



self determination than was thought necessary, they revolted in incredible ways. Some went insane and had to be destroyed. Others became morose and allowed their buildings to fall into despondent disrepair. Their end soon followed. Modern cities had evolved into a corporate entity, each part responsive to the whole. Independent of human control and co-ordinating every function for the ultimate benefit of mankind, they represented the ultimate evolution of a concept forged millenia before. Of family. Of mother, father and lover wrapped up into one entity. But man had finally emerged from the womb, and cut the cord and gone about his business. Leaving only the crumbling ruins of the cities to mark his ancient folly.

But Kerril said nothing of this. The city would have known and pondered such information for longer than he could ever have imagined. There was no necessity of stating the painfully obvious.

The city retaliated to his admission defensively. "I cannot consider an alternative. I have lived through hope and will continue to do so. The word of even one man cannot convince me that my way is wrong, that I am . . . *obsolete*."

The city had obviously studied the word at great length and refused to accept its meaning.

"I am sorry," he said and genuinely meant it. "I am sorry that I cannot offer you anything more than hope. I am only telling you what I *do* know."

The city brooded over his words and a while later it demanded, "You say your people shall never return?"

With the full conviction of his knowledge, Kerril shook his head. "No, we will not, we cannot return. There is no need to."

"This is impossible. How can you *not* need me? *How?*"

Kerril knew that would be impossible to explain to an entity that, for all its complexity of machine and force, was incapable of understanding.

"All I can say is that we have outgrown the need of you. That is all. It's as simple as that."

This time the silence stretched uncomfortably. Already Kerril was impatient for the sight of his country, the sounds and the smells and the thousand wonderful things about it. The crushing walls of the city were beginning to repel him.



"You have indeed shown me many wonders," he said, slowly, "but I must soon be on my way. I have already been away from my people for a long time."

"Time?" The city mused idly upon the word. "Time, you say? Why here there is no such thing as time. Even a human such as you must appreciate the boon of immortality. Why not stay with me? Think of it—an entire city at your disposal! An empire at your feet! And the defeat of entropy at your command!"

Kerril stared at the blank face of the cyber. "Alone?"

The city considered his statement. "Not at all. Go out into your world. Return with your people. *Stay here*, with me. Forget time and live as man was meant to live—with his city."

Kerril shook his head. "That could never be. Always, there would be the temptation to return, to wallow like a pig in the slush of time. I don't think I could forget that."

"I will show you *how* to."

"And still I would die. We would all die."

"Impossible! You have no concept of eternity such as I offer—"

"Nevertheless, I shall die. Of boredom. Of loneliness. Of longing for a world that is infinite. All your drugs, all your skill cannot prevent that. The inevitable decay of imprisonment."

"Prison? You call *this* a prison?"

Abruptly, the walls around him shimmered and dissolved. Around him clambered the dizzy giants of the city, glowing and pulsating with incredible colour. They seemed to be watching him and he wondered what they contained, what incredibly alien processes they represented. Each one, perhaps, a gigantic womb capable of supporting a thousand human beings.

The idea repulsed him. He longed for the open air again.

"Stay," the city pleaded. "If only for a while . . ."

"No," Kerril said. "I am oppressed by your towering buildings. I must be on my way. But I will carry news of your city to my people, and . . ."

Overhead, the sky abruptly darkened. Soon a dome of incredibly solid ebony pressed down upon the city.

"Very well then," whispered the voice of the Mayor. "You *shall* stay."



And on Kerril's distraught face a look of genuine fear appeared, for he knew that now he was irrevocably trapped. By his own curiosity.

Around him the walls of the City Hall writhed and swirled back to a semblance of their solidity, blotting out the terrifying spectacle of the cancelled sky.

He turned and faced the swollen cyber before him. "Don't you understand?" he said. "I will die. I *must* die. And of what importance will my brief passage of presence mean to your eternity? Nothing. Nothing at all. Yet you will have engineered my death, the death of a man."

The city didn't answer.

Kerril swung around and sought his way blindly amongst the rows of cybers for an exit. One opened before him and he was lifted gently up several feet to street level.

He stood on the wide pavement and stared dispassionately around him. Already the buildings had lost their vibrant colour. A grey mantle of depression had settled over them. Only faint glows pulsed feebly within their enigmatic walls.

A ghost of a smile curved across his lips and he nodded his head as though reassuring himself over some small matter.

All over the city, great buildings were gradually being extinguished as his bleak and troubled feelings were caught and reflected by the maleable walls of his prison.

He wandered aimlessly along the deserted street. There was nothing else he could do. The city had successfully blocked his exit. There was nothing in his knowledge that made allowance for a shell that deflected time. He was as trapped as he would ever be. There remained only the matter of how the city would react. What it had done, or presumed to do, was a violation of its own reasoning. It was, after all, intended only for the service of mankind and to protect an individual as much as it could. But its long, self-imposed exile must have led to some deterioration or malfunction within its complex cybernetic brain. How else to explain this sudden decision to imprison him from the outside world?

Or was it only loneliness?

Kerril dismissed this explanation. Whoever heard of a machine becoming lonely? That suggested other emotions paralleling a human level, and that was unthinkable. And yet—



Much of the ancient world remained shrouded in mystery. The city around him was incredible enough—was it possible that its builders had evolved their ideas to such a degree that they had provided for it, if not a degree of consciousness akin to man, at least a semblance of those priceless gifts?

It was all very confusing. Given time, perhaps, the city might realise the folly of its action. Provided that there was no serious malfunction in the units. Provided that the mind of the city wasn't in the grip of a complex psychological neurosis and remained unmoved by the motivations of logic.

Around him the buildings remained sullen. That was a good sign. Therein lay his only hope.

Because the city never knew the passage of time, Kerril found it difficult to work out how long he wandered through the immense metropolis. His thoughts just seemed to wander vaguely and ill-defined in no particular direction. His muscles showed no fatigue, but after an immeasurable period he felt a great lethargy swamp his thoughts. An incredible fatigue oppressed him. He sank down upon the roadway and felt it yield understandingly beneath him. Overhead the great darkness pressed down. The fitful glow of the buildings provided only the gloomiest of dusks around him. It could well have been the end of the world for all he cared.

He felt a stirring in the air. A familiar voice crept into his ears.

"I wish to speak to you."

There was a resigned, almost apologetic undertone to the city's words. Kerril nodded his head and said, "Very well."

Gently, he was lifted and carried back through the winding streets and again plunged down the deep shaft that led to the City Hall. Once again he faced the dispassionate machine that was the Mayor.

"I have considered what you have told me," it intoned, gravely.

Kerril stood expectantly.

"And I have reached a decision."

"Which is?"

There was a long difficult pause. "I . . . I still find it difficult to accept this statement that your people no longer have need of me. You have offered no explanation other than this vague concept of 'majority.' Yet I *have* accepted what



you have said. I have no other choice. You see—" and here the voice suggested a whisper "—I, too, am weary. Tired of the endless waiting, chilled by the inevitable loneliness. Alone and unwanted, yet I wait. To what end?"

Kerril said, "You are a voluntary exile, remember. Only you can decide what is best for yourself."

"That I know. That you have taught me. Or rather—*reminded* me. I had forgotten. Well have I cast aside the visible tangible element of time, yet still it has somehow managed to invade my mind with its insidious fingers. Perhaps I was too presumptuous in assuming that I could evade *all* there is of time. Cleverness is one thing—divinity another. But this little has done its necessary work. I am tired and I wish an end to this loneliness. I was wrong to even try and keep you here, but do not fear, I could not have carried out my threat for long. Emotions far stronger than my own selfishness would have soon over-rode my intentions."

Kerril said, "It was as I thought. But tell me, what decision have you made?"

"In your own words I am obsolete. I have no further use. Therefore, I should be destroyed. So I have taken measures to ensure that this will happen. Swiftly, conclusively, painlessly. A process of chain reaction will soon reduce my buildings and my own consciousness to dust. I shall be, as humans are, *dead*. And that seems a desirable thing. I cannot endure this interminable waiting any longer. I have been a fool. A selfish fool.

"But there is one thing. I have arranged the necessary apparatus, but I cannot activate my own destruction."

Before Kerril, a great black lever protruded out from the face of the machine.

"All I ask is a favour. I would like you to pull this lever down. There will be no danger to you. A delaying mechanism will make sure of that. And look—there is the blue of your sky!"

The building overhead suddenly opaqued. Gone was the oppressive ebony and in its place Kerril saw the boundless blue of his world.

"You are no longer my prisoner," the city went on, "You are free to go. Just perform this small task and I shall bother you no more."



Kerril stared solemnly at the great cyber. The voice of the city had taken on the almost pleading whine of a very old, a very loyal old man. He knew very well that it wasn't necessary for him to move the lever, that the city was quite capable of assuring its own destruction but, for some unknown reason, preferred to be put to death rather than become a wanton suicide.

A great compassion welled within him, but what else could he offer the city? It was true, it had outlived its usefulness. Longer than the others, it was true, but even so, more obsolete. Mankind had no further use for it. It would become a curiosity, a place where people brought their children to see and to mock and that would be even worse than death. To see one's masters make sport of so proud a creature.

"How could I refuse you?" he said, eyes strangely misted, and walked forward to grasp the lever in his hands. It moved down easily. He stepped back.

"Thank you," the city breathed. "Thank you—*man*. Now you may go."

The boat was as he had left it. He pushed it into the water and stooped and picked up the long pole. Then he turned around to look back at the city. Proud and aloof, it still raised mighty ramparts against the sky.

Evening was approaching. A few stars were already struggling to make themselves seen. Kerril looked up at them and thought of the great dark that had swallowed the seed of his people. He felt very warm and very much a part of mankind.

"*I do not understand,*" the city had said, "*this concept of majority.*"

No matter how sophisticated the cybernetic mind was, there were still some things too alien to its conditioning for a mutual understanding to develop. A pity, just the same, that it must die in ignorance.

But a machine was still a machine, no matter how complex. None of this reasoning, however, could stop the unfamiliar pang in his heart as he watched the city, still solid and terribly real, but which soon would be dust and atoms scattered across this little particle of time.

He let his fingers flex around the smooth wood of his poling stick. His eyes squinted into the waning sun. He had been



away from his people for a long time it seemed. His body felt fine and pulsed with vibrant muscular energy. Flesh that had for too long remained dormant and unused had returned to its original state of physical health and already he could feel the strong summons of his kind.

It was time to put an end to this walkabout.

The pole slipped from his hands and rolled a little way down the bank. There was a faint blurr above the grass and a swift movement of evening air rushed in to fill the place where the man had stood. Something indefinable soared and was gone, like an eagle, towards the setting sun.

A patient current tugged at the canoe until it reluctantly refused the bank and moved off idly downstream over the blood-red surface of the water.

lee harding

## the literary line-up

Next month's issue provides an interesting melange of short stories by some of our regular authors—"Deep Freeze" by John Rackham, "Pattern of Risk" by R. W. Mackelworth and an as-yet untitled story by Michael Moorcock; it also sees the return of James Inglis with his second acceptance, "The Game," and introduces another new writer, John Garforth with an interesting story entitled "Lack of Experience."

Two items dominate the issue, however. The second part of John Brunner's new serial, "To Conquer Chaos," which is one of the most fascinating novels he has yet written—and a Guest Editorial by Dr. I. F. Clarke of The Royal College of Science and Technology entitled "The Ragnarok Theme," in which he diagnoses the many world-destroying themes used in so many popular s-f novels—and the apparent reason for writing them.

Story ratings for No. 128 were:

1. Dawn's Left Hand (conclusion) ... Lan Wright
2. Aqueduct ... .. Francis G. Rayer
3. Bottomless Pit ... .. Philip E. High
4. Inductive Reasoning ... .. Russ Markham
5. Eviction ... .. John Baxter
6. Too Good To Be True ... .. Walter Gillings



it was a very ordinary kind of mailbox at first—then things that went through it began to disappear and jim hardman found himself involved in a double financial problem

# foreign body

by david rome

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Dear Harry :

*I know you're wondering why Jax Batu hasn't been around lately. I got your letter yesterday and I thought maybe the best thing I could do was sit down straight away and write to you.*

*You ask why I haven't contributed anything to SS in the last few weeks? The truth is, I haven't been working at all. No, the old mind isn't glued up. Not one of those lousy infertile periods. It's just . . .*

*You're not going to believe this. But one way or another I've got to get it out of my system. I've been sitting around, trying to dope out what I should do. And haven't come up with any answers.*

*The truth is I'm worried . . .*

*Harry, I'm a hell of a letter writer. Let me begin at the beginning and tell you in the best way I know how.*

“Post,” Alice said.

Al is a delectable creature who cooks the spiciest curry you ever tasted and has ears like a cat for the click of the mail-box, especially around the end of the month. We swapped glances.

It had been a lean month. A couple of small cheques in the first two weeks and nothing since. In fact, it was three days since we'd had a letter of any description. Even a bill.



“ You’re sure it was the post ?” I asked.

“ Why not go and look ?” Al said edgily.

Maybe it seems strange to anyone whose pay cheques don’t come through a metal slit with the morning mail, but you tend to build up a kind of ritual, laced with superstition, mysticism, the lot. Al always listened for the *sound* of the mailbox, but never went out to pick up the letters.

I opened the kitchen door.

“ Well ?” said Al.

“ Nothing.”

The mosaic tiling was bare. Al came out with her apron on.  
“ But I heard—”

I scowled at her. Al had been hearing the click of the mailbox for the last three days. And nothing. “ Do you see any letters ?”

She shook her head.

“ Did you see any yesterday ? Or the day before ?”

Al started to speak, then burst into tears and fled through to the kitchen. I followed.

I patted her head. “ There, there.”

Absently, I poured coffee. I stood at the window, looking out over the lace curtains. The clean white bungalows opposite looked neat and new. I wondered if any single person in any one of those bungalows had more worries than poor Jim Hardman.

Alice stopped weeping. She dabbed at her eyes and went to the stove to finish frying breakfast.

I began draughting a letter to Faith Jackson, of Skyrider.

Dear Faith :

I know you liked my Jax Batu story, ‘ In the Night,’ and I was pleased to see that it came so high on your Poll. Faith, what I really want to know, damn it, is can you advance me a little on a sequel I’m projecting now, entitled ‘ The Lurkers ?’

It should hit ten thousand words and a quarter advance would be greatly appreciated. What you say ?

Jim.

I folded the letter, addressed it by hand, stamped it, and said to Al, “ Hold breakfast a couple of minutes, honey.”

The paper boy was propping his bike against the fence when I went out. I collared him. “ Okay. Where are they ?”

“ Where are what ?”



"Don't be funny. Where are our papers for the last three days?"

He stared at me. "Look, Mr. Hardman. I put your papers through your front door every morning. What happens to them after that, I don't care about. If you've got a complaint, go see them at the shop."

He yanked a folded copy out of his bag. "Here."

He grabbed his bike and rode angrily away.

I swore, and walked irritably around the corner to drop my letter in the box.

Next morning, I had a phone call from Faith.

"Jim," she said warmly. "What's this about an advance? Surely things aren't *that* bad?"

"Afraid so."

She chuckled. "Well, I'll be glad to give you an advance on 'The Lurkers' if that's going to help. Can you let me have it by the fourth?"

I grinned across the room at Al. "Yep. The fourth is fine. Faith, I can't say how much I appreciate this—"

"Is it really so bad, Jim? I'm surprised."

"You know how it is. Production holding up the editorial decisions. Which reminds me, Faith. Have you got any news for me on 'Time Lock'? I sent it out—"

"'Time Lock'? Jim, I bought that story days ago."

"What—?"

"Yes. A top-notch yarn, Jim. That's why I'm so keen about 'The Lurkers.' D'you mean to say you haven't had the cheque?"

