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NEW WORLDS

SCIENCE FICTION

volume 46

The Dark Mind

colin kapp

• john rackham •

• b. n. ball •

• john baxter •

• p. f. woods •

• david busby •

no. 136

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SCIENCE FICTION

november 1963 volume 46 no. 136

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THREE SHILLINGS

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guest editorial

while in Italy this summer, we picked up some fascinating information concerning lost Russian astronauts, few details of which have ever been published in the daily press, although some references have been made from time to time—here, written by the Rome correspondent of one of our national newspaper groups, are some of the authenticated facts

satellite hunters

by john ashton

On April 12, 1961, a human voice reported from space. Simply, laconically, it said : " The flight is normal, I feel well !"

Since that day, which marks man's first major breakthrough of the frontiers of space, we have never failed to respond to the calling to the stars, closer now than ever before in known history.

For to us all on Earth the feat of Yuri Gagarin, the subsequent launching of manned American and Russian artificial satellites, was not so much a matter of one nation's technical superiority over another, but symbolic of the dreams of our forefathers, only a few minutes ago on the face of Time's great clock. They too stared up at the vast, star-filled night skies above and felt their hearts beat faster, their blood course more rapidly, more hotly, their breath catch lightly, and they were filled with a great longing !

Space, and the stars, have moved closer in the past ten years. No longer do " the faint gnat-voices " cry to earth-bound Man in vain. With atomic energy and miniaturization, with ion-drive and extra sensorial and dimensional research, with determination and, what is perhaps vastly more important, imaginative power, we are reaching out towards them and fact, in many instances, has already caught up with the fiction of the past.

Today we tune in on radio and TV to some distant count-down. Our camera-eyes transmit images of the men aboard still primitive orbiting spaceships, our space probes feed vital data on distant planets into our computers. Stone by stone the road of conquest is being paved, and already the majority has grown accustomed to it. True, events in the past two years have fired our imagination. Each successful launching brings us a step closer to what we all, consciously or subconsciously, desire so greatly !

And yet, who stops to consider, who gives a thought for the men, and possibly women, who have fallen by the way ?

Who cared to stop and think of some fateful, tragic moment, when the retro-rockets failed ? Or when the tiny ship hurtled beyond its prescribed orbit into infinity, to drift helpless, a silent wreck, for uncounted centuries amongst the stars ?

Or more simply, more tragically perhaps, when the controls failed, the radio link was severed, and the vessel continued to orbit for many months after its pilot died, until gravity gently drew it closer to earth and it disappeared, a flaming meteor hurtling through the night to the surprise and delight of old and young ?

Who cared to stop and think ?

I, for one, did not.

Until one night in May, not quite a month after Gagarin's feat, when the phone rang in my office at the Rome bureau of London's largest daily !

An unknown voice said :

" This is the Torre Bert tracking station in Turin. We've just picked up signals from what we think is another Russian satellite in orbit, with three persons aboard. We thought you might be interested !"

Automatically my mind reached back to my daily diet of Italian papers. I remembered a short news item, datelined Bochum, Germany, according to which the director of that city's observatory stated that another Soviet launching was

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Ivan Dalroi's one-man hate campaign against Failway Terminal brings him four, separate sets of enemies—Failway itself, the police, the Black Knights, and the Cronstadt Committee for whom he works. One man couldn't possibly survive such odds—one ordinary man, that is . . .

the dark mind

by colin kapp

part one of three parts

one

Failway Terminal cut across the old sector of the city like an ugly red house-brick thrown by a vandal on to a Lilliputian town. Almost a square mile of the old town had been obliterated to make room for the monstrous hundred-storied hulk of architectural impotence which was the Terminal building. Streets and parks alike ended with a plaintive suddenness short of this monumental reminder that money can buy anything. Its shadow secured a shroud of almost permanent gloom across the tenements still cringing between it and the river. Failway Terminal, thought Ivan Dalroi, was a headache from any point of view.

A ground-cab set him down at the main entrance, and he lingered for a while watching the faces of the trippers and the sensation seekers who flocked to the Terminal in search of the pleasures only Failway could provide. The sight made him slightly sick. Failway was strictly impartial : the customers got

what they paid for—pleasures simple, exciting, exotic or erotic according to their wishes. The trouble was that people tended to graduate . . .

The girl at the reception desk took his card and scanned it with disfavour.

" You have an appointment ?"

" No," said Dalroi. " Only people who expect to live a long time make appointments. I want to speak to Peter Madden, and if he's not home I'll wait—right here."

" Would you care to state the nature of your business ?"

" Right now it hasn't got a name, but unless I get a few good answers I shall probably call it murder."

The girl dialled a number and spoke briefly into an acoustic chamber. Then she turned back to Dalroi.

" Mr. Madden was expecting you to call. He will see you immediately."

Dalroi scowled. Only a selected few knew he was planning to visit Failway Terminal. Only one other person knew his purpose. Somebody was guessing, or . . . A sudden stab of panic clawed at his vitals and he rejected it savagely. Nobody frightened Ivan Dalroi with an old trick like that !

Peter Madden was a mild-seeming man with a careful, suave calm born more of rigid self-discipline than inner content. The man's balance and control was almost perfect, thought Dalroi, but the tell-tale top line frown betrayed the power and the conflict locked within the skull. Peter Madden was not a man to be crossed lightly.

" Failway Public Relations at your disposal, Mr. Dalroi. We aim to serve you."

" I doubt it !" said Dalroi. " I'm not exactly increasing the good-will of the establishment."

Madden looked him firmly in the eyes, a slight smile on his lips, and motioned him into a chair. " Knowing your reputation for trouble, I take it this isn't a social visit ?"

" If you were expecting me, you know damn well it isn't. For the record I'll pretend you don't know who I am or why I'm here." He searched carefully around the room for the concealed microphones he knew were recording every word he spoke. " I'm a private investigator working on behalf of Baron Cronstadt and the Cronstadt committee. Four weeks ago three members of the committee visited Failway on a fact-

finding tour. I know they went in because I watched them. They never came out again."

"That's a sweeping statement," said Madden gently. "You don't suppose we lose people in Failway, do you?"

"I do mean just that."

"It's scarcely policy, Mr. Dalroi. Failway is devoted to offering patrons whatever they choose to seek. If they came looking for facts, I have no doubt they found them."

"And if they came looking for trouble?" asked Dalroi. "Let's stop fencing, Mr. Madden. The Cronstadt committee is out to break the Failway monopoly. The fact that three members don't return after a Failway visit is highly suggestive of a little foul play. I'd be interested to hear your explanation."

Madden laughed quietly. "My dear Dalroi, we're not afraid of the Cronstadt committee, and we've nothing to hide. There've always been cranks against Failway, and there always will be—it's part of the cross we bear for being in advance of the times. Why should we trouble ourselves with the maunderings of three old men?"

Dalroi looked up. "Who said they were old?"

Peter Madden spread his hands. "Prohibition is an old man's occupation. Do you mind if I offer you a little advice, Mr. Dalroi?"

"Call me Ivan," said Dalroi insolently. "It sounds less formal."

Madden controlled himself. "Very well—Ivan. I advise you to drop this case. You've a big reputation as an investigator. I suggest you wouldn't want to ruin it by starting something you have no hope of finishing."

"Is that a threat?"

"No, simply a prediction."

"Then your crystal ball is tuned in to the wrong channel. I've never yet walked out on a case."

"Not even when the price was right?" Madden watched him closely.

"No," said Dalroi, "not even then. First of all a man has to live with himself. Besides which, I have a personal score to settle with Failway."

Madden fingered a file of papers on his desk then pushed it aside with a hint of impatience. "I was afraid of that," he said. "I don't suppose it does any good to repeat that you have no chance at all of succeeding?"

" No," said Dalroi. " Win or lose, there isn't enough room for Dalroi and Failway to live together. One of us is going to have to go."

" At last we reach a point of complete agreement," said Madden quietly.

He stood up to signify that the interview was at an end. Dalroi rose also, puzzled by a curious undercurrent in the P.R.O's manner. Madden showed him out with the usual courtesies and a final handshake. As their hands clutched, Dalroi became aware that a piece of folded paper was being pressed into his palm. A glance at Madden's eyes cautioned him to silence. He trapped the paper deftly beneath his thumb, and set off down the corridor without once looking back.

He was deep in the heart of the old town before he slipped the note carefully into his pocket. Glancing round to make sure he was not being followed, he entered Mortimer's cafe-bar and went straight to the telephone. This was a tactical move. Mortimer saw him enter and nodded to the boy to watch the door. Dalroi and Mortimer had a mutual pact to protect each other's right to privacy, a remnant of the old gang fights of their youth.

The note read :

FAILWAY G2. 12.00. MUST SPEAK. MADDEN.

Dalroi frowned. Failway G2., was the heavy goods entrance on the river side of the Terminal. It was situated in the wharfing area in the toughest and most vicious district of the old town. Dalroi knew. He had spent his youth in the shadows of the brothels and bars around the mouldering wharves. That scar on his forehead was no accident.

He dropped some coins into the meter and dialled his office. Zdenka, his secretary, answered the phone.

" Dalroi here, Zen. Anything new come in for me ?"

" Nothing—unless you count the gas bill."

" File it," said Dalroi. " Under miscellaneous. Look, I want you to get on to our police contacts and see if you can get information on any unidentified bodies found in this area in the last four weeks. I'm specifically interested in three, male, in the fifty to sixty-five age group."

" That sounds ominously like the members of the fact-finding party who went into Failway."

" Precisely," said Dalroi. " I'm tempted to wonder if I've been looking for them in the wrong place. Something's very

curious about this whole affair. There's a hell of an undercurrent behind everything."

"Speaking of undercurrents," Zdenka said, "somebody named Dutt was on the phone."

"How long ago?"

"Thirty seconds, perhaps."

"Right!" said Dalroi. "You can go home if you want to. I shall probably be late."

He broke the connection hastily. He knew nobody named Dutt. The message was a pre-arranged code. DUTT . . . Don't Use The Telephone. It meant that the personal-privacy meter in the office had detected a wire-tap on the line. His interest in Failway had somebody worried, and that somebody was going to a great deal of trouble to keep informed of his movements. Things were beginning to warm up.

He left the phone, nodded to Mortimer, then changed his mind about going out of the front entrance and went through the kitchens at the back. Turning uptown he ignored two ground-cabs and selected a third. Thus it was he was just re-passing Mortimer's bar in time to see the front blown out by a bomb which exploded within.

He halted the cab, half inclined to plough into the wreckage to look for Mortimer and the boy, but the angle of the beams told him the floor had collapsed into the cellar. That made it a job for the fire-service rescue squad and the police—especially the police. Mortimer's hobby was printing, and the presses lived in the cellar—so did the plates which produced such highly accurate counterfeit banknotes.

With a sick heart he ordered the cab to drive on. He had no doubt that the bomb had been intended for himself. Obviously he had been followed from Failway by someone who was not only a master of his trade but was also prepared to kill and was not particular as to how he did it. That triple qualification narrowed the field quite a bit. He could not recall more than half a dozen men in the country who could fit the post—and they were all very expensive.