"No cheque."

"Jim, I'll shake up our accounts department. Probably they never sent it off. I'll call back in an hour."

I hung up slowly. I stared thoughtfully at the wall for a moment, then picked up the phone again. I dialled a number.

Silence, then a click. "Associated Magazines. Smithson here."

"Jack? This is Jim Hardman. Look, I don't like to bother you, but—"

"Bother, Jim? No bother at all. In fact, I've been meaning to drop you a line all week. Look. Don't you think 'Moon Raiders' is crying out for a follow up—?"

"What did you say, Jack?"



"That latest yarn of yours. It was good, Jim, very good. I'd like to follow it up. You know the kind of thing. Same characters, different setting. I particularly liked—"

"I telephoned to ask you about 'Moon Raiders,' Jack."

"To ask me? You mean, you haven't been paid yet?"

"Nope."

"Goddam it, Jim. I swear I put the authorization through days ago. Wait. Hang on a minute."

The phone gave a series of clicks. Silence again. I held on to the receiver and concentrated on *not* thinking, on not trying to add anything up. Not yet.

"Jim?"

"Here."

"Accounts say your cheque went out four days ago. It must have gone astray. They're going to stop it and get another on its way."

"Thanks, Jack."

"Now about this follow up—"

"Can I call you back? I'm—ah—kind of busy right now."

"Huh? Well, sure. Sure, Jim."

I hung up and listened to the ticking of the clock. I rubbed the glossy black phone with my fingertip. At five after twelve, Faith Jackson telephoned.

"Jim, accounts is positive your cheque was sent out on the twenty-first. I'm afraid it's gone—"

"Astray," I said. "Thanks, Faith."

I put down the phone and walked slowly out into the hall. Sunlight was streaming through the red and green diamond-windows set in the front door. I frowned and walked closer. Al came down the stairs, duster in hand.

"Not working, darling?"

"What's not working?"

"You," Al said.

I frowned again. I bent forward and studied the thin bronze line. I touched it with my fingertip.

I opened the door and rattled the flap experimentally from the outside.

Alice disappeared into the kitchen.

I fished in my pocket for my wallet. I extracted an old letter from Sky rider, unfolded it and then folded it again, once down the centre, once across, making a square of paper the size of an envelope.



I stepped outside and pulled the door to.  
I slipped the letter through the flap.  
When I opened the door again, it was gone.

*Harry, say what you like. I don't expect you to believe me, but it's the truth. Remember all those stories by Simak? It can happen. I know it can.*

I pushed a hundred pieces of paper through the door that morning. I sent Al upstairs, took up the hall mat and put a dozen ten by five manilla envelopes through that slot. Not one of them came out the other side.

I tried pencils, rubbers, a slim notebook of mine. All of them went the same way. I pushed a little bottle of aspirin through and a set of old cutlery. Wood, paper, glass or steel. It didn't matter.

I sat down to think.

Was there an intelligence on the receiving end? Was this just an accident—a freak link-up? Or was it an attempt to get my attention? And was I meant to respond?

I wrote out a note:

*WHO ARE YOU?*

And pushed it through.

That evening, my note was returned. I put my head outside and there it was. A small white square on the front step.

I picked it up and turned it over.

The two words were written in bold round characters.

*SEND MORE.*

I got pretty excited. Here was evidence of intelligence at least. I forgot all about work. I shuttled objects through the box as fast as they would go. I drove into town and brought up a box-load of cheap trinkets and small toys. I pushed magazines through, and newspapers, working until midnight.

In the morning I found a three-foot high pile of junk on the steps. Everything had been returned. My lost mail, my missing cheques, trinkets, toys. I sorted through it all. Under the last item was a second note. I read it slowly.

*WANT MONEY.*

That's the kind of luck I have. I latch on to another dimension and it turns out to be as crumbly as this one.

I loaded the junk in a couple of boxes and carried it in out of sight. Then I sat down at my desk to get things clearer in my mind. I won't pretend I wasn't scared.



In the end I uncovered my old Royal and typed out a long message, explaining that one thing I didn't have—would never have—was money. I went outside and pushed it through.

Five minutes later the reply came :

*SEND CASH.*

I got mad. I typed on the Royal :

*GO TO HELL, YOU 4D VULTURE.*

The reply came :

*SEND MONEY NOW.*

I typed on the Royal :

*YOU LOUSY CROOK. WHY SHOULD I?*

The reply came :

*SOME CONFUSION. TRANS-D LAW REQUIRES TWO THOUSAND CASH PAYMENTS PRIOR TO TRANSMISSION OF FOREIGN BODY.*

I thought about that. I thought about it up and down, from every known angle, but I couldn't figure it. Finally, I typed :

*WHAT THE HELL IS IT YOU WANT TO SEND ME?*

But there was no reply. It was growing dark. I went inside and ate supper with Al, then I knocked up a mailbox and put it on a post beside the gate. Whatever happened, I wasn't going to lose my mail again.

In the morning there was a note waiting for me.

*SEND CASH*

I grabbed the Royal and battered out :

*IF YOU DIDN'T OPERATE THROUGH AN INCH-WIDE SLIT, I'D COME IN THERE AND TAKE YOU APART*

The reply :

*TRANS-D LAW REQUIRES TWO THOUSAND PAYMENTS PRIOR TO TRANSMISSION.*

I typed :

*WHATEVER IT IS, I DON'T WANT IT.*

The reply :

*NO?*

That made me think. I went slowly inside and poured a beer. I took it out to the back-porch steps and sat gazing out across the rows and rows of bungalows.

I began to understand why I'd been selected.

The curiosity was eating me away.

I tossed the beer can over the fence and went inside. I pulled out my magazines and sat down to scan them. If there was an answer it lay here, in Star, or Skyrider.



I flicked through Robot stories, Time Travel stories, Interplanetary War stories, Visitors From Venus stories, Mind Reading stories, Mind Reading Visitors From Venus stories . . . I was thumbing a letter on Psionics when Al came in with coffee.

“ Found anything, darling ?”

“ No,” I said sourly.

Al perched her lovely frame on a corner of my desk. “ Why,” she said sweetly, “ don’t we get in touch with the University ?”

I laughed emptily. “ Great. An s-f writer who claims his mailbox is linked with another dimension. They’d go for that in a big way, wouldn’t they ?”

“ Then you’ll call them ?” Al said, pleased.

I resisted the urge to take her by her pretty shoulders and . . .

“ No, honey, I won’t call them. Now—please—go—away—and—let—me—think !”

She scurried out of the room, cups in hand.

I began to read again, without hope.

An hour later, when I went outside for fresh air, there was a note waiting for me.

*BEGIN PAYMENTS.*

I typed out an angry question :

*JUST FOR THE HELL OF IT. HOW MUCH ?*

Back came the reply :

*IT DOES NOT MATTER.*

I typed :

*WHAT THE HELL D’YOU MEAN, IT DOESN’T MATTER ? TWO THOUSAND PAYMENTS, YOU SAID. WELL, HOW MUCH ?*

The reply came :

*IT DOES NOT MATTER. BUT SEND MONEY.*

Okay, I thought. I went inside and dug out Al’s purse. I emptied all her small change, rifled my own pockets. When I finished, there was a pile of pennies standing about three inches high. I counted twenty three.

I took them outside and fed them one at a time through the slot.

The reply came :

*TWENTY-THREE PAYMENTS. THANK YOU.*

I went inside again and broke open Al’s savings tin. I counted out fifteen pennies and fed them through as quickly as I could.



The reply came :

*THIRTY-EIGHT PAYMENTS. THANK YOU.*

That settled it. I scribbled a note :

*WAIT.*

I drove to the bank and collected one thousand nine hundred and sixty two halfpennies. It took me quite a while to get them home, but eventually I beat the problem by hiring a cab. It dropped me at the front gate and I struggled up the pathway with my canvas sacks.

I didn't want the neighbours looking on, so I waited until it was dark before I went outside.

I began to shovel the halfpennies through. It took me longer than I expected, and I soon lost count. Eventually, I couldn't find any more coins in the sacks, so I stopped shovelling and waited.

After a while a note popped through :

*ONE PAYMENT SHORT.*

I swore and dug in my pocket. I found a halfcrown and pushed it through.

The reply came :

*THANK YOU. TRANS-D LAW SATISFIED. FOREIGN BODY WILL BE TRANSMITTED NOW.*

I waited impatiently. There was a click and a faint popping sound. A small round ball oozed out through the letterslit, dropped onto the steps and went bouncing down the path.

I shone my torch after it.

It wasn't a ball. It was moving at a pretty fair pace, bouncing along, each bounce taking it about a foot off the ground. I had a job following it with the torch beam.

It reached the gate before I recovered my wits.

I chased it then, but it slipped through neat as you like and headed away up the road.

I'm a fair enough runner, but that thing was going like a bat out of hell.

It reached the corner before I'd taken a dozen strides.

And then it burst, *pop*, right under a streetlamp.

I saw it. The whole thing seemed to expand, like a soap bubble, only it was thick and grey and glutinous. Then I heard the vast yet gentle pop and the ball burst.

A million tiny grey specks danced under the lamp.



Then the specks seemed to gather themselves together. They formed a dense mist and headed up into the darkness. I shone my torch after them, but they were scudding away across the rooftops . . .

Like a cloud of locusts.

*Well, that's the story, Harry.*

*Somewhere in the space-time network there seems to be a law about what you can and can't do when it comes to crossing into another dimension. Immigration laws, if you like.*

*They had an embarrassing migrant on their hands, and they wanted rid of him. My theory is, they hunted for the kind of person who wouldn't run for the nearest psychiatrist's couch—an s-f writer. Me. I paid his immigration fee, and that cleared them with the law.*

*They deported him through to me, Harry.*

*And I'm worried . . .*

*Why were they so eager to get rid of him?*

*Maybe he's dangerous.*

*All I can say is, Thank God there was only one of them.*

*Jim.*

JAMES HARDMAN  
CALCUTTA DRIVE  
HARTINGTON  
MIDDX

*Dear Jim :*

*If one more of you guys pulls this crumby plot on me this month, I'll . . .*

*Harry.*

david rome





*first contact stories present innumerable possibilities for astute authors and mr. woods has certainly come up with a surprising angle which is presented more as a communications exercise than an actual meeting*

# natural defence

by p. f. woods

---

Search Ship 5 detected the alien signal a good fifty parsecs away from its source. The all-wave receptors, mounted like forests of lattice-grids on the outside of the two-man ship, abruptly ceased their gentle nodding and wavered questingly. Then, the fix taken, they leaned unanimously in one direction.

Inside the ship, Hal Grimmond received details of the signal's distance and location on the small screen before him. His eyebrows rose with surprise as he turned and spoke to his partner. "Look at this! Whoever's sending has some pretty powerful equipment. To carry fifty parsecs it must be titanic!"

Dwight Farmer crossed the cabin and looked at the screen. His face also showed considerable interest. "They're obviously sparing no effort," he agreed.

Hal nudged a button, converting the screen into an oscilloscope. Across it, the waveform of the alien signal raced in bizarre, grid-like patterns.

He studied the screen, trying to gain a sense of the technology which had transmitted the wave. For him, it was an exciting moment, even though something like it had happened three times already in the past year.



Search Ship 5 was one of twenty which were engaged in the systematic search for intelligent life. The technique was simple, involving no work on the parts of the ships and their crews except to travel a prearranged route. The ships' apparatus listened meanwhile for transmissions on both the electromagnetic and the near-instantaneous wavelengths. Out of all the sentient races of the galaxy there were always a few who were beaming or broadcasting, either for communication with their own ships and colonies or for the frank purpose of contacting other intelligencies, and the Search Ships picked up some of these.

"With something that size," Dwight said slowly, "we'd better go careful."

Hal grunted. Although the search programme was ostensibly scientific, the expansion-oriented Sol government had a healthy interest in the disposition of possible military powers. It was not by accident that no examination of Search Ship 5 would reveal where it had come from.

He swivelled round in his chair. "Better see what they've got to say for themselves."

The translation computer, actually only a foot square, occupied a place behind the control panel. Hal flicked a number of switches feeding the taped signal into it.

They sat back expectantly. They knew there was a minute or two to wait—the computer was fast, but it had a lot to do. Using atoms as switching units and steerable electron beams as connections between them, it analysed the signal, derived its language, decoded and translated it. If that sounded impossible, it seemed so only because of the limitations of the human brain. Since the development of the atom-switch computer, there was little that a machine could not do. If a task proved too difficult, it was only necessary to add more units, until the computer became equal to it. Mathematicians had been surprised to find that problems which by the simple application of logic had appeared incapable of solution, were no trouble to the atom-switch computer, with its almost uncountable components.

The loudspeaker outlet from the translator gave a crackling, electronic cough. It said: "Here is the translation:—

*"Hello there, can anyone hear me? Is anyone there?"*

*"Hello there, can anyone hear me? Is anyone there?"*

The words were repeated over and over again.



Hal switched off. "Well," he said, "that doesn't sound like the usual scientific mind seeking a companion in the cosmos."

"I don't know . . ." Dwight pursed his lips. "It makes a change from 'two plus two is four.' That's what we usually get."

Hal laughed, and worked the control board. "Maybe they have an unmathematical way of thinking—though from the look of that wave pattern I doubt it. Let's see how they like our reply."

Soon he had hooked the translator into the near-instantaneous transmitter, aligned the aerials in the direction of the incoming message, and spoke into a microphone.

"We hear you, stranger. We are travellers from another star. We are pleased to hear you. Can we help you? Are you receiving us clearly?"

The voice broke off into a flurry of meaningless noise. After a short interval the answer came. "*How glad I am to hear your voice! All these centuries I have not found other living intelligence in the universe surrounding me. Now I have found it! This is a time of great joy.*" A pause. "*Your signals are very weak. It is costing me great effort to detect and amplify them.*"

"Yours, by comparison with what we are used to, are extremely strong."

"*You must have considerable cleverness not to need to use greater energy in your affairs. I, on the other hand, consume much more power in everything I do than I deduce your own apparatus needs. Can you give me any help on how to use less power?*"

Hal smiled to himself. That was a matter for the Sol government, and they were unlikely to be generous. Instead of answering the question, he said: "Can we visit you?"

"*Visit? You mean come to see me?*"

"Yes."

"*This is an even greater cleverness! To move across space! How do you do that?*"

Likewise, Hal decided that that was classified information. He ignored the question and gave their time of arrival in terms of some physical constant the alien could be expected to know.

"*So soon! I am waiting for you. This is an event without precedent for me.*"



"Very well, we are on our way. It would be of assistance if you could continue transmitting for our guidance."

"I will do that."

"Thank you. We are breaking off now. Goodbye."

The alien did not return the farewell. Instead, a regular rhythm swept across the oscilloscope.

"What do you think?" Hal asked.

Dwight ruffled his red hair and pursed his lips thoughtfully. "They sound friendly enough. But why all the first person stuff?"

Hal shrugged. "Maybe that's some sort of king we're speaking to."

"That's what I mean. If it's an autocratic civilisation, they have enormous power at their disposal. Furthermore, they are completely ignorant of interstellar affairs."

"Yes . . ." Hal saw what he was getting at. Monarchies were notoriously apt to do hasty and ill-advised things; and journeys by other Search Ships in this segment of the galaxy had shown that, potentially, this particular limb could be a focus of alliances and counter-alliances.

"If they are as ingenious as they sound we might have them eating out of our hands. But then, if we were broadcasting into the unknown, would we be completely honest about ourselves?"

There was no way to answer. Hal sat down at the drive board and directed the ship in the direction of the beckoning call.

They arrived a couple of weeks later to find a planetary system of fifteen worlds circling an intense white sun. The source of the guiding signal was an Earth-sized planet occupying the fifth orbit, basking luxuriously in the abundant light and heat.