He began to sense the power and complexity of the web stretched out across the city. Somebody at Failway was displeased or frightened or both, and Failway never stopped at niceties to remove a thorn beneath the flesh. It had always been

the same—the vast concentration of power scaled down to the fine operating edge of the professional killer ; the knife in the dark, the body in the river—nice inconspicuous deaths with no witnesses, no convictions, and nothing to connect them with Failway save the tenuous threads of suspicion.

Failway tolerated no opposition. It was ruthless, thorough, and invariably fatal to its opponents. Why not, when it was prepared to spend a million pounds to ensure a man was dead?

Cronstadt himself had chosen Dalroi for the job ; 'Ironfist' Cronstadt, the Steel and Paper Baron, a man of fierce ambitions and bitter, uncompromising drives. Around him he had drawn a committee of helpers as bizarre and unorthodox as himself : Presley, head of the United Churches Militant Action Group, Hildebrand, psychologist and intellectual, and the fantastic Doctor Gormalu, whose scientific genius had first made Failway possible. Also backing Cronstadt was the government-appointed fact-finding group whose disappearance had given Dalroi his first operating part in the game.

Three streets from the office Dalroi dismissed the cab on a swift impulse. It occurred to him that the bomb in Mortimer's bar had left him with an unsought advantage. For a few hours at least Failway would be unable to tell if their murder bid had been successful. That gave him a few hours to locate the killer who had followed him, and to extract a little vengeance.

He dived into the nearest hotel, went straight through into the cloakroom and locked himself in. Then he pulled out his utility-wallet and did a hasty make-up job on himself. Under the brush and powder his hair turned darker and streaked with grey. His face tanned chestnut with the lotion and the supple skin tautened as the resins dried and contracted. Contact lenses masked the colour of his eyes, and within twenty minutes the face of Ivan Dalroi aged by thirty years.

He now turned his attention to his clothes. The trousers and shoes were nondescript but his jacket was obtrusively his own. Not far from the hotel was a third-rate tailor who made his fortune out of the sartorial necessities of underpaid office workers. Dalroi left his own jacket in a hotel locker, and by the time he stepped on to the bus he was certain that no one could have recognised the peevish, frustrated clerk as the grim-eyed private investigator who had so narrowly escaped death at Mortimer's.

He chose the bus-stop before the ruined bar, and walked on to where the knot of spectators pressed the police cordon. He pushed his way forward until he was jammed against the arm of a policeman attempting to control the crowd.

" Keep back behind there !"

" What happened ?" asked Dalroi.

" Explosion," said the policeman. " Now keep moving along there."

" Any survivors ?" Dalroi asked.

" No, not a hope. They've got stretchers in there now but the ambulance is a waste of time. Now move along, if you please !"

Dalroi worked his way slowly through the crowd. There were the usual groups of people who assembled on such occasions : the housewives complete with shopping, shift workers homing for a late lunch, the elderly and retired who had no more congenial occupation than to pronounce judgment at an accident or a hole in the road. Mentally he catalogued the assembly one by one, looking for someone who did not quite fit. He was certain in his own mind that the bomb-thrower was still on the scene waiting for confirmation that Dalroi was dead. Finding no positive suspects he moved back to the beginning of the crowd.

" They say there's three dead bodies in there," Dalroi confided to a fellow onlooker.

" That so ? Still, there might have been a lot more in a bar at this time of day."

Dalroi moved on. " They say there's three heads in there," he said to another, " but only two bodies."

" Three ?" The men looked up sharply. " How do you know ?"

" I was speaking to the fire-chief. He said two waiters and a big blond fellow."

" I wonder why they don't fetch them out ?"

" Can't," said Dalroi. " The floor dropped in. The place is inches deep in Scotch."

He moved on, spreading an occasional lie, and reckoning on inference and hearsay to spread the false rumour of his own demise. Then he saw his man. The face was disguised and unfamiliar but the set of the shoulders and the soft cat-tread walk struck a chord in his memory. The assassin had turned from the crowd and was leaving, as though bored with the inactivity of the scene.

Dalroi followed him silently. They turned off the high-street, through the arcade, then right and on to the Blackwater bridge. Halfway across the bridge the assassin paused to light a cigarette. Dalroi paused also to slip the catch on his automatic pistol. Then the two fell into step.

" Nice try, Michael Neasden," said Dalroi casually.

The other was startled. " What the hell ?"

" Keep walking," said Dalroi. " I've got a gun on your spine. This is one funeral you aren't going to miss."

The other considered this in silence for a moment. " What makes you think I'm Michael Neasden ?"

" Simple," said Dalroi. " I followed your backside for two years, exercising round a bloody prison yard."

Despite the gun the other faltered in his stride. " Dalroi ! But I thought . . ."

". . . I was dead. And you thought that because you were just on your way to Failway to collect the fee for having murdered me. That's one mistake more than you're allowed."

Neasden shot him an agonised glance, then lunged. His fist took Dalroi in the stomach as he sprang for the parapet, then he vaulted the concrete rail and dived for the river below. A barge passing beneath saved Dalroi having to fire at a target moving in the water. It saved Dalroi having to fire at all.

two

Dalroi had no doubt his office was being watched. Any of a hundred windows in the area could be used to overlook the door to the office block. Fortunately the doorway was common to thirty offices and he was confident his disguise would stand up to all but the most prolonged scrutiny.

He entered the building and went straight up the stairs, suddenly aware that the light in his office was still burning although the hour was late. Through the reeded-glass panel in the corridor he could see the outline of Zdenka sitting at her desk. A darker figure stood near the door. The atmosphere held the sweet smell of trouble. He ignored his key and fingered the office doorbell. A moment's hesitation, then the door was opened by a tall stranger in a black tunic shirt.

" Mr. Dalroi ?" asked Dalroi, playing again the frustrated clerk.

" At this time of night ? Try again tomorrow." . .

" But I must see him. You see, my wife has . . ."

" Good luck !" said the man. " You're probably better off without her."

But Dalroi pressed into the office, fussily insistent. One look at the half-formed hope on Zdenka's face told him all he needed to know. The stranger found his revolver, only to watch it spin from his fingers as a deft blow from Dalroi paralysed his arm. Before the amazement could register Dalroi hit him again and he fell as though pole-axed to the carpet.

" I thought you were never going to come," Zdenka said.

" I was delayed. A friend of mine was killed by a bomb and I felt obliged to find out who threw it. When did this character turn up ?"

" Right after you called. I think he was connected with the line-tap on the phone."

" That makes sense," said Dalroi disgustedly. " But they might have had the decency to send a professional. I wouldn't be surprised if he even carries his identity on him."

He searched the stranger's pockets rapidly. " I thought as much : Failway Internal Security Force. Probably sent to clean-up the office as soon as they were sure that I was permanently out of the way."

" What are you going to do with him ?"

" Call Inspector Quentain and tell him I wish to make a charge of armed assault and illegal entry. With the sort of pressure Quentain's under he won't dare do a thing, but it may give us a few loose ends we can hook on to Failway."

" You hate Failway, don't you ?" Zdenka watched him curiously.

" Hate," said Dalroi bitterly, " doesn't begin to describe the emotion. I was brought up in the shadow of Failway. If ever a friend was killed the finger pointed to Failway. If ever a girl went missing we all knew where she'd gone. The building blocked the sunlight from the streets, their refuse polluted the river, and their methods twisted the life and hope out of the people. They set a price on every form of human degradation ; if you couldn't stand living in a slum you could always sell yourself to Failway."

" Sounds grim."

" It was not only grim, it was murder. Failway owned most of the property and most of the people down by the river, and

they knew how to put on the pressure. If you had a talent Failway could use, you either joined them or they broke you."

" They didn't break you."

" No," said Dalroi. " I was one of the few who didn't break. That doesn't mean they didn't try."

" I hadn't realized such a situation could exist."

" Why should you ? Nobody's proud of degradation and nobody's going to speak out against it when it means a certain bullet in the back as a price for indiscretion. But that's not alone among the things that Failway hushes up. Did you know that once you get on the Failway system proper you quite legally cease to exist. The Failway process breaks through into what is called an inferior energy level. What that is I wouldn't pretend to know, but it's not on Earth as we know it, and it's legally, morally and actually outside of every protection we normally enjoy. Once you're in Failway you belong to them. The fact that they normally give you a good time and then fetch you back to the Terminal is simply because it pays them to do it that way."

" But millions of people go there every year. I was there myself for the holidays."

" I know," said Dalroi. " But did you ever see the police files on the people who didn't come back ?"

" But they can't just kidnap people."

" Don't be naive. Failway is a police-state and a law unto itself. It's also big business, and big businesses have a way of being ruthless with things affecting their interests."

" There's another reason for having your knife in Failway, isn't there ?"

Dalroi looked away strangely, only half seeing. Then he nodded dully.

" A girl ?"

" Perhaps." Dalroi cleansed the resins from his skin carefully.

" Don't you want to talk about her ?"

" I'd sooner not." The sweet spirit drew the colour from his hair.

Zdenka caught sight of his face in the mirror. She had never seen Ivan Dalroi with quite that expression before.

" Sorry !" said Zdenka. " I didn't mean to pry."

" Don't worry," Dalroi said. " Things like that don't hurt any more. They just leave you numb right through. It's a

kind of emotional anaesthesia. The world's never the same place afterwards. Somebody takes the flowers away. Poetry dies."

" You must have loved her very much."

" She had golden hair and the artless charm of a child. When she smiled it was like a shaft of sunshine breaking through a winter's sky. She left me because Failway offered her big money to go and work in the pleasure grounds. For that piece of vandalism I intend to break Failway even if I have to use my bare hands."

" Suppose Failway breaks you instead ?"

" I can afford to take that risk," said Dalroi. " I don't have very much to lose. For me it's part crusade and part revenge, but for you there's nothing in it but the salary. That's why I don't want you mixed up in what's to come. I'm sorry, Zen, but this is the parting of the ways."

" You can't do that to me !" Zdenka said. " We're part of the same firm, remember ?"

" This isn't any ordinary fight, Zen. Failway won't be satisfied until it's eliminated all the opposition. There's no point in your getting involved in something which doesn't concern you."

" But it does concern me since I've got to live in the same world as Failway, too. That makes it my fight just as much as yours. Now tell me what we're going to do."

" You're making a big mistake," said Dalroi. " Our role is making trouble for Failway—fifth column, sabotage, any sort of random mischief, and the more destructive the better. This is to divert attention whilst Cronstadt applies some other measures."

Zdenka scowled. " It's not exactly legal !"

" Not very," said Dalroi, " but legalities aren't going to bother Failway either. I've already had proof of that. The fact is that Failway's already above the law, so we can't be compromised by having scruples ourselves. Frankly our only assets are speed and mobility, and if we get caught we can't expect any mercy from Failway or the police."

" All right, where do I start ?"

" This whole business has a bad smell. Do you remember Harry Dever? He was a good journalist before he took to drink. In the morning I want you to find him and take him down to Passfields, you know the spot."

Zdenka nodded. " You think he might know something useful about Failway ?"

" No," said Dalroi. " I think he might know something vital about the members of the Cronstadt committee."

" What makes you think that ?"

" My dear Zen, tackling Failway is about the only form of legalized suicide still available in this country. Anybody who declares war on Failway and lives longer than twenty-four hours is either extremely clever, extremely lucky, or just plain immortal. Half of the committee are still living. It might be interesting to find out why. For the sake of our own lives we can't do that too fast. You'd better call Inspector Quentain now and ask him to pick up this Failway idiot before he stains the carpet."