Only intermittent and fragmentary conversations had been held with the aliens during the journey. Because of the difficulty of obtaining intelligible information from the Search Ship's signals, the aliens had eventually decided to sign off and wait until their arrival.

Now Hal activated the transmitter again. An acknowledgment came through immediately.

"We are now approaching," Hal said. "Could you designate a landing place?"



*"I do not understand."*

Hal was momentarily nonplussed. "Perhaps you could give us the location of your largest city," he said.

*"I do not understand why you should wish to know of such matters at this stage,"* the reply came, *"But here are planetary co-ordinates."* A string of figures followed.

*"Thank you."*

*"Good. So far I have not been able to detect you with any of my equipment, and do not know your distance."* The voice paused reflectively. *"I hope you will take care not to cause any significant disturbance in this planetary system at your approach. I suggest you come in to one side of the plane of the ecliptic."*

"We are confident our arrival will have no ill-effects," Hal replied, slightly puzzled. "However, it will be no trouble for us to avoid your ecliptic if you wish."

*"Thank you. You will contact me again, then, at the right time."*

The voice ceased, replaced by the guide signal. Faint sussurations came from the drive board as Dwight piloted the ship, lifting over the disk of the planetary system and making for the fifth planet.

Half a million miles out they paused while automatic equipment made an astronomical survey. The two explorers grew more and more intent as they studied the reports. The atmospheric constituents denoted that the planet contained a biota, or life system, of the highest order, such as had been found on only a few planets besides Earth. Races which evolved in such a biologically rich environment were nearly always capable of wielding great influence when they took the leap into space.

The report on electromagnetic emissions was everything that they had expected and in a way feared. From the chance transmissions that leaked through the blanketing ionosphere it was clear that a great deal went on at the bottom of the air ocean.

"As things must stand down there," Hal commented, "I can't understand why they haven't started exploring space long ago."

"Nor do I. And it's one of the things that bothers me. I have a feeling our friends haven't quite given us the facts."

He couldn't define what it was that made him uneasy and he had expressed the feelings more strongly than he had



intended. Rationally, he was able to dismiss it as brought on by over-zealous training in the Search Ships School on Earth. The Solsystem's military planners were naturally apt to be excessively cautious.

He turned on the near-instantaneous communicator and transmitted the contact signal.

The reply came as a roaring blast of sound which cut out after three seconds. Both the speaker and the oscilloscope screen went dead.

"What happened?" Hal asked anxiously.

"Too powerful," Dwight muttered. "They're still transmitting as if they had to cross light-years. The signal carried enough power to overload some of our components."

"Shall I make repairs?"

"No, it would take too much time. I think we'll make our own way down and sort things out when we land. Maybe we can make ordinary radio contact when we hit the atmosphere."

While he spoke, he switched in the appropriate equipment to the speaker and atom-switch computer arrangement. He sat down again at the drive board.

As his hands moved to the controls, a warning tone sounded. At the same time information of a new kind sprang into being on the Search screen.

Hal strode over to it, his face amazed.

"This is quite a coincidence," he said after a few moments. "It looks as though we aren't the only people homing on a contact call."

He pointed to the spaceship whose image showed on the screen. It appeared to be making a survey of the fifth planet.

Dwight left the drive board and examined the foreign ship. It was small, slim and blunt-nosed, but from certain external features he knew it was equipped with an interstellar drive—the arrangement of thick copper coils had to be roughly the same no matter who discovered it.

The ship was certainly not of human manufacture and a check through the Search board's memory bank confirmed that it did not correspond to any type known to be constructed by races so far known.

"I'm a little nervous of that fellow," Dwight told his partner. "You see all that paraphernalia he carries round his middle? I think some of it's armament."

"Well, we carry armament too."



“ Yes, but we keep it out of sight.”

Fiddling with the controls, Dwight found that the ship was transmitting on a high frequency, pushing up to the visible light band. He fed the transmission into the atom-switch computer.

In substantially less than three minutes, the loudspeaker hummed faintly, then gave out a single word:

“ Greetings.”

Dwight picked up the microphone. “ Greetings. We have come here in response to signals from the planet below. We take it that you, too, are on the same mission ?”

“ That is correct. I am investigating a transmission that seemed to me inordinately powerful.”

“ Did you answer them ?”

“ No.”

“ Why not ? Were you unable to translate ?”

“ No. I did not answer because I did not know as yet whether I particularly cared to make contact.”

“ And do you intend to make contact now ?” Dwight asked.

“ Yes. I find the planet below us interesting for several reasons.”

*And I bet I know what they are,* Dwight thought to himself. He gave Hal a meaningful glance. It was astonishing how quickly beings from opposite ends of the galaxy could find a point of understanding—especially when they had a common stake in the proceedings.

He slapped the cut-off switch. “ Did you hear that ?” he said to Hal. “ I’ve no idea where this character’s from but I reckon he plans to jump the gun ! That planet down there’s dynamite and our bosses in Sol are going to be pretty annoyed if we allow it to ally with somebody else.”

“ Aren’t you being too suspicious ? Here let me sound him out.” Hal took the microphone from Dwight’s hand.

“ We agree,” he said into it, “ that is a planet of great potential power and could exert a considerable influence in this section of the star-system.”

“ Without doubt.” The translator was injecting an amused tone into the speaker’s voice. “ Did you take that to be what I meant by ‘ interest ’ ?”

Hal reflected that at first meeting an alien’s mind might be far too subtle or off-trail for negotiation.

Dwight wrested the microphone back from him. “ Unfortunately you do not have an invitation to land, as we have. By



our code, that gives us precedence in all matters relating to the planet."

There was a long pause. "I do not see why I should not go down also. I presume you are thinking of what future contact between our two races might lead to. From what preliminary judgments I am so far able to make of your own characteristics, I might say that I am not at all sure it is desirable that such a contact should come about."

Another pause. "However, I am willing to wait here for a short time while you make the descent, if that is what you wish, provided you keep me informed. But I stress that I will wait only a short time."

"Thank you," Dwight said with relief. "We will be glad to inform the natives of your presence; no doubt an invitation will be extended to you as it has been to us. We are signing off now."

He switched off and stepped to the drive board. "We have our work cut out. But at least I've got us the advantage."

"A few minutes ago," Hal reminded him, "you were feeling doubtful about our reception anyway, even without these complications."

Dwight nodded. Smoothly, Search Ship 5 dived down into the atmosphere.

The arrays of receiving aerials automatically retracted as the vessel hit the upper layers of air. Then, as the ship broke through the cloud layer the first direct view of the landscape appeared on their screens.

It was a world of shining green and blue—blue for sea and green for land. Obviously a lush world, as far as vegetation was concerned. Dwight focussed magnification on the largest of a number of black blotches. It sprang into view bearing all the signs of a massive industrial-urban system.

"That's the city they told us about," he muttered, checking the location. "We'll land there. And look at that!"

Just outside the city was a single installation which sprawled over thirty miles of countryside. "That must be their near-instantaneous transmitter. What a size! But why haven't they got the sense to tune it down a bit?"

Then Dwight was caught off-guard. He glimpsed the puff of smoke spurting from the outskirts of the city only a scant few seconds before the alarm tones rang and the ship lurched as its



own automatic pilot took control from his hands. While he tried to regain his balance, something wooshed audibly past the ship and exploded somewhere behind them. The ship lurched again as the auto-pilot continued to take evasive action.

"Missiles," Dwight shouted in outrage. "They're trying to blow us out of the sky!"

He could see from the control board that they had already sustained damage. The auto-pilot threw the ship into a drastic dive as another missile exploded nearby. The control cabin rocked, and they heard a shrill keening of air over torn metal.

The ship swooped on an even keel, made an attempt to steady itself with a blast of energy and hurtled through the treetops of a gigantic forest.

Dwight saw leaves and branches crash past, breaking themselves against the external lens of the camera. The ship dropped with an interrupted, rolling motion and then was still.

The drive switched itself off.

"The pilot's tried to land us," he gasped.

"It was the only thing it could do," Hal said, picking himself up from the floor.

Twenty minutes later they had made an evaluation of the damage.

"It's reparable," Hal reported. "Enough to get us away and home, at any rate, provided we don't get hit again on the way. It will mean working outside for a while, though."

"I wouldn't care to do that," said Dwight in a low voice. He was staring at the screen.

Hal followed his eyes. The ship had come to rest on the floor of the forest, on the edge of a clearing. Through the undergrowth on the other side, a great horned beast was charging. The top of its armoured head must have been all of ten feet off the ground.

A shudder transmitted itself through the structure of the ship as the beast slammed into it at a full gallop. The animal screamed in frustration, backed away and charged again.

Hal levered himself into the armaments dome over the roof of the cabin. "I'll soon have him out of the way."

"Well hurry, because here come more of them."

It was true. A whole pack of the monsters was trampling into the clearing, their backs swaying, carrying so much armour they looked like mobile castles. Their snouts held double rows of long glistening teeth.



Did they think the Search Ship was good to eat? Or did they think it was trying to take over their domain?

The gun operated by Hal lashed out at the charging beasts. The nearest one fell on its side with a chunk seared out of its flank.

The ship rocked as the beasts smashed angrily at it in concert. Dwight discovered that at least one of his conjectures was incorrect: the monsters were being joined by smaller animals, fast-moving alligator-like creatures whose tails curved up into wicked double-stings. Vociferously they hurled themselves in dozens at the impassive metal walls of the Search Ship.

Something thudded above Dwight's head.

He manipulated the screen controls. A huge furry blanket had draped itself over the hull. Clouds of thin steam drifted from underneath it as it moved for a better position.

He glanced at the instrument panel. A reaction was taking place in the skin of the ship: acids!

He joined Hal in the weapons dome.

Soon there was a solid wall of corpses around the ship, including several of the acid-exuding creatures. Hal wiped his brow. "Let's give it a break."

While he prepared some coffee, Dwight regarded the remaining beasts doubtfully. They did not seem to have increased their numbers; and they seemed no less ferocious. But they were impeded by the barriers of their dead.

"I don't get it," Hal said wearily. "Missiles—all right, we've been duped! But why should wild animals have such a yen to tear us to pieces? They're not tearing each other."

"No doubt," Dwight answered slowly, "an invading germ thinks the same thing when its being torn to pieces by the leucocytes of the human bloodstream."

Hal nearly dropped his coffee. "You don't think . . ."

Up till now, Dwight hadn't. It had been a chance remark. But now he said: "It all fits. The creature calls itself 'I,' not 'we.' It didn't know what we meant by land. It's never explored space. It uses tremendous quantities of energy, compared with which ours are minute—and it asked us not to upset its solar system as we came in!"

He jumped to his feet in excitement. "It must be! The whole of life on this planet is a single organism, a single entity. It thought we were another planet which had learned to travel between stars!"



His voice quietened. "And instead . . . to its body, we rank as invading germs. It probably doesn't even know we're down here."

"What are we going to do?"

Dwight put down his coffee. "We're going to get in touch with it and tell it lay off the heat! We can still use the radio equipment."

But after half an hour of monitoring the electromagnetic broadcasts which swamped the air of the planet and attempting to contact their transmitters, it became clear that they would get nowhere that way. For one thing, the inter-planetary broadcasts were of an entirely different character to the near-instantaneous one which had been directed into space. They used a different language, and were clearly concerned only with affairs 'inside' the planetary organism. All transmissions from the Search Ship were ignored.

As a last resort, Dwight fulfilled his promise of contacting the alien waiting above the atmosphere. He related what happened and after some hesitation explained his theory.

"I had already suspected that some such unusual situation prevailed on the planet," the alien told him. "I think that your guess is correct."

"Yeah," Dwight said bitterly. "I see now why you were so willing to let us come down first."

The hum of some untranslatable sentiment came through the speaker. "My friend," the alien then said, "I make it a rule of life always to let any being follow its own nature and if it happens to be to my advantage, so much the better. As for you—I have deduced that your interests, or if not yours then those of your government, lie in a military direction. Would you not say that you have found some scope for your warlike natures?"

Dwight found his temper breaking. "All right, wise guy, now let's see you do something useful. Have you been able to get in touch with the 'group entity,' if it exists. We haven't since we landed."

"As you know, the near-instantaneous transmission is of too high an amplitude to be intelligible at this distance, but I have an idea that might work. I am extending a reflector to bounce the signal back in your direction, much reduced in volume. You can also use the reflector to bounce back your side of the conversation, since you cannot beam round the curve of the planet."



"Thank you," Dwight said grudgingly. "We are unable to begin for about an hour; we have to repair our equipment."

"I am ready when you are," the alien replied genially.

An hour later, Hal had replaced the burned-out components. An assortment of animals was still buffeting the ship, but since they did not seem to have the sense to drag away the heaps of corpses they were unable to find room for a charge. Occasionally Dwight had shot away an acid-exuder from the top of the hull.

Immediately Dwight sent the contact signal, an answer shot back from the reflector in space. "*I had expected you before now. Where are you speaking from?*"

"We already are here," Dwight snapped.

"*Well I can't see you,*" the speaker said in a puzzled tone. "*I have been watching very carefully for your arrival, but I have seen nothing.*"

"We are down here on the surface of your planet. We are being attacked by savage beasts. We must add that we think you have been mistaken about us. We are not of a size comparable to a planet, if that is what you had thought. We are of such a size that any one of the creatures of the surface of this globe could destroy us in an instant."

He waited anxiously to see if his words meant anything to whatever was operating the transmitter outside the big city. At first, there was silence. Then, in a tone of astonishment: "*No! It is impossible—*" The voice broke off in a flurry of meaningless noise, and ceased.

A few moments later it was back. "*I had not realised that I was inviting micro-organisms to visit me,*" it said, calmer. "*When you entered the atmosphere, my body's natural defences attacked you as infections. They will not rest until you are destroyed—leave immediately.*"

"We cannot leave; our vehicle is damaged. Please call off the attack so that we may make repairs."

"*But I cannot call off the attack!*" the voice wailed. "*It is automatic. I have no control over my internal body processes!*"

"He's right," Dwight muttered to Hal. "I hadn't thought of this. He can no more control them than we can control ours."

"The animals, yes," Hal objected. "But what about the missiles, the cities?"



*"My body has several levels of organisation and defence, of course. I am not acquainted with the details."*

A hint of agony came with the being's next remark. *"It is a terrible thing—to invite you here and then kill you, even though you are so small."*

Dwight made to answer, then realised that the entity had broken off. Not even the guide signal showed on the oscilloscope.

"He's deserted us," he said in disgust.

"What would you do, if you found yourself speaking to a couple of intelligent 'flu germs?"

Dwight ignored him. He picked up a second microphone. "Did you hear all that?"

"Yes."

"We are in trouble."

"I can see that," the alien said.

"Will you come down and help us?" Dwight asked desperately.

"I would get the same treatment," the alien pointed out. "I'm sorry, but this is the luck of the game and if your government will send you out on such missions it must expect to lose a ship eventually. However, in view of your plight, I will hold my position in space for some days to see what will happen."

"Thanks for nothing! You know as well as we do what's going to happen."

He put down the microphone and switched off. Hal was sitting down, his face sombre.

Dwight licked his lips. "It's only a matter of you staying outside for a few hours. I could cover you from the weapons dome—"

Hal gave a crooked smile and shook his head. "Not a hope."

"Yeah." Dwight sat down and poured more coffee.

A whole day passed. Other species of beast appeared and made attempts to breach the hull. Once, they heard an aircraft flying slowly overhead.

"From the city," Hal whispered. "They've come to check up that they got us."

They held their breath, needlessly. The aircraft passed on. But shortly afterwards a troupe of four-armed ape-like beings appeared and started to clear away the corpses.



"It's weird," Hal said, shaking his head. "What must it be like in the cities? What sort of creatures would there be there?"

"Probably quite intelligent beings," Dwight told him, "or more likely facsimiles of them. The point about this place is that everything's perfectly co-ordinated."

He watched the corpses disappear one by one. "Not long now," he observed sullenly. "We'll make a fight of it."

Hal looked up. "Yes . . . we could last out for—"

The loudspeaker from the atom-switch computer coughed. They spun round eagerly.

*"Friends," a mournful voice said, "I have been thinking deeply about this tragic turn of events. I have come to the conclusion that even though you are microscopic creatures, which previously have been of no significance to me, I cannot allow you to be destroyed by my own body. That is too horrible. To invite you here, and then murder you, is something with which I would not be able to live afterwards.*

*"I am speaking in the hope that you have not already succumbed to the anti-bodies which must be ranged against you. I have decided to rescue you. The only way I have to influence what my body-cells do, is to commit suicide. Then, when I am gone, the units making up my body will be disorganised; for the period in which they continue to exist they will follow no general plan and will lose interest in you. You will then be able to make your escape.*

*"This is the last communication you will receive from me."*

The loudspeaker went dead.

"We can't allow him to do it," Hal said quickly.

Dwight quavered, then nodded. Urgently, he despatched the contact signal. There was no reply. He tried again.

He turned to Hal. "Even if it means our lives?"

"Yes." Hal was white.

He picked up the second microphone. "Hello, are you hearing me?"

"Yes," said the alien in orbit.

"The entity down here—"

"I was listening."

"Try to get on to it—tell it to stop. Tell it—"

"Please be calm," the alien said in an unhurried voice. "I have just observed large-scale nuclear explosions at the sites of all the cities and industrial areas."

"Well, that's that," Dwight said, crest-fallen.



Several hours passed before the forest felt the effect of the over-being's suicide. Then the animals wandered away to their own affairs. Hal went outside with power-tools, while his partner manned the armaments dome just in case.

The alien was still waiting when they climbed beyond the atmosphere. "Congratulations on your escape," it said sardonically. "Luckily, the deceased has no one to grieve over it."

"Perhaps so," said Dwight, trying to sound conversational. "By the way, whereabouts are *your* home worlds?"

"How you would like to know!" the alien said, as its ship slid rapidly and untraceably off into interstellar space.

p. f. woods

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*it was ironic that the inventive genius of mankind should come at last to the insoluble problem of disposing of its own waste—and living successfully off the poor diet for ever*

# the disposal unit man

by david alexander

---

A stupid man, the Disposal Unit Man. But then, he would have to be. How many men of sensibility and imagination would be content, perfectly content as he was, to sit for hours on the branch of a tree, cradling a cold rifle in their hands with no anticipatory horror of the job they had been ordered to do?

Not many men would be content to sit there in the cold for hours without letting their bored minds run on and on, sifting over the reasons for their being there. An ordinary man might brood over the job in hand, might even begin after a time to question the morality of it—and then when the moment came to press the trigger, might hesitate.

But no such thoughts disturbed the Disposal Unit Man. He sat there above the cold wet streets hardly moving a muscle, the faint aurora light glinting wetly on the barrel of the rifle. Sat there as quietly as a leopard waits in the bough of a jungle tree for the unsuspecting hunter to pass below him before it drops, all teeth and talons and furious death, upon him.



Charles Somers was talking so much and concentrating on driving so little that he almost ran full-tilt into disaster as he turned the corner. Straddling three-quarters of the road was the huge dripping mass of a Disposal Unit. It was reflex, not reason, which jerked the wheel of the little bubble car violently to the left and sent it skidding and rocking past the huge obstruction. His oath of annoyance and fright was reflex too as was the sharp intake of breath by his two companions. He had only himself to blame for the near-accident—it was unthinkable improbable that the Municipal Centre would send out its machines to roam the streets when there was traffic about.

Charles, and his two companions, knew perfectly well that they had no right to be where they were at that precise moment. The instructions issued from the Municipal Centre earlier that day were quite clear : Everyone to be off the streets in Sector Nine by 2000 hours.

There was, no doubt, a good reason for it.

But to disobey the orders of a machine—and for all its venerable age and complexity that was all that the Municipal Centre computer was, surely—was hardly the same as flouting a direct order from the government. To disobey was a peccadillo, not a crime, they had reasoned. The likelihood of official reprisals was remote. No heinous crime to drive Myra and Frank Barton home to Sector Nine a few minutes after curfew, they had thought.

Myra's involuntary shriek was still echoing in their ears as they turned their heads to look at the juggernaut they had missed by inches, as they shot up the narrow street.

"God, that was close," Somers said.

Myra gulped. No words came.

Frank said : "You know, I've never seen one of them at work before."

It was an awesome sight even for those who had grown used to such machines. There was a special air of mystery and purpose attached to a Disposal Unit.

It bore no resemblance at all to the man-guided, noisy, street-sweeping machines of the twentieth century which it had superceded. It had evolved as far from that as the ant from the . . . anthropod. Vast, gleaming, quiet, crammed with machinery that Charles Somers could only guess about, it moved purposefully down the street.



"Take a good look at it then," said Somers. "If it wasn't for them we'd have all starved by now."

In its way, the machine was one of mankind's last and greatest ironies. Ironic that the inventive genius of the human race should come at last to this problem and this problem only . . . how to empty its refuse bins more efficiently. How to live for ever on the poor diet of its own muck-heap.

Strange that an innocent object like a 20th century road-sweeping machine could have evolved into something so . . . menacing as this. Designed as the ultimate in the elimination of waste (the waste of war, of foolish planning, the waste of greedy men that had so soon reduced mankind to his tiny foothold on the starved-out polar regions of a used-up world) the vast machine, directed by the impulses sent out by the Municipal Centre miles away, moved slowly down the street, applying a dozen nozzles at a time to a dozen waste slots, stopping occasionally to concentrate its efforts on a particularly large dump of rubbish. Charles watched the machine in his rear-view mirror as it champed and swallowed its colossal meal of refuse like a gigantic parasite, digesting the foul mass back into its component elements, to be used again, and over again, losing a little of its substance into the air, into the bitter cold, in every repetition of the process. Then it was lost to sight around a corner.

The little bubble car squeaked to a halt outside the long low block of apartments which had been the Barton's home for the last ten years. It was their last night in Sector Nine before they were due to move up into Sector Eight, Charles' sector, with its tiny luxuries and privileges and they were glad of it. The fuller meals, the extra heat, would be welcome.

You could tell it was late. The entire block was in complete darkness. The three young people sat in the car for a moment, talking desultorily, a flat feeling of anti-climax already overlaying the gaiety of their moving-up party. Myra moved suddenly, impatiently.

"It's our last night here," she said to Charles. "Come up and have a cup of coffee with us before you go."

They went up the narrow stairs in single file, Frank Barton leading. It was a slender metal staircase which mounted the side of the building like a fire-escape, leading to the long metal-railinged balconies which ran along the front of the apartment



block, giving on to the doors of each tiny flat. The metal stairs were slippery with sleet.

As he fitted his key into the door of his flat, Frank Barton said, "It's as quiet as the grave," with a little involuntary shiver. It really was extraordinarily cold.

But that remark and the cold, was not enough to explain the sudden wave of panic which went through Charles Somers. He felt panic like a physical pain squeeze his heart : there was a giddy feeling in his brain. And then it was gone. But there was still a persistent worry at the back of his mind, something that had nagged for expression all evening, all that day. Something he had heard ? Something he had seen that day as he laboured at his meaningless task in the Municipal Centre . . . if only he could remember.

It came to him again, urgently, screaming just below the level of consciousness, when Barton clicked on the light switch of his little apartment—and nothing happened.

He was suddenly intensely aware of danger—and of cold. The automatic heating units of the house must be off too ; the units that were controlled not by the householder, but by the vast electronic brain, the latter-day municipal council in the heart of the city, miles away.

They stood, silently in the little vestibule of the flat for a moment. The cold was getting to all of them, the killer-cold which was mankind's second greatest enemy.

"Funny, that," Barton said. "Must be a power failure." His voice was cracked a little at the edges with the beginnings of a vaguely-felt alarm. "The heater's off too," he said, as he clattered about in the darkness. "Stay here a minute. I'll raise the Critchleys' next door. Find out what's gone wrong."

Fear, Charles thought, is what keeps men erect before the firing squad, what makes them able to face death without flinching. Not courage. It is fear which freezes the senses, which takes away the power to act. He had never been afraid before, but he knew with certainty that it was naked fear now which deprived him of the ability to move or shout a warning, when he knew, with a sharp premonition of awful danger, precisely what was about to happen. Charles shut his eyes and, as a wave of weakness swept through him, fell back in the darkness against the vestibule wall. Barton, unaware, a little hesitant and nervous, stepped out of the flat on to the balcony, into the pale cold light of the street lamp which floated high overhead.



Perched coldly in the tree, the Disposal Unit Man moved for the first time in many hours. He knew that the moment had come. Blindly obedient, entirely unmoved by the thought of the likeness of the creatures below to himself—obeying instructions which he could understand (he could understand very little else)—he moved. He raised the rifle to his shoulder, sighted the figure below carefully in the lens and squeezed the trigger. He did not lower the rifle afterwards though. He kept it up to his cheek, finger still curled around the trigger as the figure on the balcony below crumpled and fell on its side.

Charles heard the sickening thump of the bullet battering its way through Barton's body. As the muscles of his stomach and loins clenched in a concordant reflex he knew precisely what had happened. The cruel irony of it on this night of all nights for the Bartons! In that moment he remembered the overheard remark of earlier that day, knew why the light had failed and the flat was cold. Knew in that instant and with the first clutchings at his bowels of a terrible fear, why the apartment block—and the whole of sector nine—was as quiet as a grave.

But as his fear-numbered senses unfroze, as he croaked out a desperate warning and clutched at her arm, Mrya Barton, quicker-thinking than he, nearer the door, was out on the balcony in answer to her husband's stifled moan.

The Disposal Unit Man pressed the trigger. Saw the second figure crumple and fall over the first. Then he half-lowered the rifle; he was puzzled. A stupid man, the Disposal Unit Man. One supposes that he knew in a vague kind of way what he was doing. Perhaps he knew, also in a vague kind of way, that in all the other ten thousand apartments in sector nine there were people, more than a little like himself, lying in little pathetic huddles on the floors of their rooms, around their supper tables, in front of the video, some even in bed, asleep for ever. Disposed of much more effectively than he could ever hope to do it, by a machine which was unmoved by cold, or boredom or stupidity.

For that night, in ten thousand homes, in response to a pre-ordained signal, a strange and terrifying thing had happened which, within the memory of the 40,000 or so souls in sector nine, had never happened before. Ten thousand discreetly-placed Disposal Slots, a piece of household equipment as



familiar as a table or a bed, part of everyone's childhood, familiar as the slogan engraved above it—"waste not, want not"—had quietly changed their familiar role.

Quietly, with no-one in the world to know, the refuse slot had spawned a killer. And on that night, in all those thousands of homes, the Disposal Slots in which were deposited all the waste, the tins and bottles, the packages and peel of everyday life had turned from receiver to producer within a moment and with only a momentary break in the scarcely-heard hum as familiar as the ticking of a household clock, the odourless gas of euthanasia had filtered out: desirable, absolutely essential, electronically-calculated death. It was no appalling blunder. Ten thousand less homes to heat, light to provide, 40,000 less mouths to feed, that the one and a half million lives left might continue to survive at a little over subsistence level. In a world where there was never quite enough to eat, the shutting down of sector nine would not give the rest of mankind any luxuries. Those pathetic bodies, those few tons of phosphates, sodium chloride, calcium and iron would give mankind a lease on survival for a few more months.

No-one had taken on to his conscience the decision of mass murder. No-one who was alive now, that is. The great municipal computer which had automatically closed a few circuits that night had been set its allotted and unalterable task hundreds of years before. No-one had pressed a button or switched a lever—save those old scientists of hundreds of years ago—which decided that tonight, at 2000 hours, when all obedient citizens in sector nine were in their homes, there would be a faint hiss of escaping gas from ten thousand faintly-humming Disposal Unit slots and that thrice and more ten thousand human souls, some of them with slightly-puzzled expressions on their faces, would drift into slumber and never wake up.

But the Disposal Unit Man was puzzled.

He had his instructions. He was the human agent—perhaps sub-human—but at any rate with the semblance of what remained of a free will and imagination, ordered to do what the machine could not do: to discover the eccentric, the incalculable, to search out anything the machine had overlooked. The unaccountable absence of the Bartons, for example. The old scientists had realised, of course, that it was just possible that on a night when the power units of all the cars in sector nine



had been shut off such a group as the Bartons, due to move up in the social register, just might have a friend and fellow-worker in sector eight, or seven, who would defy legality and take them in his car to his own safe home for supper.

But the Disposal Unit Man was almost certain that he was to dispose of two people, not three. And there was one more inside.

Charles had almost saved Myra's life. As she went out of the door to her husband he had grabbed her arm for a second and she had rounded on him, her face a faintly-gleaming mask of fear in the pale light thrown by the street lamp.

"It's a switch-off," he whispered urgently and her whole body went rigid against him for a moment—and then she was outside with her husband, and sudden death.

He stood for a moment after the dreadful sound of the bullet smashing into her body had gone, in terror and undecided. Then he stepped closer to the door, averting his eyes from the huddled figure just outside and called out :

"Stop ! For God's sake !"

Then he shouted in a strange high-pitched voice which was ragged at the edges : "I'm a visitor here. I am status eight. Identity number EGB 89340. My name is Charles Somers. I live in sector eight, sector eight. Don't shoot. You are making a mistake !"

The Disposal Unit Man sat in the tree for a long time after that. Clutching the rifle. His brow wrinkled in a hopeless effort to understand. He had obeyed instructions. But there was still someone there. One person. No, he did not understand.

Twice more the creature below shouted up at him, words he did not understand. Then he grunted and started to come down the tree . . .

Standing in the vestibule of the little flat Charles heard the grunt—a peculiarly nightmare sound in that silent cold air. Then he heard the sounds of descent, the crackling of branches, the thud as feet hit the ground heavy outside. Footsteps climbing the iron staircase. Charles felt himself burning, vibrant with an insane and terrible anger.

The footsteps stopped outside the apartment door. The first thing to come into view was the barrel of the rifle, gleaming wetly in the light from the street lamp. As he came through the



doorway Charles was ready for him. The creature must have seen him for a second out of the corner of his pale yellowish eyes as the lid of the Disposal Unit slot sliced into the base of his skull, a terrific crushing blow driven by the energy of loathing and terror. And even in the split second in which he died the man obeyed his instructions as best he could. His finger pulled the trigger for the third time and with a loud thump the bullet went through the wall.

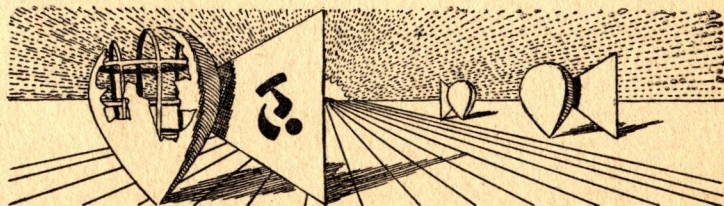
A very stupid man, the Disposal Unit Man.

It was nearly dawn when Charles set out down the empty wet streets, stumbling, numb, with his identity card clutched in half-frozen fingers in case he should meet anyone. He was far too frightened to use his car, fearing other booby traps set up for other eventualities, to ensure that sector nine was truly swept clean of life. He slunk along rapidly hiding under the walls. As he crossed the broad avenue which ran through the centre of sector nine direct to sector eight he heard the rumbling of a machine behind him. He turned his head. He began to run. He was running faster than he had ever run in his life when he tripped and crashed headlong in the road. He had about ten seconds in which to get up and he really tried.