Quentain's eyes moved from Dalroi to the prostrate figure and back again. The police inspector's sardonic smile was almost his only engaging feature.

" Suppose you start explaining," he said slowly, " and make it sound like nothing but the truth."

" So help me !" said Dalroi. " Don't I always ? He forced his way into my office, prevented my secretary from leaving, and when I arrived he pulled a gun on me."

Quentain pulled out a notebook, and rolled the dormant figure over with his foot. " A client of yours ?"

" Hell, no ! He's from Failway Security."

Quentain was suddenly interested. " Then I have no doubt he had a very good reason for doing what he did. I don't see there is any charge I can bring against him."

" Do me a favour, Quent !" said Dalroi. " Aren't I entitled to protection like any other ratepayer ?"

The inspector closed the notebook with a snap and replaced it in his pocket.

" Sorry, Dalroi ! You'd scarcely except me to risk my pension trying to make out a case for you versus Failway. You know which way the world turns."

" Yes," said Dalroi bitterly. " I know. I'd merely hoped that somewhere in the dim dank recesses of the local constabulary there was someone with a nostalgia for a quaint old custom called justice."

" Justice ? For you ? My God, don't make me laugh ! I've enough suspicions about you to put you inside for about five-hundred years—only I don't quite have the proof. And

you scream for justice ! What I don't see is how you became crazy enough to think you could fight it out with Failway."

" Call it conscience," said Dalroi. " Even policemen get infected with it sometimes."

" Not on my squad they don't."

" Don't tell me," said Dalroi. " I know most of your boys better than I knew my father. There isn't one who doesn't shed a silent tear before proceeding to beat the hell out of an innocent suspect. I know. I received the best part of my education in that little room at the back of the local station."

" It's a pity you never saw fit to heed the lesson."

" I learnt the Eleventh Commandment," said Dalroi. " *Thou shalt not be caught, regardless.* You had nothing else to teach."

" Maybe, but being in my hair is one thing, and taking up arms against Failway is another. I shall miss you when you're dead and gone."

" How much is Failway paying you, Quent ?"

" You know me better than that, Dalroi."

" Yes, but I just wondered how you came by such up-to-date information. My declared row with Failway is yet only a few hours old."

" I read the signs," said Quentain, " and I keep an ear to the ground. Somebody's not very pleased with you, Dalroi."

" And they're not offering you enough to tempt you, eh ?"

" I'm a masochist," Quentain said. " In a curious way I've got used to having you under my skin. Also I intend that when you go down for the last time I'm the one who'll be responsible."

" Thanks, Quent. It's good to know that there are still a few human beings in the Force."

" It's being so human that keeps me a humble inspector. Look, Dalroi, I'll tell you what I'll do for you. I'll take this Failway character of yours away and lose him somewhere if you'll promise that when Failway catches up with you, you won't leave too much blood in my manor. Too much gore in the gutter doesn't look too well in the records."

" Thanks for nothing," said Dalroi. " And if I want to know the time I'll ask a policeman."

" Anything we can do to get you time will receive our wholehearted attention," said Quentain, reaching for his hat. " Oh, and Dalroi . . . I don't know what you've got yourself into this time, but I wish you luck. I've a slight feeling you're going to need it."

three

The clocks were striking half-past eleven as Dalroi parked his car on a waste-lot near the river. The dank, warm and rotten smell of the mighty wash flowing between dark banks quickened his pulse and brought back memories of a youth of hopelessness. This was home ground to Dalroi ; a crazy, complex, decaying world where the sleek atomic merchantmen jostled the dirty, ancient steam-tramps for right of way on the great road to the sea ; where the sprawling fingers of dockland spread ships, warehouses and tenements in such inextricable confusion that it was a puzzle to tell which was water-borne and which on land.

Dalroi slipped quietly along familiar pathways, not unmindful that his rendezvous with Madden might prove to be a trap. Reconnoitring the roadways leading to the Failway G.2 entrance, he watched especially for parked cars and trucks, and sounded the night life of the district carefully for anything which might strike a discord.

The huge bulk of Failway loomed like an ominous mountain high into the night sky, shading even the wan starlight from the crippled streets below. The wall around the Terminal was broken by a series of iron gates at the entrance to the G.2., loading bays. Failway Security men populated the gatehouses and any attempt to enter by the gates would have been futile if not fatal. Dalroi therefore turned back to the wall. It was twelve feet of unrelenting brick, capped with the sordid spite of broken bottles trapped in cement. He weighed the position carefully. A minute later he dropped lightly inside. A small door in a roller shutter gave him access to the building.

The loading bays were accommodated in one vast hall, which dwarfed even the largest trucks therein. At this time of night the place appeared deserted ; lit by a few sullen lamps in the high roof and overcast with the air of potential treachery. Huge bales and crates around the loading ramps shadowed space enough for an army to lie concealed ; but this fact had a double edge, affording ample shelter for Dalroi as he moved carefully around the bay constantly alert for watchmen or the possible path of an infra-red alarm beam. Of Madden there was no sign.

For fifteen minutes he sweated quietly, working from shadow to shadow until he had covered every obvious angle. Cursing

Madden for a pointless mission, he was about to retrace his steps when he noticed a dark alcove on his right. He had passed it a few minutes previously and found it empty. A glass-panelled door led from the alcove to somewhere in the interior. Now, he realized with an electrifying shock, something had altered. A cigarette end smouldered dimly on the floor. Within the alcove stood a dark shadow, waiting.

" Madden ?" asked Dalroi softly.

In the alcove something stirred. Too quickly. Dalroi's hand flew to his gun. Then the world about him flooded into light. Abruptly he was running for his life, dodging and twisting through the scattered bales with a hail of shots screaming from either side. It was a marvellous ambush. Most of the available exits sprouted their own particular bands of guardians, and those not plainly guarded had doubtless been provided with their own less-obvious executioners.

Dalroi dropped off the staging and ran into the trucking line. Here the metal monsters offered a more complex target, and he was lost from the sight of his hunters. He swung under a truck and hugged himself up under the girders of the chassis. His leg gained purchase on the transmission shaft and despite the grease and filth he managed to force his aching sinews to hold his body up until he thought he would scream with the agony of fatigue.

The search came nearer, and passed. A cursory spotlight swept beneath the truck but failed to find his back. Soon they would return more warily and search more thoroughly. If escape was possible it was now or never.

He dropped to the ground cautiously, the fall of his feet cushioned by the thick, dried oil-patch underneath. Swiftly crossing between one line of trucks and then another, he worked his way towards a large express truck. As he reached the cab a shout went ringing from the further side of the hall and feet came running. He prayed silently as he felt the little key beneath his fingers. For a second the engine failed to start, then coughed twice and broke into life with the noise of vibrant thunder.

Dalroi urged the vehicle into lumbering life and charged it across the intervening space straight at the steel-shuttered doors With the engine warming rapidly he felt his luck returning. Then impact ! The truck was doing fifty when it hit the shutters, and the slam and the scream of tortured metal would have

made a fitting prelude to the last days of the universe. The bumper grid took most of the force, but the cab ripped open at the top and the safety-glass dissolved around him in a hail of patterned diamonds.

Then he was out of the building, the shutter torn and twisted like a cardboard mockup. Only the gates now stood between him and the road. The gatekeeper stood square in the approach, dutiful anger passing to screaming hysteria as he realized Dalroi's intention. Instinctively Dalroi swerved slightly to avoid the creature in his path. The manoeuvre stripped the glass canopy off the front of the gatehouse and centred the truck on a brick column between two gates. Too late to brake or change direction, Dalroi gritted his teeth and charged the vehicle forward.

The brick column went down like straw before a scythe, and the heavy gates disintegrated in a hail of fractured castings. The rear wheel bucked frenziedly over the debris, and the battered dreadnought churned a crazy corner and hurtled into the sleeping street.

Abruptly he realized his mistake. A vehicle the size of his could never pass except by the regular trucking route. The way down which he was moving was flanked by warehouses, with low interconnecting bridges across the street. He passed under two granary conveyors without mishap before his frenzied braking fetched the truck up short with its load jammed under a narrow tunnel. With difficulty he forced open the door and dropped to the ground. He was greeted by the heated richness of leaking fuel from a fractured pipe. A car was shrieking up behind, and bullets whined and ricochetted off the tunnel walls He had scarcely started running when the truck burst into sheets of flame, effectively sealing the route behind him.

He cleared out of the district fast. The flame-watch circuits lacing the town had fire-tenders sounding in the distance within seconds. But no matter how swift the wheels of officialdom, the local population would always beat them to it, eager for the morbid excitement of a fire and perhaps a little looting on the side.

Dalroi stuck to the shadows and fly-paths, for his face was well known in the river district and he had no intention of being picked up on a relatively minor charge of arson and illegal

entry. His car was still where he had left it, but he wandered watchfully about the area for many minutes before he was satisfied that no one was watching. Then he swung out fast.

A quarter of a mile away a group of cowled figures in an instrumented trailer bent over the displays which told the tale of his leaving, and nodded in dark unison. Dalroi was shaping neatly—in fact, very neatly indeed. There was nobody in the world quite like Ivan Dalroi.

The hills around Passfields were bright after the morning showers. In the cutting the damp shadows clung heavily under the trees and the air was heavy-scented with fern and the blued wood-smoke from the cabin fire.

The apron in front of the cabin was occupied with Zdenka's car, so Dalroi turned his own car at the foot of the slope to a point where years of usage had worn a partial track amidst the silver birch. As he alighted he stopped in sudden dismay, for the track never used except by himself, was marked with fresh tyre tracks in the damp forest loam. He stooped to the ground for a careful examination. A medium-heavy vehicle had come and gone again, and footprints trailed up the hill in the direction of the cabin. Again the sweet smell of trouble.

He turned away into the trees and made a broad circuit to the rear of the cabin. Against the cabin wall he listened, hoping for some slight sound to confirm or reject his fears, but he heard nothing save for the wildlife in the brush beyond.

The blue wood-smoke rising gave him an idea. Silently he climbed the outhouse wall. A piece of flashing, left from an old repair, enabled him to stop the flue completely. Then he dropped to the ground and waited, gun in hand, for the opening of the door.

Nothing happened. In twenty minutes he knew the hut was untenable. Smoke issued thickly from the gaps under the eaves and round the windows. Finally he kicked open the door, gun raised, and peered into the smoky dimness of the room.

Harry Dever's body was on the bed, a wide wound where his forehead ought to be. Dalroi entered cautiously, fearful for Zdenka, but the rest of the cabin was empty and disordered. Of Zdenka there was no sign at all. The smoke, salty and acrid, drove him out again with smarting eyes and nostrils.

He broke some windows to clear the air and went back to Dever. The man was a rat and had been one all his life, but he had also been a mine of off-beat information. Dalroi felt the body, not yet cold. Perhaps two hours ago the murderers had struck. That was the last piece of information that Dever had to give. No clues as to who or why.

Dalroi swore, and kicked the sullen stove from its moorings, toppling it to the floor and scattering the hot embers. Paper rekindled the flame and the fire had gained irrevocable hold of timbers as he paid his last respects. Only as he turned did he notice on the door, scratched hastily in the paint, a single word : *Gormalu.* But this was the mystery rather than the answer, for Gormalu was blind and no more capable of committing this atrocity than of flying.