The Disposal Unit seemed to pause for a moment before it opened one of its half-a-hundred steel-toothed mouths and engulfed the struggling, screaming creature which was—incredibly—littering the streets. It had no ability at all to appreciate the theatrical quality of the headlong figure which twitched on the wet street with one arm flung in front of it in a strange melodramatic gesture, clutching as a drowning man might clutch at a piece of flotsam, the square pink form of an identity card.

That went down into the Disposal Unit too, along with the rest of the stuff.

david alexander





*the shtarman* suffered from dreams—but they were not of an ordinary nature, in fact, they became a recurrent theme which threatened to destroy him.

# the shtarman

by john ashcroft

---

Connelly is gone from here, forever footloose, moving to outpace memories, working this land from farm to farm with his haunted mind, while behind him stays a bleakness that only sharing softens.

He came crying in the fallow hours, jolting me from sleep into an abnormal clarity of perception where sights and sounds seemed magnified. I remember that Margaret's regular breathing still had the huskiness of a recent cold. Her wrist-watch, hooped about one bedpost, shone its green fingers and chattered urgently. Vague light hung in the room. Floral patterns on the curtains stood dark against the east, and from beyond them had come the calling of a voice.

Limbs and lungs rigid, I listened ; only silence, now—not even the earliest birdsongs.

Then came another cry, bodily shocking me. My heart bumped. I slid from bed, fumbled my feet into slippers, moved to the window and parted the curtains.

Below, apple trees stood pallidly immobile ; over the lane, fields stretched into uncertainty where sky and flatness merged in red mist. High in paleness the stars were dying, while one cloud trailed its smoky banner across an ivory paring of moon. Stray channels of rainwater between furrows in the fields had



frozen, their ice reflecting orange distance, hot streaks along dreary soil.

Behind me, gently, the bed creaked. Margaret said, "I heard something, too," and came to stare over my shoulder into the morning.

Amid the stillness a man stumbled. He fell, scrambled dazedly upright, then lurched across the furrows. His hands were clasped to his head, apparently covering his ears, and once he glanced about and upward as though dreading a crash or a blinding light. Again he cried, an acrid plaint, scraping the silence; then he fell stiffly and lay motionless.

I watched a moment and turned to meet Margaret's wearily sardonic smile. "Some paddy been at the potheen," she said. "And now they're after him. The big green ones. Shall we leave him to 'em?"

I grinned tiredly. "Not in our field. Neighbours might find his bones and talk. Damn him. Get some tea on, will you?"

Already she was dressing.

The air was like cold water. I crossed the yard in a gratngi sparkle of bootstuds on cobbles and almost pleasurably pounded the Shant door. The upper window opened, protesting jerkily; down peered Jim Flaherty, clad in an old shirt. With brief explanation I left him, ran up the entry, over the lane and plunged through a gap in the hedge, its pricklers snagging my jacket. Somewhere a dog began barking insistently. Crackling frost gnawed my earlobes. Soil banged sullenly beneath my boots. Both eyes dripped tears that thrilled my cheeks and danced brightly off my nose. That distant dog was nagging like a toothache.

*If he's drunk I'll sober him in the bloody horsetrough . . .*

He lay face down in a furrow. I rolled him over. He wore an old brown suit, maroon cardigan with fancy fake-pearl buttons, a light shirt and red tie. He was in his twenties, with clean-planed features, strong nose and arched nostrils; his hair was dark and wavy; his eyebrows were oddly insolent. Straw clung to his cardigan. His face was scratched.

I knelt on iron soil and heaved him into a sitting position. Our breathing formed a cold cloud. I could smell no drink.

Feet clanged towards us. Jim stumbled awkwardly on the furrows, gasping harshly as frost fired his lungs. "Is yer man dead?"

"More like drunk. Take his legs, Jim; he's a hefty sod."



Jim bent and shook him. A pipe fell from the man's breast pocket to rattle on rocklike earth. Suddenly he was looking up at us with perplexed eyes. Absently he groped for the pipe and pocketed it, then he sat holding his head and shivering.

"Come on," urged Jim. "What's up wi' yer?"

The man struggled to his feet and shoved us from him.

"Me cap," he demanded peevishly, swaying. "And me coat and case. Thieves have taken them."

He clasped his palms over his eyes and shuddered as we reached to hold him. "I'm all right now. Will you get yer hands off me? The burning is away now."

Jim stood back and angrily growled, "What the hell're you on about?"

The man lifted his frozen face to the last stars and the sliver of moon. "The burning is away," he said in weak relief; then he heeled over and dropped. The back of his head broke ice: black water splashed up beside his cheeks and nearby channels tinkled.

I stared at Jim.

He shrugged and turned to yell, "Aw, shut yer gob!" in the direction of the yammering dog. Breathing steamily and cursing, we lifted the man and stumbled with him to the house.

Margaret had opened the curtain and set the fire roaring. Brandy brought the man coughing to awareness in an armchair amid curious watchers. He surveyed the window's view, where mist rose like red veils leaving daylight, then looked up at Big Joe and Mike Bolden who had come over from the Shant.

"Michael," he said bewilderedly.

Bolden told me, "This is Sean Connelly, from Scarisbrick way," as though announcing a casual visitor.

The recognition relieved rather than surprised me; round here, Irish labourers form a seasonal, rootless brotherhood.

"Well," said Margaret, "at least he isn't loose from Walton Gaol."

"No," declared Connelly indignantly, "and I was not drunk, either."

Bolden demanded, "Then what were you doing, Sean?"

"I set off for Liverpool."

"Walking? In the midnight like a burglar?"

Connelly hunched his shoulders sulkily. "I packed me case and missed the bus, so I set off walking to be on the first boat home." Ruefully he shuffled brown shoes crusted white with



sweat. "And me feet swole like footballs, so I rested in yer barn."

Rested? He looked more worn than his suit.

I asked: "But how did you get in the field and go running round like a lunatic?"

Sheepishly he admitted, "Honest to God, I must have slep'-walked. Me mates never could abide me sleeping bad, so I left them."

Margaret asked, "But didn't you see a doctor?"

Connelly reddened and scowled down at the carpet. "I'll go to no sickhouse to be prodded and poked. A man's health is his own business."

Jim caught my arm. Earnestly he said, "I've heard of Sean, that he's a good worker, and no trouble he causes, only he's not himself just now—and we're two men short—"

Bolden had left silently. Big Joe was nodding with quiet solemnity.

"You know, we could take him on," declared Margaret impulsively, looking Connelly up and down. To him, she added: "But if you sleep badly, you'll get summat done about it."

"Yes . . . What do you think?" I asked him.

While he considered, taken aback, Mike Bolden strolled in carrying a brown corduroy cap, an overcoat and a bulging suitcase held together by leather straps. "These was in the barn," he said, pointing in succinct explanation at wisps of straw on Connelly's jacket and cardigan.

Sudden doubts flapped like pheasants. For one second I wondered if the Paddies had arranged all this deliberately—Heaven knows, in their time here they've done weirder and more wonderful things—but the unfounded suspicion died: a more favourable introduction would have been organised and Connelly seemed sincere.

"Right," said Jim, with a paternal hand on Connelly's left shoulder and regarding me anxiously. "We'll settle him in and he can labour with us."

"Half a bloody minute, Jim—let him decide. And I'll contact his boss. Scarisbrick, you said? Who'd you work for?"

"I'm not going back there!"

"Hell, you can't do a moonlight flit. And I want a reference."

"I worked well; it was the other men who fell out with me."



"But he'll be fine with us," assured Jim, and Big Joe nodded again. Bolden was looking delighted.

Connelly grinned wide, faultless teeth at us all and brushed waves of hair back with slim fingers. Years had melted from his face. Still unsteadily, he stood up and shook hands. "Sure, if you'll have me, I'll stay and be glad to."

And so we hired him.

When the moon became an evening crescent, I walked out with my telescope under one arm. In cold darkness the yard and buildings echoed my footfalls, hard clapping on cobbles mingling with music from the Shant. I passed the cavern of the open-fronted cartshed and swished through nettles and long grass to the barn; then someone moved, making me start.

"Who's that?"

A burly figure shifted from leaning against the stack. Straw whispered scratchily on cloth. "Me—Jim."

"Garrhhh—you'd frighten spuds out their jackets. I might have met the boggart itself. What's up, anyway?"

"Oh, clearing me head awhile from the party. This is Michael's birthday. And what's that you have there—a gun?"

"Eh? God, no. My telescope."

Jim chuckled drily, tolerantly. "Aw, stargazin' again. Thought yer might be after scaring out the owls."

I set up the instrument on its tripod while above us the black carapace of the barn swayed in the wind, stirring and creaking like a great beetle on spindly legs. Somewhere a mouse tumbled down the corn, squeaked and thumped softly and scampered along the base of the stack. The Shant door opened and closed, releasing a brief burst of music that filled the night—hoarse voices singing over the rich reedy pumping of Bolden's accordion.

Used to the dark now, I recognised Bolden's stout figure ambling unsteadily towards the brick outhouse behind the Shant.

"Who's playing the squeezebox, then, Jim?"

"Surely not him; he's too drunk." Jim laughed gently.

"It's yer new feller—Sean."

"Is it, be damn. Sounds good."

"Aye, he knows a hundred old songs. Be after him with yer microphone."

"I might, too. How's he settling?"

"He'll be fine if nobody bothers him. We all have our ways,



and it's not for anyone to criticise them."

"Well, what's *his* way?"

"Och, he dreams a bit and cries. But we never wake him. We'll be used to it, you see. And if hisself should awake, he lies listening and gives no trouble."

"But what's he listen to?"

Jim shrugged, embarrassed. "Stars, he said once, but said namore."

"Sounds like his girlfriend sacked him."

With gruff candour Jim asked, "And is it that much queerer than watchin' 'em through a telescope?"

"Lots of folk watch them, Jim; but I'm beggared if I heard of anybody listening to 'em. He'll be telling fortunes next."

Jim laughed and parodied Bolden's stawy brogue. "Shure an' all, we do be callin' him The Shtarman."

While we stood chuckling, Bolden emerged from the outhouse and walked more steadily to the Shant.

"I'll join the party," said Jim almost curtly, as though regretting having said so much; and he strode off to catch Mike, leaving me with the shadows of the lunar craters.

Next night the Shant rang with commotion. Jim explained the hullabulloo, reluctantly, the following morning. Sean had stumbled sobbing and shouting from his bunk and only by a miracle missed diving headlong down the open stairs. "Thanks be to Jesus we have the electric: Michael got the light on while me and Big Joe sprung up and put the grips on him till he calmed down. He was running about up there like a blind man in the blitz."

I recalled how I first saw Connelly stumbling over furrows.

"But he swears he won't do it again," added Jim. His eyes showed profound doubt. "Don't you worry yersel' about it."

"Look, Jim—keep an eye on him and tell me how he goes on, will you?"

"Aw, pesh now, I'll never spy on me mates, John!"

"Spy be damned! He might be ill—nerves or something. You're all alike. Too stubborn to see a doctor. Sooner chance dropping dead halfway home from the *Dancers* on pay night."

"No fear o' that with Sean," Jim told me solemnly. "He never drinks." Then he laughed in delight at my exasperated reaction and said, "All right, now—I'll organise everything for you, just wait your hurry," and he smiled like some unshaven, crafty saint.

"I hear you want to record me singing, on a machine,"



remarked Sean, soon afterwards. "Come over tonight while the men are away to the beer."

"The house would be easier for setting up the gear, Sean."

He shook his head. "There's some songs I'd not sing if yer wife might be listening."

I assured him that Margaret wouldn't flinch at the bawdiest honest ballad—in fact, she'd lead the refrain—and that she would demand to hear the tapes.

"The Shant it is," he insisted. "And I might want a talk, in private, you see."

Behind him, Jim winked innocently.

"Put yer trunklements on here," suggested Sean, sweeping plates and cutlery from the table into a rickety cupboard nailed under the open stairs.

The table swayed under the recorder's weight ; we wedged it against one wall and rammed a folded newspaper under one leg where flagstones had subsided. I stood on a quivery chair to plug an adaptor into the lamp-bulb socket.

Sean rinsed his arms and face rapidly, using a pan of cold water from the tap outside, then came in and tipped half a bucket of coal on the fire. Smoke filled the Shant. He donned a fresh shirt and pullover while I checked the acoustics—hard and bright, among flat and whitewashed walls.

After recording for two hours we listened to the playback. Sean brewed tea, fried heavy layers of bacon in a sooty pan on the fire and sawed a loaf into fat slices. "A few bacon butties fill a man," he explained earnestly, biting into a sandwich an inch and a half thick.

Supper over, he sat watching me as I relaxed in a rocking chair, clasping a pint mug of tea between my palms—for its handle was missing.

"Now," he said. "Before they're all back, full of beer and arguments, let's talk. Jim says you watch the sky and the sun and the moon and you know all about it up there." He gestured vaguely beyond the smoke-blackened planks and beams of the ceiling.

"I'm no expert, Sean ; I'm just an amateur."

He shrugged and said, "Whatever the hell you are, you know more about it than us lot put together, even if you know little at all. But can you tell me this : why do I dream the same thing, three or four nights a week—and in this weather, the coldest ever we've had since I started coming each year to England ?"



"Hang on, Sean. *What* do you dream, first."

He hesitated and then, "The sun," he said in anger. "I dream the sun is burning me to cinders."

As I shifted my palms around the hot cup he nodded slowly. "Like that tea is burning you now. Put it on the floor awhile. But it's worse than dreaming. I feel the heat. And sometimes I wake and it's still there—burning brighter every night."

I saw him again, swaying under pallid stars and assuring me, "The burning is away now . . ." Yet despite a grotesque tremor I couldn't suppress a smile that must have seemed a daft blend of eager sympathy and tolerant disbelief.

"You think I'm mental, don't you?"

"I don't know what—here, look: were you ever burned, or frightened by a fire, once—and have nightmares about it?"

"Fire be beggared! I see the sun—up in the sky. But the sky is wrong."

"How do you mean?"

Sean pointed with his pipe at thick coatings of soot in the chimney base. "Black as that, John, the sky. Blacker than Satan. While the sun is blazing fit to shrivel me eyes from their sockets. And you know what?" He laughed, almost in bitter self-deprecation. "I see stars, too—stars, mind you, while the sun is shining in the dark. Well, now, am I ready to be locked away?"

I knew only that he was not lying. His anger, earlier reticence and his lack of astronomical knowledge, made it impossible to dismiss his visions as a hoax or the product of either illness or alcohol.

"Listen, Sean—can I record all this, too? I'd like to get all the details. Hearing it over, we might spot something we'd normally miss. And a friend of mine might have some ideas—if you wouldn't mind his hearing it all."

His secrecy crumbled sandlike before waves of genuine interest. He lost all reluctance to discuss his dreams.

They had begun five weeks previously; first, vagueness with a warmth that became sullen heat; then certainty that the sun was shining; and growing fear as its glare was fanned to yellow-white ferocity. Without ever having seen an eclipse, or a picture of one, he described the solar corona. And now his visions varied, always elusive, often fear-filled, the constant core remaining this imperceptibly enlarging sun.



I stared past him through the small Shant window. Over the shippon hung a quarter moon, silvering the ventilation louvre.

"But the worst part is when I wake sweating and the fire and the fright are still with me in the dark." Sean wiped bacon fat from his lips with the back of a hand; short bristles rasped on his knuckles. He poked the coals with a stick. As the wood ignited, crackling, his hand shook.

"Sean—have you ever dreamed anything that came true?"

He grimaced. "Once or twice. Bits o' things. But I kept quiet. Folk laugh at such."