He was about to leave when he remembered the recorder in Zdenka's car. It was standard practice to record the transportation of clients and informers, and sometimes provided that little extra information which was forgotten at an interview. He reached in and pocketed the recorder then drove out of the woods as fast as he could.

A mile away he drew into a side track and started the recorder.

" Hell of a time to call a fellow out," said Dever's voice complainingly. " The streets aren't dry till after eleven."

" Don't fret," Zdenka said. " All we need is a little co-operation. This is an information job and we pay well. What do you know about the Cronstadt committee ?"

" Are you mixed up with them ?"

" No comment. Suppose you tell me about Cronstadt ?"

" Ah ! A pointed question. Cronstadt is a warrior of the old school, pig-headed and utterly ruthless. He made a bid for the Failway monopoly when it was first formed. Rumour has it that he's trying to stage a comeback."

" That sounds relevant. What about Presley ?"

" A nut of the first order. Preached hell-fire to his wife until she killed herself, then got even with her by refusing to sanction her burial in a churchyard. To hell with your body, it's your soul he's after."

" Hildebrand ?"

" A bit of an unknown quantity. Some queer rumours about the mental asylum he runs."

" And our old friend Gormalu ?"

" Are you sure he's on your side ?"

" I'm asking the questions. What do you know about Gormalu ?"

" Enough to know how dangerous such information is. If you really want to know you'll have to make it worth the risk."

" You can discuss that with Dalroi. He should be following fairly soon. If the information's any good, he'll pay."

" And that's another thing," said Dever. " I never could understand how you could go on working for Dalroi. Too damned unhealthy. He's a professional trouble-man. If ever there's trouble you can bet your life he's in it somewhere—usually underneath. Even the government agents were asking questions about him a little while ago, and anyone who attracts that sort of attention from the Black Knights is usually on the short list for . . ."

The tape came to an end and flapped uselessly around the spool. Dalroi cursed. The Black Knights were the top-level government security agents. They only handled assignments from high-treason upwards. Then what had they wanted with Dalroi ?

The scream of a police siren roused him from this line of speculation and vaguely through the bushes he saw the patrol cars jet past. It did not take much to work out the odds. Whoever had killed Dever had also tipped off the police. With a dead body in his burning cabin Dalroi would have a lot of explaining to do. Sufficient to keep him out of the way for a reasonable period—say fifteen or twenty years. The heat was really on.

He absorbed this information quietly, trying to restrain the burning fury which welded up inside him. He was trying to fit the pieces of the puzzle together. From the scrawled word on the cabin door and from the fragment of taped conversation there was a reasonable supposition that Gormalu was the weak link in the Cronstadt committee. The Black Knights' interest was a little difficult to see. Dever must have given more information than was recorded, for Zdenka would not have allowed a lead like that to die. He had to find Zdenka.

On his way through town Dalroi parked his car in an alley near the central station and hastened into a public telephone kiosk. He dialled his own number and coded the auto-sec which stored incoming messages. The message store was empty

and a polite taped voice invited him to leave a short message. Dalroi cut the connection swiftly. A low-pitched blurr from the auto-sec warned him that a line-tap was operating. It would take about five seconds for the call to be traced. Zdenka had not phoned in and that was a sure sign that she was not a free agent. Then he called Brian Regis.

" Dalroi ? You're certainly in the news tonight."

" Don't rub it in," Dalroi said. " I'm in trouble up to my ears right now. Look, I want you to do something for me. Zdenka's missing, and I don't think she went of her own free will. It's my guess she's been kidnapped and I need to know by whom. I'll pay well for the information."

" It's a deal ! If she's within fifty miles of the city I'll know by the morning. Where can I call you ?"

" Don't try," said Dalroi. " My phone is being tapped. I'll call you."

" Right ! If you want some advice, don't stay in one place too long. There's a whole lot of people looking for you."

The distant wail of a siren sent Dalroi running back to the car. It was obviously the police who had tapped his phone. Within seconds he was out of the alley and speeding precariously through the maze of turnings which constituted the downtown suburb. He lost the sound of sirens early and began to relax when he was confident that he had avoided the patrol. Two clues pointed to Gormalu. It was an unlikely lead but one which could not be ignored. Steadfastly he headed out of town.

four

Gormalu was blind, but the fact was not immediately apparent. The bat-call radar boxes on his shoulders guided his feet and hands with a precision which had unnerved many who had misjudged the disability. No, it was not the blindness but the sheer ugliness of the man which left the undying impression : the hawk face with the taut yellowing skin, the sightless eyes peering through dark glasses, the slight, gaunt, skeleton frame. To those who knew him further, the more hideous facet was the terrifying hoard of hatred which festered behind the blinding genius. To Dalroi he was the anathema of all that lived and breathed. There was no love lost in any encounter between them.

This night especially, Dalroi was in no mood for charity. Gormalu, as a member of the Cronstadt committee, was the pivot of his whole plan of operation. He had the information which Dalroi needed to make an effective move against Failway, and he was somehow involved with the strange affair at Passfields. Dalroi cursed. He who would trade with the Devil needs watch out for his own soul.

From previous visits Dalroi knew all he needed about the layout. He left his car nearly a mile from his destination and walked the rest of the way through the dark, sullen trees. Gormalu's henchmen would be wary and it was too easy to set a radar alarm on the approach road, but working in the shelter of the giant boles, nothing short of direct observation could detect his coming. Finally he circled the house, planning the best method of entry. The skylight gave rustily to the force of his fingers and seconds later he was standing in the dark laboratory. Nothing stirred. Silently he made his way to the dim inner-sanctum where Gormalu habitually held court.

The door opened quietly at his touch. Gormalu was there, his sightless eyes watching the door from the shadows of one small lamp.

" Don't move," said Dalroi. " Call for help and I'll kill you."

" Don't be theatrical, Dalroi. I've been expecting you. You should know better than to try to take me by surprise."

" I have reasons for not advertising my visits in advance."

" Just so ! The police are rather interested in you now."

" Don't let it give you ideas," said Dalroi. " I cut the phone wires before I entered. I don't exactly have a trusting nature. Kindly keep your hands where I can see them."

" As you wish." Gormalu leaned back into the shadows until only the thin, clawlike hands remained visible, resting on the table. " Now tell me what you want."

" I want information on Failway : what it is in a physical sense, where are the extra-spatial extensions, and what are its most vulnerable mechanisms ?"

Gormalu was amused. " If you had a degree in about eight subjects and an I.Q. of about one-hundred and eighty you could probably understand the answer in about five years."

" Perhaps !" said Dalroi. " But you know exactly what I need."

" Very well ! I shall confine myself to words of one syllable. That you will still be ignorant when I have finished is entirely your affair."

" I'll take the risk."

" Do you know anything about the nP energy values for atomic nuclei ? Perhaps not. Advanced neutrino study is not exactly popular science. Suffice it to say that all the atomic nP values for a given space-time lattice fall within a certain spectrum of energy levels. Can you comprehend that ?"

" No," said Dalroi, " but don't let it stop you."

" Well, it is the coincidence of the nP value in a given atom with respect to another which places the two in the same space-time lattice. This correspondence is called actuality. If the values are too far apart the coincidence breaks down, and, viewed from the standpoint of one atom, the other can be proven not to exist."

" Yet it does still exist ?"

" Certainly, in its own lattice or continuum. And as for atoms so for compounds and aggregates. The nP values are bunched in periodic steps, one step of the series being held by the atoms of this universe in which we now stand. Failway is based on the principle that atoms and thus matter, may be transposed from one energy level to another."

Dalroi nodded. " You mean from one universe to the next."

" No ! Universe is too limited a term to apply to the status of an energy level. Some are simply theoretical planes. Two that we know of are five-dimensional abstractions, one is a straight line, and one is a small sphere containing nothing within and the inverse of nothing outside it, or vice-versa according to your mathematical standpoint."

Dalroi fought these conceptions without success.

" All right," he said. " Let's concentrate on the levels that Failway use."

" Of an infinite series of levels," Gormalu said, " technology limits us to thirty-eight, of which the Failway apparatus can reach about twenty. Of this twenty they can populate only six, all rational planes or the internal surfaces of major spheres."

" Six," said Dalroi musingly. " I had always heard it was five—five places of pleasure starting with the prissy and descending in conscience as they increase in viciousness. I wonder what hells the sixth one contains."

" What terrible depths inhabit the human mind ?" asked Gormalu. " Are you so afraid of shadows ?"

" No," said Dalroi. " I was born in the shadows. I knew more about vice and viciousness at seven than most men comprehend at seventy. That sort of childhood leaves some rather ugly scars. I just don't want it to become a national characteristic."

" It never occurred to me that you were a humanitarian."

Dalroi ignored the sarcasm and moved the solitary lamp until the tired illumination fell full on the doctor's face, wishing the man had eyes to betray his moods. The dark glasses, forever turned precisely in his direction, radiated something more than sightlessness ; something malignant—as if his very soul itself were dark, unfeeling glass.

" You give me the creeps," said Dalroi.

Gormalu's chin jutted forward with a hint of amusement. " What else did you wish to know about Failway ?"

" Critical points for sabotage."

" Of course ! The application of brute strength to problems of technical delicacy."

" I didn't ask you to approve my methods."

" But I like your methods. They have a crude simplicity which is rather refreshing in this complicated world. It's just that the destruction of any form of technology is repugnant to me."

" I feel the same way about the destruction of men," said Dalroi sourly.

" Very well, discounting ancillary equipment, most of which is duplicated, the key to Failway is the field matrix tuner. That is the device which controls the destination of the capsule when it leaves the potential gradient. Smash it, and nobody can enter or leave the outworld levels until it's repaired and recalibrated ; alter the settings and a capsule in transit would get lost somewhere between here and infinity."

" If I smash the tuner what would happen to people already on an outworld level ?"

" They'd die." Gormalu pushed his chair back into the shadows as though the dim light burning pained his sightless eyes. " The levels are entirely dependent on supplies from Failway Terminal. Considering that it takes sixteen weeks to calibrate a new matrix tuner and there might be a visiting population of four million, you can sense the scale of the

catastrophe that your interference would invoke. Let's face it, Dalroi, you're out of your class when it comes to immobilising Failway. It's a task calling for a finesse you are never likely to acquire. Stick to murder and petty larceny."

" One more question," said Dalroi slowly. " What unholy gifts do Failway offer you in return for such poisonous allegiance ?"

For the first time the death's-head was overtaken by the white cast of fear.

" Blast you, Dalroi ! That's one question more than you're allowed."

" Is that why you had Dever killed ?"

" I didn't. It was—somebody else."

" Who ? Do I have to shake it out of you ?"

He reached across the desk and caught the thin, dry throat between his fingers, forcing Gormalu back into the chair. Gormalu fought and tried to rise but Dalroi threw him back again savagely and increased the pressure. In a paroxysm of frenzy Gormalu threw up his hands. Dalroi released him as he felt the body slacken. A small object clattered on to the desk and Dalroi stooped to pick it up.

A small black knight.

" That was very foolish, Dalroi. There are some things it's better not to know. You're caught up in a tide of affairs more complex than you can imagine."

" I want answers, not double-talk. Was it the Black Knights who killed Dever ?"