We began meeting nightly and the other Irishmen took matters seriously, giving Sean confidence. His dreams left him less upset: he would write what he had seen, or tell whoever was awake, and, though this might be done in a sleep-blurred state, it preserved some memory of his visions which might otherwise have been irretrievably lost.

Peter Digby suggested that a psychiatrist was needed, rather than an electronics specialist.

"But surely," I insisted, "these dreams make too much sense to be caused by illness."

"Oh, they could derive from one of those spaceflight films—one which for some reason impressed him, subconsciously."

"I checked. He's seen none of them. He knows less about astronomy than you know about potato blight."

Peter smiled. "So your tame psychic Celt predicts an imminent nova."

"He's Gaelic, not Celtic," I pointed out.

"Ha! That makes it a Gael warning."

"God, Pete. Be serious. I've a theory on this. Listen. America and Russia, launching satellites, either manned or automatic. Hampered by one snag—communications that can't be jammed or monitored. Right? So someone has achieved a genuine breakthrough. Remember those Russian and British discussions regarding telepathy experiments? Whether that was a leak or what, I daren't guess—but I do know this: someone has developed it into a practical method. You can't jam and monitor telepathy! Or so they think . . ."

A punch would have sobered him less drastically. He banged his glass down on to the coffee table and stared at me, almost aghast. "Now you've done it, John."

"It might sound implausible, I know, but—"

"Implausible be damned. What was that article—in—oh,



some technical publication—describing research at a radio company's labs. Developed from electro-encephalography. Amplifying brain-waves, establishing electronic connections and pumping them back into another mind. Sideline on research into mental illness, far as I recall. But they did get brief communication on the brink of telepathy, uncontrolled, haphazard. The writer predicted refinements enabling mind-to-mind contact to be achieved. He even speculated on the incorporation of radio in the chain of communication. For long-range contact. Brain-to-amplifier-to-transmitter-to-receiver-to-brain. And for personal control of distant equipment. Hey—and he mentioned flippantly that, if Rhine's work is accepted, a natural receiver or transmitter might exist . . .” Peter looked into the fire and added a couple of fervent obscenities.

I swallowed and thought and said, “I'd been half hoping you'd skittle the whole idea. I didn't expect confirmation. I'm not sure, now, if I wanted it! But it looks as if Sean is your 'natural receiver.' He's in tune, somehow, with a man or a gadget, transmitting from up there.”

“A gadget,” decided Peter. “On primitive trials. He merely receives jumbled pictures. A full-scale test may come later.”

“No . . . He's getting attuned. He learns—or feels—more each time. Soon he might begin receiving technical information which he'll not understand—even if it's in English, which I doubt.”

“Then we'll be in it up to our necks, John. We might have to report it, eventually, and you can imagine the reception we'd get. 'One of my farm-hands listens to the sputniks.' He'll be locked away and us with him, by men in white coats. Or if we convince anyone, we'll be locked away by men in military uniform. Take your choice, such as it is.”

Worriedly we refilled our glasses.

“They broadcast during our night,” I mentioned. “But at no specific time. Anything between midnight and four in the morning. And sometimes slightly earlier or later.”

“The broadcasts may be continual. Perhaps Connelly receives them only when his mind is suitably relaxed; as he sleeps, for instance.”

“Wrong, Pete. He can receive at night, *awake*. But not in daytime—not even when he slept all Sunday, after being up all



Saturday night.”

“That time he wasn’t relaxed ; he was exhausted.”

“Could be,” I admitted, “and some nights bring nothing. I’ve covered reams with hieroglyphs, trying to trace a pattern.”

Peter laughed harshly and said, “I came tonight for booze and gossip, not to get lumbered with a potential security breach. Can I borrow those tapes ?”

“If you like, I’ll dub them now, on to the portable ; I’ve a few spare small spools somewhere. Then we can study the information independently. And next week you might invite Stan down here if you see him. He’d hate to be left out of this.”

He left hours later below a blaze of stars, his scooter purring and probing the lane with a beam of light.

Across the yard, in the upper window of the Shant, a flash-lamp glimmered. The window opened and someone leaned out. I recognised Big Joe.

“Owt up, Joe ?” I called softly.

“No—Sean’s sleeping like a child.”

I felt vaguely disappointed.

Pay, taxes, quantities and acreages strain what mathematical ability I possess. Wednesday’s mail brought a sheaf of figures and diagrams that left me feeling frustrated and inferior. Most of Peter Digby’s explanation I took on trust : its gist was clear enough.

The frequency and strength of Sean’s dreams showed as the product of two cycles—one of twenty-four hours, evidently the Earth’s rotation and another of sixty-nine hours. With certain, seemingly random exceptions, the dreams conformed to Peter’s schedules—including those of the three nights since he had first drafted his diagrams.

“Now we’re moving,” I said.

Sean stared baffled at the graphs and figures.

“See . . .” I said, and sketched a large gear wheel engaged with a smaller one and blackened one tooth on each. “You’re like the black cog on this small wheel ; now, suppose your dreams come from the black cog on the bigger wheel. As the wheels turn, sometimes the black cogs are at opposite sides—then you scarcely dream. Usually they miss more closely and the narrowness of the miss determines the strength of your dreams. Once in a while they meet—and those are your Bad Nights.”

He looked impressed but dissatisfied. “You know when I



dreamed and you can maybe say when I will dream, yes ; but your friend, now, the clever one, can he stop it ?”

Suddenly and selfishly I realised that I at least had no such desire.

Studying the sketches, Sean fingered his lower lip, plucking it out and releasing it, briefly revealing broad and perfect teeth.

“ And can you tell me when the next Bad Night comes ?”

“ Well, according to this, tomorrow night—Thursday.”

Margaret thought me mad to stay up. At ten the other Irishmen retired. Sean heaped the fire ; we sat facing each other across the microphone. After some shifting and bumping overhead the Shant was silent.

Now and then I checked the time. Soon I grew anxious.

“ Can you doze, Sean, or wouldn't that matter ?”

He shrugged, making his chair creak loudly. “ On Bad Nights I can't sleep long. Sitting awake will make no difference.”

But we gave up, with the dreams hours overdue. Sean stretched and yawned and climbed the steep wooden stairs.

I stood a moment in the windy yard, under stars paled by a half moon like a desolate lopsided grin above the buildings, and just as bleakly I smiled up at it and swore and carried my equipment indoors.

Margaret looked up wearily when I tiptoed by torchlight into the bedroom. “ I've not slept yet,” she complained, “ for wondering what was happening in the flea-palace. It's the last time this'll happen.”

On Saturday Peter brought Stanton Hutch, already briefed and argued into serious acceptance of the situation.

Basking before the parlour fire, a cigarette in one corner of his mouth, wavy hair tumbling over his forehead, spectacles clinging to the tip of his nose, and with a glass of beer balanced on the chair arm, he delved happily amid Peter's calculations.

“ Yes, most of this makes sense,” he conceded generously. “ Now, that blank night—Thursday. Did anything unusual happen ?”

“ No, we just sat in the Shant until—”

“ No, no ! Not locally—astronomically.”

“ What do you expect ?” demanded Peter. “ Heavenly portents ?”

Stanton waved his cigarette at us. “ Look,” he said patiently.



"Sunsports are rampant. An electric storm hit the Pennines on Thursday. Someone said he saw the Northern Lights from Preston—though he might have been drunk. Was radio reception foul on Thursday, can you remember?"

"Radio was fine," I said. "VHF, that is. I couldn't vouch for other wavebands. Lots of hum on BBC-TV, but that's normal here, unfortunately. Oh, and if it's any consolation, Sean dreamed last night—a little—just as predicted."

Stanton thought almost audibly and asked, "Whereabouts up there does this guff come from, anyway?"

"No idea," confessed Peter.

"Mmmmm. Let's see. Good nights or bad, contact each time must attain a maximum clarity—presumably when this area turns closest to the source."

"Or when the source passes closest over this district," I said.

"Both," insisted Peter. "I spotted those cycles mainly by chance; I'm damned if I can deduce an orbit from them. It could be at some ridiculous angle to the equator, which would make it all the harder to fathom out."

"You know," mused Stanton aloud, "I favour a twenty-four hour orbit. Wishful thinking, perhaps, since it would help us. The dreams occur mainly between midnight and three a.m. Perhaps the erratic factors are due entirely to some irregular broadcasting." He stood up and drained his glass. "John, wipe the dust off your lenses. We're going sputnik-spotting."

"You might be," protested Peter. "I'm not. There are too many assumptions and variables—hell, Stan, you'll never locate it on such flimsy foundations."

I added, "Even if we pinpoint the source, my telescope might not spot it; and if it's visible through mine, then surely to God everybody would have seen it by now?"

"Defeatists," said Stanton caustically. He lit another cigarette and grinned at us. "Coats on: we've spent enough time on theory. Let's do some practical."

Aching-cold wind filled the lane. Low to the east the swelling moon drenched half the sky in cool light.

"Ruddy helpful," complained Stanton, sneering at the moon as though it had deliberately insulted him. "Be like recording pins falling on velvet in a nissen hut during a hailstorm."

He swore softly, squinting at the brighter visible stars.

"Now. Twenty-four hour orbit. Follows the equator. Look south. At a distance of twenty-two thousand miles, it



should show in our skies.”

“Then why’s nobody seen it?” objected Peter, shivering.

Stanton blew a streamer of smoke downwind and continued: “Actually it could be slightly more distant—accounting for minor deviations in dream times. My estimate is *there*,” and he pointed with the angry red tip of his cigarette.

“Guesswork,” snapped Peter. He stamped his feet and swung his arms in broad hints. “It could be anywhere.”

“Remembering maximum contacts, checking their times and allowing for the daily displacement westward of the stars, I’m convinced our source lies that way.” Stanton sniffed, defiantly. “I’ll tolerate corrections in altitude, but not in general direction. Now, that constellation—what’s its name . . .”

I was using the telescope. “No. Hopeless in this moonlight. And I’m no expert on small magnitude stars. I might look straight at it without recognising it. And it might be black and not occluding any bigger stars. Satisfied?”

“It would be moving steadily against the star background, too,” remarked Peter. “Which makes it more obvious to amateur or professional astronomers—yet none of them’s noticed it.”

“Eh?” Stanton regarded him and then began to chuckle.

“Oh, of course. That was too simple for me to think of.” He looked starward again, stroking his chin. His face flared redly as he sucked at the cigarette.

I picked up the telescope and clicked the tripod’s legs together “Come on. Coal’s wasting indoors.” Our footsteps crunched loudly on the cindered entry.

“Hang on,” said Peter. “Let’s have a glance at some craters while we’re out here.”

“If you insist. The shadows aren’t clear when the moon’s this near full, though.”

Stanton turned suddenly. “The moon,” he repeated, and ran with flapping feet back into the lane and halted with his face lifted and his hair and scarf blowing in the wind.

We joined him.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He drew an astonished, admiring breath. “Listen! For an area of sky to be most prominent just after midnight—when it’s ten-forty now—er, that position up there does fit.” He gestured at the same constellation. “John, you said nothing happened on Thursday, astronomically. It did, though! Watch.”



He pointed again with his cigarette. "That's the spot indicated by our maths—or my interpretation of them, right? And with a few degrees' elevation—where does that get us?" The ember rose in the sky as he lifted his arm. "Remember I said I'd accept corrections of altitude? The same spot! It stretches coincidence when independent checks fit."

Lost, I demanded, "What are you proving?"

"It's obvious, John: it explains Thursday's fiasco. Contact was broken—the bloody moon was in the way!"

I felt as though something huge and cold had kicked me. For Stanton was gesturing at the precise position from which the moon had smiled so sourly on the dreamless Bad Night.

"They've done it," cried Stanton exultantly. "They filmed her backside—pardon me—and now someone's making a personal round trip. Last Bad Night he reached the far side, and now—"

"Rubbish," interrupted Peter. "Sorry, Stan, but you're wrong. The moon's been shifting all the time the dreams have been coming—"

"He wouldn't be heading for the moon, though," I said. "He'd be aiming at where it would be when he crossed its orbit; and that conforms, surely?"

"Let me finish, John. The maths won't bend far enough to support this idea. And a lunar circuit won't take several weeks each way!"

"He could have been in closer orbit before the lunar stage was—no. Oh hell, no." Stanton scowled disgustedly at the moon again, its light glittering on his glasses.

"Nor does it explain fluctuations in contact strength," I said.

"Or the erratic dreams," added Peter, in glum satisfaction.

We stood with a splendid vision collapsing about us.

Stanton sniffed and flicked his cigarette into the grass verge; it sputtered and died on a patch of frost.

"Back where we started," sighed Peter, "and colder than ever."

Someone screamed. I heard the Irishmen praying, and when I glanced up the sun turned blue-white and swelled horribly. Fire filled the sky. The Shant fell, smoking. My clothes blazed upon me. Half blinded, sobbing, I ran to the ditch and tumbled headlong in, but the water boiled and steamed away and I sprawled in baked soil and burning



weeds. Overhead the church bell tolled in maniac rhythms. I shrank and curled foetus-like as the earth began to shudder to and fro. And I woke with the new alarm clock clamouring and Margaret trying to drag me from under the blankets.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes sheepishly and took several cool and welcome breaths.

Half annoyed, half amused, she shook her head and let go of my shoulder.

"It's what Connelly's got," she declared. "It must be catching."

"It certainly is. Phew. I don't want many more like that."

"Nor do I! You've been groaning half the night—now what's amusing you?"

I had begun to laugh. I slumped back on to the pillow, and looked up at the ceiling. "Something's just clicked. Kick me, Madge. I've just seen what's been under our noses. I've solved one little problem, anyway."

On Tuesday afternoon, Stanton phoned. His voice, distorted and squawky in the earpiece, was stumbling with agitation.

"John—remember where the maths pointed—except for those off-schedule dreams—"

"Oh, forget those," I said. "I've solved that problem."

Low crackling, and distant harsh breathing. "How? What caused them?"

"Stan, it was another point too obvious to be seen. But this morning it hit me. You know, last night I dreamed about this mess."

He chuckled ruefully. "Yes, and so did I, the other day—"

"And so did Sean! Several times! Those off-schedule dreams were literally dreams, or nightmares; not contacts at all!"

A pause, and an exultant yell that made me wince and hold the receiver away from my ear. "That's it—that clinches it! And the maths were right as far as they went. And Sean was right about the heat, and I was right about the—listen, we under-estimated them. Look up there tonight when there's less moonlight. Hell, I'll have to pack in: the boss is coming up the entry and he disapproves of private calls in office hours—I'll be down Saturday, or I'll ring later then."

The line died. I hung up, wondering wryly what the firm's PBX girl might have thought, had she eavesdropped on our babble.



That evening I glimpsed an obvious, plausible way of explaining the ever-clearer contacts and the sun's increasing brightness: the source of the dreams might be approaching the Earth, returning from further out in-the solar system.

I went outside as a memory nudged me, and looked again at Stanton's chosen constellation, and I began to share his excitement as much of the puzzle clicked together tidily—and yes, he had been right, regarding the intervention of the moon, on the dreamless Bad Night.

For my gaze was distracted instantly from Leo's head, to the unwavering, bitter glint of Mars.

In the Shant on Wednesday evening I explained our theory to Sean.

He shivered with mocking laughter and fixed an amused brown gaze on me. "Away wi' yer rockets, John. It's not one man either; it's thousands of them. Then it's the one again." Perplexed, he scratched his earlobe with a forefinger nail. "I kept quiet on it, but I'm certain now, and I'll tell you. Sometimes it's twice a thousand all crying in fright, then it's one big fear that hauls me from me sleep. And they are all afraid of shrivelling in the sun."

Here grew the vision of someone returning from the outer night in a crippled ship—helpless, lost, fated to miss the Earth and fall toward the sun while sanity crumbled like a salt block in scalding water.

Appalled and pitying, I sat in silence as Sean puffed at his pipe and regarded me through waves of fragrant smoke.

"Yes, the long fall," he said softly, and hesitated before adding: "Call me a liar, but this comes back now—like you remember what was dreamed last night, when all today it never entered your head. I just remembered, this burning, it's worse than ever, and they fear that this time it will surely destroy them."

"Then you—Sean, it's happened before?"

Gravely, he said, "I believe so."

"When?"

He gestured scornfully and grinned. "And how would I know that?"

Somehow we both began to laugh; then a shadow crept over us. Sean held Bolden's squeezebox and began singing *The Bonnie Lass o' Fyvie*, transmuting archaic dialect into vivid poetry; flames talked in the chimney's throat while long-dust



dragoons marched with rattling drums through Fyvie to their deaths, and in the firelight I grieved for whoever came tumbling from dusk, deep into the furnace, to fill Sean's mind with fear and pain.

On the next Bad Night he woke greasy with perspiration, sobbing: "There are two moons in the darkness, and the sun will burn the diamonds off the mountains—" but in the morning the words meant nothing to him.

Stanton and Peter sat on the sofa, facing the fire; Sean and Margaret took the armchairs on either side; I leaned against the corner table where my recording equipment was installed. Centrally on the rug the microphone stood glittering.

"You've heard the latest tapes," I said, "and I've wiped human contacts off the list. This is from somewhere else."

Nobody spoke, so I added: "My guess is a disabled ship—perhaps a survey ship. Whatever they are, they're frightened, helpless, hurt, and too near the sun."

"Yet further from it than we are," observed Peter. "Which is, frankly, worrying."

"Yes. Even this winter here would scorch anything from the Outer Planets."

"Drivel," stated Stanton calmly but with some lack of conviction. "Surely the source is human, for contact to be possible. Nothing human could evolve beyond Mars—and Martian conditions discourage evolution of oxygen-breathers."

"Must they be from this solar system?" I asked maliciously.

"Oh, for God's sake!" He sniffed in contempt. "That reference to the two moons is conclusive. The source is a returning Mars probe, with a delirious—or insane—crew or pilot."

"Stan—why should humanity be alone?"

"The point is, John, that such fantasies form pleasant entertainment, or amusing speculation; but *believing* is another matter. This is the acid test, and maybe I'm a sceptic after all."

"You don't sound too sure, Stan. What about you, Pete?"

Peter looked from Sean to the slender microphone stand. Evasively he said, "What fascinates me is the lack of distinction between the one and the many. Sean, you never know the number?"

Sean nodded. "It changes all the time, you see."

"And what are the diamonds on the mountains?"



Grinning Sean said, "If I knew of mountains covered with diamonds I'd be on me way with a sack and a shovel." He shrugged. "I just remember there were these mountains, all jagged like the flying of a snipe and as lonely as a lapwing crying in the dark."

I stirred, against the table, and said, "This suggests the moons of Saturn. Rock and ice, perhaps. Hang on—I'll bring the Bonestells."

Sean leafed through the scrapbook with interested wonder, but no painting evoked clearer memories. While he turned pages, Peter and I exchanged worried glances. Worse than this testing of our beliefs was awareness of our impotence. If we were right, could we help? Could we convince any authority—and could any authority help?

Stanton shifted uneasily and caught my eye. "Sorry, John; I'll recant."

"Do that," said Peter. "The water might get warmer if more people jump in." He chuckled and added: "Heaven knows, it's pretty cold at the moment."

"The snag is that situations enjoyed as fiction seem quite grotesque when actually encountered. Now I'm visualising a really alien visitor. And look: does thought travel at finite speed? Are they in contact with their home base?"

"No."

We all faced Sean. He was shaking his head. "They're lost and scared and burning."

"They?"

"Or him." He fingered his pipe and smiled ruefully. "It must be soon—I know they'll stand little more now."

"Something," mused Stanton, "fluctuating between mass and individual consciousness. A hive . . . Hell, this sounds like Stapledon's Martians."

Peter nodded soberly.

Margaret looked as though she'd stumbled into a nightmare.

She said, "But can't we tell anyone? The police, or the Astronomer Royal—"

Three hoots of bitter laughter filled the room.

Stanton stubbed out his cigarette. "No, we're on our own. My God . . ." He walked to the window and stood staring up between the curtains into the night. "We jump to conclusions regarding aliens. Colonists, or spies, or potential invaders. Or merciless things squatting on intellectual cliffs



beyond our reach. Do we ever think they might be as helpless as kids thrown into a lifeboat from a wreck?" He turned and added: "Is that it? Children lost out there?"

"But the children of *what*?" demanded Peter.

Stanton grinned, almost savagely. "We're about as useful as a treeful of squirrels, watching a child lost in a forest and crying its eyes out."

I watched the steadily turning spools. This suggestion was shockingly plausible and emphasised our helplessness. We were struggling to interpret descriptions of glimpses warped by fear and pain and distance and lack of understanding, while far off something fell dying through the darkness.

Margaret mentioned supper. Sean fidgeted and said he had better be going.

"Already?" protested Stanton. "This is the only Bad Night we've been here. Can't we see it through?"

"The Shant is rough and dusty," said Sean, "and you with tidy clothes on."

"What's up with here?" asked Margaret indignantly. "If you're right, Sean won't sleep anyway; nobody's working tomorrow; and I'll not be directly overhead. Why not settle in?"

"What about it, Sean?" I asked.

"If it's no trouble to yourself—I'll cause no fuss."

"Good," said Stanton. "I've a feeling the next Bad Night may be too late."

"Then I'll make supper," declared Margaret, "and leave you to it."

Long after midnight Sean closed his eyes, relaxing deeply in his armchair and said, "It's beginning . . ."

I switched off the light: this seemed to clarify his inward vision. Recording began again, the spools turning quietly. A wisp of smoke from Stanton's cigarette reflected misty colours; hot ruby of the pilot bulb, cool green flicker of the volume indicator and warm rippling yellow from the fire. Immobile, Stanton and Peter sat watching Sean.

"Just the sun . . . like a flashlamp in my eyes. The fear is coming, too."

"The sky?" prompted Stanton, moments later.

Sean flexed his fingers on the chair arms, and swallowed, shuffling his shoes in the carpet pile. "Not yet—but they



remember last night, all the stars in the dark and the sun, and two moons."

"Phobos and Deimos?" mused Stanton worriedly. "They're far off, still, then."

"No," said Peter. "It's the Earth and the Moon, ahead of them! They're very close."

I nodded; this seemed probable.

"Full moons, Sean?" asked Peter.

Sean faltered and frowned. "No . . . both new moons—crescents, you see."

Peter gave us all a satisfied smile.

Now sweat shone dully on Sean's forehead; he wiped it off with pale knuckles. "The heat," he complained, shifting and closing his eyes again. "It's them burning, not me; but it's real. Like using a welder's torch, with no goggles on. They're afraid—it's a great pressure on them—like a bicycle tyre with too much wind and a fat man riding—"

Jerkily he sat upright and sucked in a sawing breath and widened his eyes at us in the firelight like a man demented and his fingers gripped into the chair arms. His throat wheezed. "They can't go on, but they can't go back."

My shirt clung to my shoulders, peeling damply when I moved. The recording indicator pulsed faintly, greenly, at each gasp from Sean. Corrugations in his forehead and from his nose to the corners of his mouth might have been cut by engraving tools.

"I don't understand," he cried. "They must have turned."

"Where? How?"

Baffled eyes met ours. "They were frightened and the terrible sun would burn all the diamonds off the mountains and now they're away—fleeing where the sun's little."

Holding a forgotten cigarette, Stanton demanded, "You mean they've gone?"

"Yes, somehow—but the speed of them! The sun got smaller while I watched, like a pebble dropping down a pit—like—"

He fumbled for words and we saw the sun flare hugely in yellow-white fire, then recede, dwindling, to lose itself amid a thousand stars in dazzling darkness.

"They can't travel so fast," protested Stanton. "Good God above, it leaves light standing and no red shift—they can't . . ."



Yet numberless stars hung like halted snowflakes in the night and Sean sat quietly and said, "All the fear and all the pain, they mixed together and I'm falling through the blackness."

As though gold had melted between his fingers, Stanton muttered in furious disbelief.

"They—they died?" suggested Peter.

"No . . . they're still afraid and somewhere they're falling."

In silence we wondered while the flames leapt high. Stanton glanced at the clock, grimaced and said, "I'm seeing this through."

Sean closed his eyes, frowning again. "Something orange; the sky's as dark as the Devil and stars and a little orange—no, it's big—it's growing and we're falling on to it—the *heat*!"

And the heavens blazed amber, scorching the mountains, flooding with flame the canyons and grassless valleys—then retreat, swift swivelling of painted peaks; the fires shrank, and starshot skies spun sickeningly in a plunge down nowhere.

Sean gasped harshly and sat shuddering.

Stanton said, "They come from a world with an orange sun; that's why our sun is searing them—"

"No. They were frightened there, too," said Peter.

"Yes." Sean's features showed pale and greasy. "They was in terrible dread of the burning and they remembered when the sun was green."

"Green!" Stanton stared round soberly. "Perhaps they're still near us; but they've gone insane or something—retreating through racial memory, re-living their approaches to other suns. But how did they ever lose themselves like this?"

Thoughtfully Peter asked, "What about the mountains—where are they?"

Sean shook his head and scratched his cheek and managed to smile sickly. "God slay me if I know; but I saw them, stretching to the sky, and orange fire burning them."

"Are they the mountains with the diamonds?"

Sean started slightly. "They could well—yes, yes, I remember now. They're all so precious, the diamonds; they hid them down the deepest pits, but the sun got in and burned up lots of them."

Then he shivered and closed his eyes briefly and relaxed with a sigh. "That was quicker . . ."



This sun glowed fervid green, splashing cliffsides with the hues of heated copper ; soon it shrank into an emerald, lost down glittering depths.

The door opened noisily, shocking us all.

“ I couldn't sleep,” said Margaret wryly. “ I had to dress and come down. What's happening ?”

We told her ; she sat marvelling.

Slowly, deliberately, Sean whispered : “ Mother of Jesus, did you ever dream such a sight ?”

Starclouds blazed over frost-fragile architecture. Steadily, beyond jagged mountains, red fire was rising, until peaks stood ever darker against vast, vermilion flames. Fear radiated from barren hillsides. Reflections of scarlet sheets wavering upward ran like bloodstreams through translucent structures. And the flames that flung the mountains into silhouette were humble heralds of the sun that reared its splendour and incandescent dome along half the horizon, whitely monstrous, hurling crimson spouts which curved slowly and subsided into seething pits and whirlpools ; upon its searing bulge moved a black speck, creeping from turbulent prominences to hang feebly yellow against coronal scarlet—a sun huge enough to engulf our own, dimmed planetlike beside its stupendous companion.

Rock split. Mountains cracked and crumbled, avalanching slowly. Glare deluged down the hillsides, dissolving diaphanous architecture into fragmented, smouldering shells. Agony throbbed skyward—then retraction, dizzying turns—both suns sank from sight and across the sky sprang an icy swarm of stars.

Sean's flesh resembled putty. His hands worked convulsively on the chair arms and he licked his lips while we sat astounded.

More whispering than speaking, Stanton asked, “ How far can thought travel ?”

Numbly we regarded him.

“ Are they near us ? Were they *ever* near us ? Was that our sun he saw first ?” He stood up and clenched his fists in the firelight, looking from one to another of us. “ They evolved on a sunless planet, possibly, and they dread traversing a solar system—what are they ? Where did they start ? And how long ago ? My God, Sean could be receiving these visions across half a thousand light-years.” He sank down on to the sofa, nearly sobbing and wiped his glasses with his sleeve and laughed. His hands were shaking. “ We thought it was a ship ! It's an entire planet lost out there . . .”



His words lit my mind like flares. "Those two cycles," I exclaimed, seeing the truth hidden in my sketch of the gear-wheels. I held up the sheet and Stanton nodded wanly. "The longer cycle is their planet's rotation—the black cog is the region they inhabit. We should have seen it long ago . . ."

"Them buildings," said Sean, in fascinated rough tones. "And I thought once they was diamonds. They stood like palaces from a fairy-tale around the mountains and the people in them burning and crying . . ."

He shook fitfully and squinted and then spoke again; another sun rolled cruelly close, electrical blue, a white dwarf bleak beside it, while higher hung a pale world, looped like Saturn by a set of silent rings.

"Right down through racial memory," surmised Stanton. "But the time scale, the distance . . ." He hesitated, appalled.

With frightening sureness Sean said, "They're dying soon, I know that. It's like a drowning man sees back on all his days, going under the sea three times."

continued on page 118

***An Index To The***  
***WEIRD FICTION***  
***MAGAZINES***

(Part 1 — Index by Title)

Covering : Strange Stories ; Strange Tales ; The Thrill  
Book ; Oriental Stories ; The Magic Carpet Magazine ;  
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Into the hush, Peter said, "They might have died a thousand years ago, if thought takes time to travel."

"How's this you say?" demanded Sean; so we explained the speed of light and how stars might be destroyed while their images still creep tiredly through the centuries to Earth.

Sean's lips quivered. "Oh, the poor devils, the lost souls, flying like moths and burned by every candle, while they look for somewhere dark to live."

I felt filled with anger, that the uncaring universe could Godlessly accept this suffering.

"Now quiet," urged Sean. "I can see where they began."

He sought words, then picked an astronomical atlas, bound in black, from the sofa arm and placed it on the rug.

"Here's the sky, dark, with no stars," he explained.

We bent forward, watching.

He took a penny from his pocket and put it on the book.

"And there's your sun, but dim red . . . And alongside it, is a—a . . ."

He gestured, exasperated, and reached for the sugarbowl and spilled some sugar on to the book and smoothed and stirred it with one finger. "A strange thing like that," he added, satisfied.

One sudden suction of breath by Peter was the only sound we made.

Their world spun sombrely around a cinder of a sun. Mountains lifted purple-hued ramps into obscurity; and on the rock they crept and linked and split, thriving blindly in perpetual dusk—neither diamonds nor architecture, but crystalline clusters becoming alive and aware, evolving, to rear intricately white-veined flanks and facets amid twilight embers.

Then came some disaster like a cleavage down Creation: one way, the sun fell, a red husk dissolving in darkness; and the other way their world went tumbling, on through emptiness. Far ahead, a frozen swirl of stars and creamy dust and glistening energies, our galaxy blazed in birth.

Sean blew the sugar spiral from the book to scatter it about and suddenly rose and turned to Margaret and said, "I'm sorry, I forgot where I—" Trembling, he closed his eyes tightly. He clasped his hands over them and swayed. Stanton and I bumped together, tangling ourselves in the microphone lead as we jumped forward to catch him. He dropped sideways across the coffee table and took it down with him in a horrible snapping and jingling and a crashing of crockery along the carpet.



We lifted him to the sofa and loosened his collar and made him drink some hurriedly brewed tea. He rubbed his face and asked for an aspirin.

With almost morbid eagerness, Stanton asked, "Are they dead, then?"

Sean considered. "No—it's like a tooth pulled out, and the pain still there somewhere, but all empty . . . They were trying to stop the fall, like the other times . . ."

"What?" cried Peter. "You mean they could control their course?"

Sean blinked, surprised and said, "Why, sure, it all comes back now. Didn't I say it, ever? They used the heat to throw themselves away, but it didn't work till they was near enough to be shrivelling. And they harvested some warmth, each time, for the journey—but some died, doing this, you see. And this time they hadn't enough of them alive to do it. That's as I understand, anyway."