" I warn you," said Gormalu, " you're treading on unholy ground."

" Hell, I was born on unholy ground ! Now talk—for I'm quite prepared to kill you if you don't."

" I don't think you will," said Gormalu quietly.

Dalroi sensed the pay-off and dived for his gun. Not fast enough. A blow on the neck from behind dazed him momentarily, and before he could react his arms were pinioned and forced up behind his back until he knew the bones must break at any second.

Unashamedly he screamed and the hold relaxed very, very slightly. He knew Gormalu's henchmen, Timoshu and Matshee, and he knew they would not hesitate to cripple him at the slightest provocation. A blind tide of anger rose within him and leaked impotently away with the realization that he was completely powerless.

"Let me give you a little advice," Gormalu said, fingering his throat. " The Black Knights have something big lined up for you. Something big and brutal—something to do with Failway Don't try to fight it. Just accept whatever comes."

" One day," said Dalroi, " I shall probably kill you. Human failings, the lust, the greed and the cowardice, I understand, but you are a scowling enigma. I don't know what black principles motivate you, nor what ghastly solace your twisted longings crave. Knowing you is like the kiss of death !"

" You're a man of many talents." Gormalu's voice was a mere hiss between his teeth. " You're a fool, a prophet and a poet all in the same breath. The only reason I don't have you killed now is because somebody is waiting for the privilege who will make an immeasurably better job of it."

" I don't suppose," said Dalroi, " you've ever seen a shaft of sunlight breaking through a winter's sky ?"

Gormalu nodded to his henchmen. " You know what to do."

Dalroi tensed his muscles, waiting for his antagonists to move, ready to take advantage of any opportunity. He never stood a chance. He only dimly felt the deft blow as darkness flooded over him.

When he awoke it was only a tenuous return to consciousness He was in a ditch, his face propped on one arm clear of the filthy waters. He was soaked to the skin, and above him rain lashed from a pitiless, muddy sky. Survival demanded that he move, but only the force of survival had the power to override the pain that racked his body. Gormalu's henchmen had done a thorough job.

Despite the numbing of the bitter cold, every movement produced a pain too cruel for fortitude. In a state of near delirium he attacked the slimy bank not caring or knowing what it cost him in pain or energy, nor how many times he fainted before he made the crest. After a time his mind withdrew from the struggle and pure, blind instinct forced him on, then deserted, leaving him helpless and exhausted on a bank of yellow clay.

The next time he woke the sun was high and warm and his clothes were steaming as they dried on his body. Painfully he rolled over, drinking in the warmth hungrily, dimly recognising that his life might depend on it. An eternity seemed to pass whilst he lay thus, then, feeling stronger, he attempted to rise

to his feet. The pain flooded back, but he fought it grimly. His back was a thousand aching segments and each rib was a band of agony cramping his breathing. His limbs responded as though the joints had been carefully misplaced. He lay still for a moment longer, summoning his will to overcome the thousand crashing signals from his splintered nerves. Then he stood up and walked, his body burning with fire and his mind as cold as ice.

As he walked something elemental stirred within him, something which transcended pain and the bitterness of his plight. It was hatred, sheer, unbounded, naked hate, coupled with an endless determination to survive. It was part of the raw energy of the universe, the terrible will which ordained creation, the naive spring of the life force common to all things animate. Yet it was more than this, for it channelled and charged through a mind of more than ordinary awareness and cunning ; a mind shaped in the corrosive shadows of Failway, already bitter and familiar with the darker things which men do to each other. It was as a shaft of black forked lightning which played terribly through a brain already inflamed with dreadful resolution, and it spat like an angry arc in the tense no-man's-land between consciousness and the dark side of the mind.

five

The surge of blood was strong in his ears and a blinding headache lanced through his skull like the forced insertion of a blunt penknife. And something else . . . a whisper, a ghost, a flash of memory or delusion . . . of a long corridor with doors of surgical whiteness ; the macabre chink of instruments on a tray out of sight ; an oscilloscope trace like a green eye burning into eyes too hypnotised even to blink ; the insane knowledge that one was undergoing something too terrible to be admitted to conscious recognition. And it was gone . . .

He groped frantically through his mind, trying to recapture the fragments and to correlate them with experience. No success. Whatever nightmare he had recaptured had withdrawn again into the dark whirlpool of the forbidden. Even the headache trailed to a dull, nagging pulse.

He staggered at length into the bar of a fifth-class motel. The bartender noted his appearance without undue alarm, poured unordered cognac into a tumbler and pushed it forward.

" Smashed my car," said Dalroi by way of explanation. " Been unconscious in a ditch. I need a wash-room and a phone."

The bartender nodded. The world was full of nuts and anyone who arrived under his own steam in as bad a state as Dalroi had a right to invent his own lies.

" You'll find the bathroom through there."

Dalroi cleansed the blood from his face and arms and examined the bruises and abrasions. They were painful but not particularly dangerous. Gormalu's thugs had exercised a morbidly scientific restraint in their brutality. He was still wondering what to do about his bloodstained shirt when the door opened behind him. The bartender put his head in.

" Looks as though you could do with a change of clothes ?"

Dalroi nodded. " Got anything handy ?"

" At a price."

" I'll pay it. This stuff of mine needs burning."

The bartender shortly reappeared with a suit of cheap cloth and a woollen shirt. He looked quizzically at Dalroi's battered face.

" Boy !" he said. " That car must have hated you."

Dalroi ignored him and made for the phone, obscuring the index as he dialled.

" Dalroi. Any news of Zdenka ?"

" Not a hope," said Brian Regis. " The boys are fighting shy. Rumour has it that you killed Harry Dever."

" I didn't," said Dalroi. " He was dead for hours before I got to him. Anyway, how does it happen that everybody's suddenly developed consciences ?"

" I know how you feel," said Regis. " You're having a rough time. But you can't blame the boys for keeping their noses clean while the Black Knights are poking around."

" The Black Knights don't want me," said Dalroi. " I don't fool with stuff on that level."

" No ? Seen the television lately. There's an appeal out for you and I don't think it's just to help the police with their enquiries. Sorry, Dalroi, but unless things cool off a bit you're strictly on your own. It seems as though you're a stranger in town."

" That was all I needed," said Dalroi bitterly. " God ! If ever I catch up with the joker who set this up for me I'll start with the catalogue of Offences Against the Person and work right through the whole bloody list !"

" Can you let me have a room for the night ?"

The bartender nodded. " You in trouble ? I know a good lawyer who . . ."

" Do me a favour !" said Dalroi. " The way my luck runs I'd need a whole ruddy army."

" I only thought . . ."

" Don't," said Dalroi. " Thinking's a thankless occupation. It's bad for the brain and makes you a bad risk for life-insurance."

" I see your point, Mister. I've a room out at the back. It has a good view of the best ways to get out in emergencies."

" You're a bright lad !" said Dalroi. " Anything else about it ?"

" Only that you have to pay in advance."

On principle he objected to paying luxury hotel prices for a paintless, fly-spotted sweat-box, but the need for rest was imperative. There was the very possible risk that the bartender might turn him over to the police, but if he had the feel of the place correctly the bartender had every reason not to attract the police to the motel. The laughing couples who assembled in the evening had certainly not been man and wife, and the bitter smell of cepi narcotics lingered mustily in airless corners of the rooms. Even so, Dalroi was taking no chances.

He checked the lock and laid a twisted hairpin in the keyhole, a simple device to prevent the door being opened during the night. Then he cleaned and primed his gun, laid it within inches of his fingers, and settled down to sleep.

About dawn he was awakened by a sound he was half expecting. There was a slight scratch and rattle as somebody attempted to manipulate the lock. Gu ninh and Dalroi stole to the door and gently pulled the hairpin from the keyhole. Moments later the door swung quietly open. Dalroi let the intruder enter, then struck once. A dull thud and the man slumped quietly into his arms. Dalroi dragged him to the bed and went expertly through his pockets.

Obviously a professional. Nothing in his pockets, no identity—not even a weapon. The latter fact intrigued Dalroi. An armed assassin he was ready for, but an unarmed man was something of a novelty. Despite an imperative instinct to get out fast Dalroi stayed, splashing water from a jug on the unconscious head until the man revived.

" Who the hell are you ?" he asked dangerously.

The dark eyes opened in momentary terror as they focussed on the gun, then his face twisted into a wry grin. Fine white teeth gleamed against dark skin.

"I am called Malmud the Strangler. Lord! But they warned me!"

Dalroi nudged the gun into the side of his temple. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to kill you."

"How did you know I was here?"

"The Black Knights always know where you are. You're something—special. They take good care of you."

"I hadn't noticed," said Dalroi cynically. "Why should they want to kill me?"

"They don't. They said you were indestructible. I thought I knew better."

Dalroi threw the gun on the bed. "Get up!"

The dark eyes regarded him curiously. "Why?"

"If you still fancy your luck, I'm giving you another chance. There's something I need to know."

"There's nothing personal in this," said Malmud warily. "Murder is my profession. Your demise was of purely academic interest."

"Not to me," said Dalroi.

Malmud sprang like a beast of prey, his hands transformed into snapping jaws of steel seeking Dalroi's neck. Dalroi stood stock-still until the last instant, then, with the closing of the stranglehold, he struck. It was a wild blow at an improbable angle, but as his arm moved something burst within his mind, a little gateway into hell, blinding his eyes with radiance. Then it was gone. He didn't need to look to know the damage he had done. Malmud was far across the room nursing his injured ribs and regarding his tormentor with more than ordinary fear.

"Would you like another demonstration?" asked Dalroi.

Painfully Malmud rose, backing warily against the wall.

Dalroi indicated the door. "Now get out! I don't know what sort of bloody run-around you're giving me, but if anyone thinks it'll stop me having a crack at Failway then they'll have to learn the hard way."

Malmud went, hugging his ribs and coughing spasmodically, leaving Dalroi staring at his own hands and trying to trace an image that lingered in his mind. For a moment he brought it

into focus and the reaction made him sweat and tremble. Then he picked up his gun and went out into the early light.

His car was still in the woods where he had left it. Turning away from town, he headed for the open country. He needed time to think. There had been more violence and murder packed into the last few days than a man had a right to expect in a lifetime. The vicious circle of death and misfortune which had surrounded him was far too pat to be coincidence. Clearly his persecutors, whoever they might be, were keeping him on the run, allowing him no time even to breathe. The question was why—what was so special about Dalroi ?

The strain was beginning to tell. He felt like a man trying to do a jig-saw puzzle on which his life depended and which was being broken up as fast as he fitted the pieces into place. Failway, Cronstadt, the police and the Black Knights were all mixed up in this somewhere. Idly he wondered if his mind was beginning to crack. Once, when he had woken in the ditch and again when he had struck at Malmud, unexpected and atrocious facets of his mind had opened up to reveal a hint of something so malicious and diabolical that his mind balked even at the memory.

Heke pt to the main highway at first, solely because speed permitted a separation of those cars which might be trailing him, from the rest of the traffic. A black Mercury stuck discreetly on his tail for fifty miles, to be replaced by a red Forrole which executed a neat changeover. The lack of finesse about this mode of surveillance was laughable. Dalroi hit the Salang Hairpin bends at closing to one hundred miles an hour with the sure knowledge that anybody who had not misspent precarious juvenile years with a superfast car on those very slopes would be unlikely to survive at only half the speed.

He was right. He swooped down the perilous cutting like a jet, knowing the precise angle for a skid-turn at speed. The Forrole tried to follow. Only the massive granite blocks of the parapet saved the wreckage from a three-hundred foot no-return trip. Thereafter Dalroi had the fall-away to himself.

At the bottom he took the river road which hugged the cliff walls out of sight from the roads above. Scorching back over the dusty tracks he drew out on to the heath and stopped.

His car was black with a gloss which hinted of a recent spray. With the attack of his sharp knife the black layer stripped in a

thin, continuous film which had only nominal adhesion to the base. In less than five minutes the car stood clad only in the bright blue of the enamel underneath. He kicked the black film into a pile and watched it burn with a brief burst of fire.

The white walls from the tyres followed swiftly. The number plates reversed and the bumper overriders unclipped and were shot into the boot. A few more modifications and the car was not easily recognizable as the one which ten minutes before had driven on to the heath.

The suit and shirt he had obtained at the motel fitted his purpose well. He settled into the car and used the driving mirror to effect his disguise. Blonde hair turned auburn and heavy grease slicked the untidy locks back against his skull. He found earrings such as the smart-set wore, and a gaudy tie which tied to the largest of all possible knots. His face tanned tomato-red as though from unwise exposure to the sun and he added freckles with a deft touch.

Now he was typical of a thousand such young men : the fading clique who gatecrashed teenage parties, those who refused to accept that adolescence was over and that the age of responsibility had begun. To complete the atmosphere he turned on the radio, seeking raw jazz to blast away the empty silence.

Then he frowned, and the sweat on his brow nearly ruined the undry pigments. The harmonic ghost of a radio squealer insinuated itself into part of the broadcast band. So discreet was its placing that it would have passed unnoticed had he not himself been a master of the technique. Somebody had set a radio-marker on his car, and even now detectors would be plotting his position on an auto-map. Whoever was after him was sparing no expense.

The receiver was a powerful set, illegally modified to monitor the police and civil service transmissions as well as the normal broadcast bands. He started at one end of the tuning scales and worked right through systematically, tracing the harmonics back to the fundamental frequency. Soon he found it, the unmistakable self-resonance of a micro-wave capsule at close range.

It took him ten minutes to locate the transmitter. So cunningly was it contrived that without knowing of its existence he would not have known the mechanism for what it was. A small cylinder, no thicker than a pencil and not more than an inch in length, had been lodged in a cavity under the turbine

feed-pump. He examined it curiously, damping the oscillations with a loop of wire. The pattern was new to him and he mentally saluted the unknown technicians for a fine technical achievement. Undoubtedly the transmissions had a range of several miles and the device had a useful life of perhaps a year. Magnetic clamps were provided to attach the tube quickly to a suitable metal surface.

Since the capsule signalled his immediate position it was imperative that he lose it fast. To have cracked open the tube would have betrayed its discovery ; to have left it on the heath would have served no useful purpose.

He drove back to the highway, pulling up near the crossing where the great trucking routes joined the express road to the coast. A near collision resulted in the capsule being attached to the side of an express truck *en route* for distant places. He wondered idly just how long his persecutors would waste on that particular deception. For the first time in several days he began to chuckle. Somebody was going to pay heavily for putting him on the murder roundabout.

He spent the rest of the day piecing facts together in his mind, trying to trace the underlying pattern. The conclusions he reached were as chaotic as the chain of events on which they were based. Whichever way he analysed it the Black Knights had no place in the equation and there was more dirt attached to the Cronstadt committee than its tyrannical author would care to admit. In fact, the committee emerged as a decidedly suspect unit. This was a charge which only Cronstadt himself could answer fully.

six

In the commercial quarter, on the edge of the old town, the streets were quiet and overshadowed with the tall, deserted offices. At the marble portals of the Cronstadt Steel Corporation, Dalroi hesitated for a few seconds, then tried the doors silently. One swung open with spring-loaded reluctance. A night-guard making tea in an alcove beneath the stairs received no hint that Dalroi had passed.

Rumour had it that Cronstadt never slept. Certainly Dalroi had never found an hour when the tyrannical man of steel was not in his office nursing some white fury at the stupidity of the

world. Dalroi knocked quietly and pushed open the door. He entered to find a heavy Service radiation pistol centred on his chest.

" Who the devil are you ?" asked Cronstadt from behind the pistol.

Dalroi moved further into the light. " Remember me ?"

The baron studied the disguise for a long second. " Dalroi, yes, I didn't recognise you." The pistol returned to the niche in the desk. " I was not expecting you just now."

" Being expected," said Dalroi sourly, " is a luxury I can do without. I appear to have been elected target practice for every murderous thug for a pretty fair radius."

" You knew it was dangerous when you took on the job."

" I'm not speaking of natural chances. I speak in the capacity of a fully fledged sitting duck. I am anticipated whichever way I turn."

" You spoke to Madden ?" asked Cronstadt impatiently. " How did he react ?"

" Twisted," said Dalroi. " Like everything else about this affair. He tried to bribe me and then set an assassin to follow me. I lost two good friends in that episode. Somebody's going to pay for that mistake."

" Curious," said Cronstadt. " I thought Madden was the one Failway contact who might be persuaded to reason."

" That's the way I saw it too."

Dalroi got up and paced the office thoughtfully. The walls were shimmering with tri-di murals of the great north forests, lending the impression that the room was an isolated island in a world of cold and conifer. Symbolically the woods mirrored Cronstadt the man : frigid, inaccessible, demanding. Then the tri-di shivered and dissolved with the inscrutable complexity of the art, and suddenly Dalroi was staring into the blinding white-heat of a blast furnace, mentally reeling in the face of the streaming fury of boiling steel cascading into some unnoticed ladle. Instinctively he stepped back as if to escape the jaws of hell.

" Effective, isn't it ?" asked Cronstadt, his finger still on the button.

Dalroi nodded. The symbolism was not wasted on him. " For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory . . .!"

" What's that ?"

" Skip it !" said Dalroi. " It seems you don't know me very well. I'm a lone wolf in all things and whereas I can stand a little co-operation I don't take kindly to being thrown to the wolves. Try it once more and I'll hit you so hard they'll have to fetch you out of orbit to bury you."

Cronstadt recovered his composure. " For a nobody, Dalroi, you have remarkably big ideas."

" And for a rich man, Cronstadt, you have a remarkable tendency to confuse yourself with God."

Cronstadt inhaled sharply, then his face broadened into a slight, slow smile. " It seems we begin to understand each other. I see now how you gained your reputation."

" And I, how you lost yours."

" Touche ! You choose your associates with care."

" I have to," said Dalroi sourly. " They all carry knives and I've a very broad back. Now I want to know what the hell is going on. I joined you in good faith for a fight with Failway. Since then I've tangled with nearly everyone who has a gun or a brickbat and a general grudge against humanity. You're giving me the bloody run-around and I want to know why. Start talking."

Cronstadt inspected his nails closely. " You think I'm responsible ?"

" I know you are. I was baptised under the shadow of the mighty double-cross. Ask your friend Gormalu about our last interview. What was your purpose in hiring me for a twisted, two-faced assignment like this ?"

" Some people hire technicians and advisers : we hire fanatics—they have a single-mindedness which begets results. You were picked because you have the disruptive and demoralizing talents which we need."

" Who is ' we '? Your bogus committee ?"

Cronstadt opened a desk drawer, withdrew a chesspiece and stood it on the table. " Does that answer your question ?"

" Not quite," said Dalroi. " I've got the wrong shaped head to make a convincing Trojan-horse. I'm getting the hell out to fight a private war of my own."

" You're too late," said Cronstadt gently. " Too late and much too valuable. We couldn't let you go now if we wanted to. Anyway, it doesn't matter. The die is already cast. We've got big things planned for you."

" Such as a marble slab ?"

" If necessary, but I don't think we shall need it. You seem to possess a high degree of immunity against ordinary murder and an innate capacity for violent destruction. Those are most useful assets for someone who is intended to take on Failway almost single handed."

" Do me a favour !" said Dalroi. " All this power-play has addled your brain. Sure I'm tough. You have to be tough to stay self-respecting down in the river area, but there's another hundred thousand just as tough playing the rackets or doing time on the Moor."

" I wonder," said Cronstadt quietly. He twisted round suddenly. Something flashed from his hand, glinting in the dim light—a sharp knife, curving.

Dalroi moved sideways with instant reaction, scarcely aware of how he moved or why. One instant he was leaning on the desk, the next, he was standing bewildered with the knife he had caught still trembling in his fingers, the blade buried in his sleeve. But for his action the blade would have been buried in his heart. The wrath surged upon him like a runaway trainload of white-hot coals. With an uncontrolled madness he sprang towards Cronstadt intent on wreaking terrible vengenace.

The baron offered no resistance. He stood perfectly still, smiling very slightly, looking Dalroi straight in the eyes. Had he done otherwise he would have been torn limb from limb. The unexpectedness of his composure robbed Dalroi of the blind anger, robbed him even of words.

Dalroi swayed uncertainly, peering once again into the blazing chasm which had opened momentarily in his mind. As the angry gulf closed down he found he was trembling from head to foot, his stomach knotted with the fearful implications.

" Lord !" he said. " Don't you ever try a trick like that again if you want to stay alive."

" That was by way of demonstration." Sweat stood out on Cronstadt's brow. " How many of your hundred thousand could catch an unexpected knife in midflight ? Have you any idea of the reaction speed needed to do just that ?"

" You knew I'd stop it," said Dalroi accusingly. " How ?"

" Because we looked a long time for somebody with just that sort of talent. If you look long enough you can find somebody with a flare for anything. Your speciality appears to be staying violently alive. I would go so far as to say you're something of a genius at it."

"I manage to get by," said Dalroi sourly. "But let's get this straight. I contracted into this as one of a team. What's this single-handed idea?"

"Think what we're trying to do with Failway. It's as big as the government and it isn't limited by the same niceties of means and morality. If the government declared war on Failway there wouldn't be any government by morning. Yet somebody's got to chop Failway back to size, somebody more terrible than the most ruthless opposition."

"We should have done it years ago," said Dalroi sourly.

"Years ago, yes, but we didn't see the danger until too late. Now there is no civilised course of action left to take. Failway maintains a staff of around five hundred thousand souls, most of whom are virtually slaves and the visitors average about four million. With that many potential hostages not even the Black Knights dare make an overt move of war. Failway is a dictatorship which wouldn't hesitate at mass murder if it helped to maintain its hold. It's the most savage and bloody-minded piece of blackmail in the history of the human race."

"You don't have to tell me," said Dalroi. "Failway grows like a malignant cancer, feeding on the very filth and degradation which it breeds. You can't remove such barbarous poisons with good intentions and prayers; you have to take up a knife and hack out the rotting flesh, losing the limb if necessary, cauterizing the wound with red-hot iron and cooling the iron with tears of pain. Barbarity must match barbarity, cruelty match cruelty: a dozen eyes for an eye and a hundred lives for a limb."

"Very true," said Cronstadt, "but do you appreciate the strategy needed for such a task? To send an army or even a team into Failway would result in the most unholy slaughter of thousands if not millions of innocent people. If Failway can be broken it can only be by one man who can't be touched by force or guile, fear or pity; one man whose frenzy is such that he could bear a million murders on his conscience without snapping; a man whose terrible thirst for vengeance would lead him on where even dedicated madmen fear to tread."