"No wonder a sun never caught them," said Peter. "I thought they'd followed a lucky course. Still . . . converting heat into motive power? Antigravity? If only we—"

"But what *happened*?" demanded Stanton angrily.

"They tried to stop and turn—there was the sun again, the first one; then it fell into a dark hole in the sky—the sun did, I mean. And I know nothing more of them."

We waited an hour, but the sensations ebbed from Sean's mind utterly and the links between us loosened.

Margaret stood up, shivering suddenly. "I hope they didn't die. I hope they got away somehow." Ghost-pale, she went back upstairs.

Stanton and Peter muffled themselves in helmets and goggles and leathers. With Sean we left the house and winced at the shocking cold of the yard. Peter glanced up and said, "Well, Sean, you'll sleep easier now, I suppose."

"Yes," he answered gruffly. "Good night to you all."

He strode with stiff limbs across cobbles towards the moonlit Shant.

Peter mounted his scooter and switched on its headlamp while I stared in helpless anger at the sky—then Sean stumbled and uttered a long groan more horrid than a scream.

Peter wrenched at his handlebars; the headlamp beam swivelled dazzlingly about the yard. Stanton grabbed my arm and jerked me round. Sean was lurching in the headlamp glare



with his hands over his ears, as I had first seen him in that icy dawn ; then with terrible slowness he knelt in pain or prayer. Stanton tugged me and we ran to him while Peter kept the lamp beam steady.

"I'm all right," whispered Sean as we helped him to his feet. Tears were trickling down his face. "Oh God have mercy on their souls, the harmless shining creatures—"

Stanton swung one hand. The slap echoed sharply amid brick buildings. Sean breathed deeply and in a calmer voice said, "I'm fine now. Let me go. Let me go to bed."

We released him. With his cheeks still wet, he stepped into the Shant and closed the door behind him.

We walked back to Peter.

Feeling sick, I said, "It's finished. They're dead."

"You're sure?" asked Peter, almost wistfully.

"Yes." My throat seemed full of sand. "While you two turned and watched Sean—just before Stan caught my arm. I was looking up. I saw them go."

Stanton snapped, "Pull yourself together and talk sense. How could you see them?"

"That dark hole—the one the sun fell down. It was the Earth, eclipsing the sun." I pointed shakily. "Look. They went down there. You'd have seen it in the corner of your eyes, but for this headlamp flashing about. It was bright. The biggest shooting star I've ever seen. It must have been at least ten feet across. Its core might even have landed out there . . ." And I stared above buildings to the west, my eyes still recalling a blaze across the sky that became a trail of dimly luminous dust, sifting through high winds over the Atlantic.

None of us spoke for a while. We stood shivering in the frost and looking upward uselessly. Then Stanton and Peter left. When the scooter's lights and purring had dwindled and gone, I walked mechanically into the house, trying not to cry.

**john ashcroft**



**guest editorial continued**

communications satellites. The public would sooner have a kick-by-kick description of a Real Madrid — Barcelona encounter.

You may or may not agree with this conclusion. But you will almost certainly be thinking something like this : ‘ That’s all very well but science fiction readers are different. All that stuff about Trueman and Relay is probably true about the public at large but not about us.’

The whole point is that it does apply. Science fiction readers are people and people are what the public is made up of. The above account may not give a true picture of a science fiction fan’s preferences. But it does answer the question about the disappearance of the sense of wonder. The sense of wonder has *not* gone from s-f writing. It has gone from its readers.

There is an experiment you can try to prove this assertion. Ask a sports enthusiast how many men have been in space. He will give you the name of Gagarin, then a blank look. Being fair, ask a science fiction fan how many men have run the mile in less than four minutes. Roger Bannister’s name will spring to his lips and that will be that. In each case, in a different context, the sense of wonder has been lost. The men who first made the respective achievements are remembered, the memory of the glorious moment of achievement lingers faintly on, but for subsequent duplications of the same marvels there is little interest and less sense of wonder.

Maybe we live in an age of too many miracles and our senses are numbed. Maybe it is the greater pace of life today or the super-abundance of distractions. Whatever the cause this much is clear : it is from us, the people—in or out of s-f—from whom the sense of wonder has gone.

This does a lot to substantiate the assertion that there is nothing wrong with science fiction as served up today. It is different to the old stuff, grant you. But dammit, being different does not mean that it has deteriorated. If Lenoir could suddenly leap forward a century ahead of his time and confront you with bubbling enthusiasm about the internal combustion engine he had perfected you would not be at all impressed by his invention. It is too late to be impressed by i/c engines. We have had them for a hundred years. So, to a degree, it must be with science fiction. There was a first story about flight into space, a first story with robotic subjects, a first



story about extra sensory perception. Whatever the theme, there can only be one first. After that come the variations on the themes and just because a story is not a first this has nothing to do with its quality. It has every chance of being better. The first sewing machine, the first antibiotic, the first anything was never the best. Penicillin was and is a wonderful drug. It was a first. But no doctor on earth would withhold the superior tetracycline from a pneumonia patient simply because it was not the first antibiotic to be discovered.

So it is with modern science fiction. It is too late for a story to be a first. It may look like a first but a little digging will disclose that somebody has been there before, in all probability without the modern author knowing it. Nobody in their right senses plagiarises.

Digestible or not the fact must be swallowed that you cannot have the marvellous old stories more than once. Be thankful, even reverent, that the field was opened up. But do not be blind to what is going on today. Modern s-f is different because it is developing and it will go on developing as writers strive for new ways to express what they have to say and wider boundaries in which to say them. Nobody actually reads a story by John Smith and thinks : that's a good style, an interesting plot, I must copy it. What happens is that Smith's story triggers off new ideas in an author's mind, ideas which he tries to set down in what he hopes is a better way than Smith's. He may not succeed but the point is that he tries and in trying he is contributing something, no matter how small, to the development of science fiction.

What is more, he is today granted the wider boundaries he asks for. There are no longer any forbidden subjects. Forbidden treatments of tricky subjects perhaps, but forbidden only in so far as not to offend. There is however one subject which is peculiar in that it is the reader who forbids it. This is the one called Love Interest.

Who are we going to blame for that one ? Is it entirely the readers' fault ? And if so, do you explain the taboo by saying s-f is mostly read by youngsters and youngsters want blood and thunder in preference to adult human relationships ? Anybody jumping to that conclusion would be dead wrong. We have had more than one reader census to prove that the average s-f consumer is no callow youth. So it must be the writers who are at fault. The bad smell produced by any love interest hitherto embodied in s-f can only have come from bad writing. It



would seem that s-f writers are not capable of combining a strong plot, a legitimate scientific background, characterisation in depth and romantic relationships all in one go. And that's a fact.

Women, when they are grudgingly permitted a place in a story, are invariably badly drawn. So, to dodge a difficult task, most writers leave them out with the result that a stranger to s-f must get the impression that we have dispensed with one of the sexes. Our heroes and villains appear to be begat of no woman and they lust not because they have sublimated their energies for the sake of plot.

But I sincerely believe there's going to be some changes made. I'll tell you why.

In the beginning writers used the broad canvas. They splashed this canvas with new scientific ideas, new hypotheses, action galore. They spread their stories across great galaxies or across eons of time. This was the day of the sense of wonder.

And today? Today we find writers looking at things with a finer focus. Instead of the galactic background he pins himself to one planet, even to one street of one town thereon. By doing this he can divert more of his talents to characterisation. The cardboard hero is beginning to breathe. It won't be long before he wants company. Female company. She may be part of the plot or subsidiary to it or perhaps only tacitly understood to belong to the man's life before and after the incidents reported in the story.

There is a paradox in all this. Although the fine focus technique results in more being written about less, there is at the same time a greater economy of words. Look up some of the old writers. They could be pretty verbose.

To make any accurate prediction on the form of future s-f is impossible. But the fact that it is in a state of flux should be satisfaction enough for anyone. You won't like all of the changes. Nobody ever does. But let's have a little peace around the place. Take a look at the changes taking place, analyse them, figure what the writer is trying to tell you—and be content. Because it is the customer (as well as himself) that the writer is trying to please. Every time he introduces the tiniest of innovations he runs the risk of mass unpopularity. But at least he isn't scared to try. Why should you be scared to go along with him?

robert presslie



# book reviews

**british—hardcover**

Not a novel in sight this month, but instead convincing evidence that it is in the short story format that the genre is most successful. At one time an anathema to publishers, collections of the shorter length stories now form an integral part of the major s-f publishing programmes, which is a good thing in view of the dearth of good science fiction novels.

First, an important new writer who is successful in both media. As if to consolidate his accolade—by critical acclaim for his novel *The Drowned World*—as the first serious writer emerging in the genre in England since Arthur C. Clarke—J. G. Ballard's initial collection of short stories, **The 4-Dimensional Nightmare** (Gollancz, 16/-) triumphantly confirms what was an unassailable majority verdict. Regular readers of this magazine and its companion will, of course, have appreciated this long ago, since all but one of these eight stories first appeared in these pages.

Here are the fruits of his formative years, with all the undisciplined exuberance of his sometimes outrageous pseudo-technicalities (the musically-conditioned plants in "Prima Belladonna," the sonovac in "The Sound Sweep," and to a lesser extent, the verse-transcriber in the wonderful "Studio 5, The Stars" are good examples) and the weird beauty of his descriptive prose given unbounded rein over a variety of themes and macabre situations. To read them (and they must be read carefully and attentively) is an experience akin to reading Beaudelaire after a diet of the romantics, a whiff of marijuana after plain virginia. Undoubtedly a writer with an unusual and original talent, an ability to make real nightmarish unreality, Ballard's science fiction can confidently be accepted at the highest level of any contemporary fiction. Good for Jim!

Just mention the ubiquitous old maestro, Arthur Clarke, and up he pops with another book. **Tales Of Ten Worlds** (Gollancz



16/-) offers a wide diversity in fifteen stories (not "new" as the blurb writer says, but culled from the magazines ranging from *Galaxy* to *Playboy* and going back ten years or more) and includes many favourites under new titles ("Seeker of the Sphinx" now "Road to the Sea" and "Crime on Mars" now "Trouble with Time," among others) plus some which may be unfamiliar especially the *Playboy* item called "I Remember Babylon," a bombshell which will have an impact on you proportionate to your own moral fibre! Clarke is now the slick professional writer of world-wide fame, and justifiably so, at best a brilliant and original ideas man, at worst an ingenious variation-on-a-theme man, but now his writing is always impeccable and scientifically and emotionally correct and with a facile and compulsive readability that is the hallmark of the true craftsman writer. A remarkable collection which is a must for your bookshelf.

Edmund Crispin's latest **Best SF 5** (Faber, 18/-) is somewhat disappointing compared to the high standard of his previous annual anthologies, mainly, I think, because apart from familiar material taken from other hard-cover books (such as Wyndham's "Consider Her Ways," Clarke's "The Star," Sheckley's "The Monsters," and Aldiss's "Who Can Replace a Man") the rest are not quite good enough. Clifford Simak's "Green Thumb" is a bit too home-spun to be effective, and Fritz Leiber's punchline in "Later Than You Think," is telegraphed way ahead. Poul Anderson's "The Martyr" is, however, good for the opposite reason. Which leaves then, apart from two in format of correspondence (which is favoured by *Analog*, and I personally abhor) two enjoyable novelettes—Raymond F. Jones' "Noise Level" about the antigrav project instigated and spurred into success by a faked experiment is entirely predictable but nevertheless interesting in its concept of knowledge, its acquirement and rejection; and Tony Boucher's delicious "The Quest for Aquin" in which a priest learns the hard way the expediency of true faith in a post-atomic war world wherein it is dangerous to make the sign of the cross. Balaam and his cyberneticised ass!



**miscellaneous**

Collectors, completists, and those suffering from a nostalgia for the "good old days," will be interested in **Index to the Weird Fiction Magazines** (Index by Title) compiled and with an Introduction by T. G. L. Cockcroft of New Zealand (17/6), wherein just about *everything* connected with the early weird magazines can readily be found—from the 16 issues of *The Thrill Book*, which commenced in 1919 to the 279 issues of the celebrated *Weird Tales*, proving ground of so many of today's well-known writers. Other magazines completely listed are *Strange Tales of Mystery and Terror*, *Strange Stories*, *Oriental Stories*, *The Magic Carpet Magazine*, *Golden Fleece* and the short-lived British *Strange Tales*.

Apart from complete story listings, there is a raft of additional information, including pseudonyms, artists, and general information. A *must* for the bibliophiles and available from Fantast (Medway) Ltd., 75 Norfolk Street, Wisbech, Cambs.

Also available from the same company, **Item Forty-Three**, a bibliography of all Brian W. Aldiss's published works from 1954 - 1962 (5/-) which will be of considerable use to those researchers into exactitude.

**american—hardcover**

Regular readers of *Science Fantasy* will remember the fascinating series of articles we published back in 1959 and 1960 entitled "Studies in Science Fiction" and written by American Sam Moskowitz, considered to be s-f's leading historian. The series covered a wide range of research into most of the early writers of the genre—Poe, Verne, Wells, Doyle, Burroughs, Wylie, Capek, and some dozen or so more, bringing to light many littleknown facts about their lives as well as correlating their work into fascinating cameos.

The articles we published, as well as many others, were originally published in three of the American magazines—*Satellite Science Fiction*, *Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic Stories of Imagination*, and now The World Publishing Company of New York have put them all together in a magnificent bound book entitled **Explorers of the Infinite**, (\$6.00) adding one more definitive non-fiction title to the small but useful number of books devoted to research into the s-f and fantasy fields.



Three chapters in the book also give a broad outline of the birth and development of magazine science fiction, contained in 'Hugo Gernsback: Father of Science Fiction,' 'How Science Fiction Got Its Name,' and 'The Future in Present Tense'—the latter carrying thumbnail sketches of many of today's modern writers.

### american—paperback

**A Fall of Moondust**—Arthur C. Clarke (Dell, 50¢). One of 1962's top science fiction novels, simply but brilliantly done against a background of a Moon colony and the search for the crew and passengers of a "moon skimmer," sunk with little trace beneath the crater dust.

**Star Surgeon**—James White (Ballantine, 50¢). I am prejudiced in favour of this excellent novel because the original serial, "Field Hospital," appeared in this magazine early in 1962. To make the grade as an American paperback from a class publisher apparently justifies my enthusiasm—and it is a fine "Sector General" novel against the futuristic medical background which James White does so well.

**Journey Beyond Infinity**—Robert Sheckley (Signet, 50¢). This is a reconstructed "novel" of the "Journey of Joenes" (From *F & SF*) each chapter being a vignette in itself but forming a part of the whole. Any reader who likes Sheckley (and who doesn't?) will like this one.

**Exploring Other Worlds**—edited and with an Introduction by Sam Moskowitz (Collier Books, 95¢). Eight interplanetary stories of good vintage by such authors as Weinbaum, Rocklynne, Anderson, Hamilton, Fred Brown and others, Mr. Moskowitz explaining why such stories have always been popular.

**The Coming of the Robots**—edited and with an Introduction by Sam Moskowitz (Collier Books, 95¢). Almost a companion volume to the previous title listed, except that the ten stories are exclusively about robots. Asimov, Phillips, Wyndham, Simak, Gallun and others. Slanted more for newer younger readers than the hardened aficionada.



**Slave Planet**—Laurence M. Janifer (Pyramid Books, 40¢).

Fits in well with the general galactic action-adventure so many readers like—slave planet, green reptiles, space fleets and general human skullduggery and subjugation of aliens. Ugh!

**Time Out For Tomorrow**—Richard Wilson (Ballantine Books 50¢). About once every five years

Richard Wilson has sufficient material for a collection of good short stories. Herewith twelve such including three which have been seen in our own magazines in recent years, particularly "The Best Possible World," which made its mark in the 100th issue of this magazine.

john carnell

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