"And I take it that I've been elected?"

"Just so. It had to be somebody tough and somebody who was not afraid to kill; it had to be somebody with a passionate and relentless hatred of Failway and with a mind strong enough not to burn out under the strain: and primarily it had to be

somebody whose innate capacity and ruthless determination to survive transcended all other emotions. We needed an indestructible and highly intelligent gutter-rat. It turned out to be you."

" Suppose I don't choose to be a bloody martyr ?"

" You have no choice. We aren't fools, Dalroi. Either Failway goes under or we do, taking the remnants of our type of civilization with us. Nobody ever supposed you'd choose to take on the job. I merely put it to you that you don't have any alternative. Failway's already after your guts, we've made sure of that. We've told them just how dangerous you are. Now you either fight Failway with our support or you fight them without."

" Fiends in Hell !" said Dalroi. " What kind of proposition do you call that ?"

" Unanswerable. You have no option but to tackle Failway. You don't know it, Dalroi, but right now you're the most dangerous man in the world."

"My God !" said Dalroi, his voice tinged with immeasurable bitterness. " My God, I'll give you cause to regret this hour !"

Cronstadt studied him intently, a frown of puzzlement on his brow. " What do you mean by that ?"

" Only this," said Dalroi. " I don't know what you've got set up for me, but if I survive I'll make you a promise—that each of you concerned with this act will die by my own hand. And God forgive the bitterness that lies within me."

Merely words, yet words impregnated with such intensity and hatred that the fiery murals suddenly seemed grossly opaque and sterile in the face of such crushing emotion. Dalroi, with a face of terrible thunder, turned slowly on his heel and left the room, and the sound of the door as it slammed behind him shook the silence of the great building like the firing of a cannon.

seven

Alone again, Cronstadt punched a button on the communicator.

" Central Security. I want the Monitor of the Black Knights."

" You're already connected. We had a tap on your communicator. This is the Monitor speaking."

" Thank God ! Did you hear that conversation ?"

" Every word. Frankly you're lucky to be alive. I'd no idea Dalroi had managed to get through to you. That boy's dynamite !"

" More than dynamite," said Cronstadt. " He's one of the Devil's own. We may have contrived a great deal more trouble than we're capable of handling."

" If it'll make you rest easier," said the Monitor, " it was only a matter of time before Dalroi and Failway came to grips anyway. We're merely catalysing the process by pushing Dalroi to the limits of endurance. At some point, in order to survive, he will have to tap the energies of the deep brain. At that moment he will cease to be strictly human and become . . . something else. If he goes through that point still rational then I think we shall achieve our object. After that we shall have to salvage anything we can or kill anything we can't."

" It's a frightful thing," said Cronstadt, " to use a man as a weapon—especially this sort of a weapon. How much untapped power is there in his mind ?"

" We don't know, but it's plenty. The dark side of Dalroi's mind is a region of activity such as we have never met before. His breakthrough will be a mental Hiroshima. No one can say what the ultimate consequences may be—for him or for us."

" I'm afraid," said Cronstadt, " in case even we've underestimated him. He's the greatest potential source of death and destruction that PsychoStat has ever seen. He's got a mind like a blast furnace and he belongs to that order of evolution in which the instinct for survival is paramount and undiluted. We're opening a new sort of Pandora's box. I wonder if any of us is big enough to get it closed again."

Dalroi walked. The night streets were deserted and the noise of the craft on the river blended loud and clear with the rattle of couplings from the railway yards. Very, very slowly the white heat of anger faded to a grim determination coupled with genuine bewilderment. In a few frantic days his world had collapsed about his head. He was a marked man, and his thousands of friends and contacts were suddenly strangers or enemies. In the whole of the grey, raw town which had been his home there was not one sanctuary where he could turn for refuge, nor one person he could trust.

But this realization, though appalling, was not the factor which generated the deepest, most penetrating bitterness. He appreciated the complexity of the trap, but why was the whole

world gunning for Dalroi ? How does a man become so special that you set him up alone against an army and shadow him with another army to ensure that he does not default ? Dalroi looked up at the patchy, patient stars and thought of the immeasurable wastes of the cosmos. A profound emptiness clawed within him. Hell ! How does a man become the most dangerous man in the world and how does he prove it with nothing but two hands and a heart full of vengence ?

The tension was rising in the city. He could feel it plainly now. The canny burghers, ears to the ground, knew it also. The streets were strangely deserted. Since leaving Cronstadt the shadows had been following him, invisible except to the sixth-sense of the hunted. This was undoubtedly the work of a highly trained group of agents and suggested the refinements of the Black Knights rather than the cruder tactics of Failway Security. Whoever the shadows, they had radio control, for the ring was closing round him even as he walked. He could almost catch the whispered orders in the air.

As he came to a crossing a police patrol car came out of a turning opposite. The car drew rapidly to a halt and the searchlight swung back and locked on him. Dalroi knew better than to attempt to run in such a situation. His disguise would have to suffice.

" Attention, please ! You are advised to return home or hurry to your nearest place of shelter. This area is liable to become the centre of violent civil disorder."

" What's the matter ?" said Dalroi. " Don't tell me tonight's the night the teddy-bears have their picnic ?"

There was a brief commotion within the car and Inspector Quentain hurled himself out on to the pavement.

" Dalroi ! One day that sense of humour's going to hang you !"

" Good guessing, Quent," said Dalroi. " But how does it happen that you're riding around in patrol cars ? Don't tell me you've run out of traffic jams ?"

" This is no joke, Dalroi. I've been looking for you since God knows when. We've got to get you out of here. There's a bloody war about to start and you're right at dead centre."

Dalroi glanced back at the apparently deserted streets behind. Only the faintest chink of metal on metal somewhere in the darkness betrayed the phantom army at his heels.

" You could be right at that," he said. " Thanks for trying, Quent, but if I was to enter your car I doubt if any of us would get to the next corner alive. Heaven knows I'm no bloody hero, but I'm going to sweat this one out because there has to be some sense in it somewhere and I need to know what it is."

" Look, Dalroi, I haven't got time to explain, but you're in something diabolical and you're in it deep. For Pity's sake climb into that car and we'll take it out through hell if necessary."

" It would be necessary," said Dalroi quietly. " Thanks, Quent, but if you really want to do me a favour find out what happened to Zdenka and see she's in no danger. Where I'm going I may be a long time coming back."

He stood well back from the car so that the unseen watchers might not mistake his intention. Quentain paused as if to make a last appeal, then changed his mind. The car took off like a bat escaped from Hades.

It had scarcely cleared the corner before Dalroi was flat on his face, hugging the ground as a hail of bullets erupted from somewhere in front of him. Then all hell broke loose. Shots crashed from all sides and for a period the street was almost continuously alight with the flashes from heavy-calibre automatics. A light machine gun opened up and sprayed mercilessly around the surrounding buildings. Dalroi bit his lip and played possum.

There was an intensity and bitterness about the fray which was quite unlike the gang-wars of his youth. This was battle for high stakes, with no quarter asked or given. Desperation was driven home with heated lead and errors of judgment were paid for with living blood. The air grew thick with acrid fumes and Dalroi was just considering his next move when the angry crossfire lessened. He never stood a chance. Something like a rifle butt stove down on his unprotected neck and the blaze of lights in his brain eclipsed the erratic flashes of the waning battle.

He awoke in Peter Madden's office with a head which threatened to explode and a predisposition to murder which was restrained only by the tightness of his bonds. Madden was awaiting his recovery with interest.

" Allow me to introduce myself," he said. " The name you already know. The position is Chief of Failway Security."

" Bit of a change from Public Relations," said Dalroi critically.

Madden smiled sourly. " Not when you consider the attitude of some of our public. I must apologise if we bungled your entrance, Dalroi, but we hadn't anticipated so formidable a bodyguard. The Black Knights guard you well. Confidentially, you've caused us a whole lot of trouble. You're a sight too clever by half."

" As a professional trouble-maker I have to be. I live by taking advantage of what other people overlook."

" A tenuous existence," said Madden, fingering a radiation pistol on the desk. " What happens when your adversary has all the angles covered ?"

" I get almighty mad," said Dalroi. " Why is the whole world gunning for me ?"

Madden looked at him curiously. " I really think you don't know ! Briefly, Failway has more to fear from you than from all the rest of our enemies put together. That's why you must be disposed of without undue delay, and this time I do have all the angles covered. If it's any consolation I'd like to say I wish it didn't have to be you."

" Don't bother," said Dalroi. " I hate platitudes."

The telephone rang and Madden listened impatiently. Then he slammed down the receiver, cast a critical eye over Dalroi's bonds and left the office by a rear door.

Minutes later the lights went out. Dalroi wondered about this but could attach no significance to the fact, nor did it offer him any advantage. The plastic thonging about his limbs gripped like bands of steel, leaving him helpless and immobile. Soon he thought he heard a sound in the darkness, as of a door opening and closing. He strained his eyes in the dim moonlight filtering through closed venetian blinds and his flesh began to crawl as he made out a shadowy figure advancing across the room, something metallic glittering in his hand.

" Who are you ?" asked Dalroi, quelling the fear which rose in his voice.

Abruptly a hand clamped over his mouth. " Malmud," hissed a voice in his ear. " Make no sound, Dalroi. You're in a tight spot."

The steel instrument snickered in the darkness and he felt the pressure of the bonds relax. In a few seconds he was free and able to stand.

" Thanks !" breathed Dalroi. " Perhaps I can do the same for you one day."

" I'm counting on it," said Malmud softly. " Have you got a gun ?"

" No, Madden took mine."

" Then take this." The broad butt of a radiation pistol was thrust into his palm. " From now on you're on your own. Don't try to follow."

Then he was gone. With a slight click the door opened and closed. Dalroi checked the safety trip and thrust the radiation pistol into his pocket, counted ten, and then he too left the office.

From memory he knew he was in the broad corridor, one end of which led down to the reception area. The corridor itself was dark, but where it joined the stairs an atomic safety-lamp gave forth a patch of dim blue fluorescence sufficient to give him orientation. Dalroi turned away from the light and headed into the unknown darkness, touching the walls and doors soundlessly with his fingertips to maintain direction. At fifty yards or so another corridor ran at right-angles to the first, and this he also traversed, attracted by the deep power-hum conducted through the walls.

He guessed the direction in which he was heading was taking him deeper into Failway, and, at this level, he should soon strike the vast hall from which the transfinite shuttles started. His fingers contacted a heavy, insulated door which he reasoned must lead into the great hall. Then the lights came on and an alarm bell began ringing in the corridor behind him. Men were running up the corridor he had recently left. Soon they would be at the corner . . . He opened the insulated door quietly and slipped into the loud warmth beyond.

He found himself not at floor level as he had supposed but on the great balcony surrounding the hall. Huge lamps overhead flooded the whole area with a light as bright as day and the hall, nearly a mile in length and a quarter of a mile across, lost its far end in the blue mistiness of a light, smoky haze.

Directly below, on the floor of the hall, was the network of narrow-gauge railway lines which guided the rapid bogies of the Failway shuttle capsules from the assembly bays into the gigantic polarizing matrix-field assembly and then on down the gradient chute where the capsules left their bogies and passed into trans-finite space. There were no passengers at this hour,

but a heavy traffic of service shuttles rocketed down the line carrying stores and liquified gases. Equally busy was the inspace route where the returning capsules leaped into existence above the slide and were synchronized deftly with electro-magnetic bogies and brought to a frantic halt to discharge the unwanted debris of six pleasure-hugry outworld levels. Above and behind him was the control room where the matrix programmers balanced the trans-finite fields which deftly plucked a capsule out of one actuality and centred it on another.

At the balcony's edge, a flight of stairs led down the hundred-odd yards to the floor of the hall. Dalroi moved along the wall until he was in line with the stair head, then sauntered unconcernedly across the balcony ignoring any eyes watching his back. He was halfway down the seemingly interminable flights of stairs before he noticed the TV pickups on the underside of every flight watching every move he made.

Somewhere a whistle shrilled, and a knot of men drew out from a further bay and ran towards his point of descent. Dalroi estimated speeds and positions silently, vaulted the rail and dropped the last twenty-two feet straight down the centre well. He landed like a coiled spring and immediately made towards the rail-tracks, leaping the narrow-gauge lines and sychronizing his movements to avoid the capsules speeding towards outspace. Then turning between the sets of lines and heedless of the hurtling traffic passing close to either shoulder, he sped down the hall towards the matrix polarizer and the chute.

eight

He began to doubt the wisdom of the action even as he started to run. The outspace capsules reached two hundred miles an hour on a carefully determined path through the matrix polarizer. What would happen to a man who passed through the polarizer at a stumbling run ? Nothing perhaps, or perhaps twisting electrocution ? The gradient chute lay beyond, where the giant electrodes drained the potential out of the speeding capsules and dropped them into lower energy universes. Would a man burn-out without the shielding of a capsule or would he be fired unprotected into some airless, theoretical void ?

The matrix polarizer was a wide tunnel, the walls of which were composed of the counterpoised coils and edgewise laminations which induced the polarizing fields to affect the

molecular orientation of the capsules and their contents before they hit the potential gradient. Without pausing in his pace he threw himself into the tunnel and was mildly surprised to feel no difference in thought or activity. It struck him that the fields might not be activated unless programmed for the passage of a capsule. If he could clear the tunnel before the next capsule came through he had a miniscule chance of staying alive.

A glance over his shoulder charged him with frenzied activity. Two capsules, borne by frantic, accelerating bogies, were speeding up behind him, one on either side. With the best of superhuman efforts it was doubtful if he could clear the polarizing coils before one capsule, at least, activated the field. He sprang wildly, almost snatching at the air to help his progress. Five steps more . . . now two . . .

Foimp ! Something caught him by the heels and hurled him into the air like a rag doll tossed by a puppy. *Foimp* ! A second twisting bolt of energy knocked the breath from his body and threw him outwards over the chute. Then he was falling, tumbling and bumping down a concrete gradient of one in three, brushing monstrous high-voltage insulator stacks and avoiding E.H.T., lines by a burst of blind, inspired hopelessness. He clutched at a metal stanchion to break his fall, missed a handhold by a fraction of an inch and fell sideways across the track. As he did so the speeding blur of a capsule topped the chute and began to descend upon him.

He had no chance to move. Like some gigantic super-bullet the capsule fell, projected by its own inertia as the bogies checked magnetically on the slope. The fantastic projectile, travelling on unseen wings, weighed down to crush him where he sprawled. Then it was gone, snatched into the realms of transfinity a few scant yards from his body. The implosion as the air rushed in to fill the void left by the disappearing capsule sucked the air from his lungs and threw him down again to sprawl among springs and buffers at the bottom of the chute. The bogies checked to a halt only half a yard behind him.

He lay for a full half minute exploring the bumps and abrasions on his body. Surprisingly, nothing seemed to be broken and he limped painfully to his feet and explored his position. He was at the foot of the Failway gradient chute, in a concrete pit perhaps fifty feet below the level of the hall. The rear wall was a sheer height of concrete and in one corner a small, greasy service-door gave access to the space beyond.

The door was locked, but this was no time for finesse. The radiation pistol was still in his pocket. He narrowed the beam to a hairline shaft and applied it round the lock, wincing as the moisture in the wood turned to superheated steam and threw out a blast of burning fibrous wood streamers into his face and eyes.

A savage kick and the door gave way. Above and behind him two more capsules burst into transfinity, but the pace was slowing as they cleared the hall for the security men to come in and get him. The little room he entered was full of lubricating equipment, pressure-greasing guns and tanks of hydraulic oil. He paused to open as many oil taps as he could find, and the room was filling with a light oil-fog from the sprays when he fired the radiation pistol and departed through the farther door.

The result was more nearly an explosion than a fire. The burning oil gushed out into the corridor behind him, unhampered by the effects of the carbon-dioxide injection system which quickly smothered the fire at its original source. The free oil burning in the passage was an unexpected bonus to his original intention to seal the route behind him.

Ahead, a bell was ringing as a flame detector sensed the fire and prepared to close a fire-shutter across the corridor. Dalroi jammed the shutter with a fire axe and leaped clear of the advancing tide of fire which followed hungrily at his heels into the crowded emptiness of a sleeping toolroom.

Chaos is a weapon seldom employed to full advantage : to a professional trouble-maker like Dalroi it was a technique worthy of the fullest exploitation. The wings of panic could carry him out of his present predicament whereas an air of pervading calm would see him set in concrete at the bed of the river, one of the inverse statues of the men who didn't quite make out.

On the wall he found a telephone and dialled the emergency number, warily watching the flames spreading towards him through the machine-tool jungle. " Fire !" he screamed. " The whole damn place is burning !"

" Don't panic !" said the operator. " Give me your location."

He left the receiver dangling on its cord and headed down the shop. A bolt from his radiation pistol cut another fire-alarm into action. In the welding section he opened the cock of an oxygen bottle and savagely rolled the shrieking cylinder back into the advancing sea of fire.

Another door and he was out into one of the broad intersecting gangways which laced the Failway terminus. He propped the door open to encourage the inferno at his heels.

" Fire !" he shouted. " Fire !" and began to run like a madman. Somebody looked hastily out of a doorway ahead.

" Fire !" shouted Dalroi. " Get the hell out of here but for Gossake don't panic !"

The man, who had no intention of panicking, was caught off balance by Dalroi's petulant semblance of fear. He shouted something to some others in the room and then rushed madly in Dalroi's wake. Others joined him, needing only the evidence of their noses to convince them of the wisest course of action. As if to verify their fears, a speaker cut in with directions for the assembly of a fire-fighting crew.

Dalroi let the others gain on him, deliberately inciting panic with a frenzied insistence to calm. Once, he stopped dead and caused a collision. Nothing disarms a frightened man like heavy physical contact. A violent scuffle ensued in which the fear rose to fever pitch and survival reactions reared an ugly head. Then the fear-laden carnival met the fire crew doubling in the opposite direction.

" Too late !" screamed Dalroi. " Get the hell out ! Nobody's paying you to burn !"

If the fire crew were unconvinced, the hysterical mass of humanity which hit them at running speed did much to affect the issue. The only man who stayed did so because the stampede had trampled him underfoot. Herd instinct replaced individual judgment and Dalroi was now riding a tide of terror which nothing could stop.

The mob snowballed. In a frenzy of screaming hysteria, the wild stampede swept down the gangway, crashed the unyielding panic-bolts and splintered the doors to fragments as it spilled out into the night.

" Don't move !" The command, urgent and imperative, was blasted across the intervening space from a battery of hailers at the gate. At the same moment the floodlights came on, flooding the walls with light and blinding the bewildered men who fought their way out of the door.

The area between the building and the outer fence was swarming with cars deploying the black-uniformed men of Failway Security. Dalroi's heart sank. The enemy had divined his intention and ranged their forces across his path. This was battle.

" Don't move !" ordered the speaker again. " There is a murderer amongst you. Spread out along the wall with your hands on your heads. Security . . ."

The hailers erupted fire as Dalroi cut into them with the radiation pistol and two floodlamps spewed hot debris into the road. He dodged back into the doorway, seeking a way of escape. His luck faded. Six bodies hit him simultaneously before he could turn. The radiation pistol went flying and he staggered backwards as somebody took his feet from under him. As he crashed to the ground the others piled on top, battling furiously to pinion him while he was down. Frenziedly he kicked two of them off, fighting with the skill and strength of a demon. He might even have won free, but the holds relaxed suddenly and he climbed up to stare into the warm, blued muzzle of a radiation pistol.

" Now let's go back to the beginning and start again," said Peter Madden grimly. " This is getting to be a little wearing."

Dalroi spat. " One day I shall probably turn you inside out."

" I don't think so," said Madden. " Not where you're going. Now move !"

Dalroi went reluctantly in the direction indicated and Madden followed at a cautious distance with his pistol covering Dalroi's spine. They worked up to the floor of the main hall, to where the shuttles started on the outspace route. A bogie was signalled to the ramp.

" Get on !" said Madden. " You're going on a trip."

" Without a shuttle capsule ? You're crazy !"

Madden shrugged. " Either you go that way or I'll burn you where you stand. And don't think that I wouldn't." His finger tightened on the pistol meaningly.

Dalroi looked at the vehicle : a bare chassis straddled with girders overhanging the four wickedly-powerful motors of the drive. A man could stay on that providing the acceleration was not too great and that he had rubber bones. He stood stock-still, his brain racing to find a way out of the situation. " Where to ?" he asked at last.

Madden laughed shortly. " What the hell do you want, an itinerary ? We've scrambled the field-tuners and unbalanced the matrix coils. I can promise you a destination somewhere between here and infinity. More than that I don't care to think about. One thing's for certain : you're never going to return. Now do you ride or fry ?"

This time Dalroi had no way out. Every trick in his repertoire was nullified by the pistol on his spine. He stepped on to the bogie, laid himself across the girders and secured a firm handhold.

" I'll see you in hell," he said.

It wasn't only motion, it was murder. Cushioned in deep foam plastic, the passengers in the capsules scarcely felt the raw acceleration. Dalroi felt it threaten to dislocate his arms as his body slid backwards over the awkward steel. The minimal damping of the chassis transmitted a bruising vibration to every point of contact and the hypnotic effect of sweeping down the mile-long track at closing to two hundred miles an hour and a low angle of view brought cold sweat to his brow.

But those were the least of his troubles. The nickel-copper laminated hulls of the passenger capsules had a very precise function—that of protecting the occupants against the physical and mental hostilities of the transfinite field. They were virtually spaceships in miniature, with self-contained atmosphere, light and heat, and designed to withstand all of the multi-million changes of super-physical environment which transfinite travel involved. The twisting disproportionality of the area beyond physics was normally minimized to a vague nausea by the squirrel-cage electrodes in the hull and the careful use of anti-hallucinogen drugs. Dalroi had neither of these. He was heading unprotected into regions antagonistic to both body and sanity, to arrive, perhaps, at some unguessable destination from which he had no possible means of return.

Like a crude, iron arrow, the bogie hurtled down the track heading for the matrix polarizing tunnel. In a fragmentary burst of anguish he considered throwing himself from the bogie, but that meant certain injury, if not death. Outspace there was one chance in infinity squared that he would not die. Then he hit the polarizing field and the shattered circuits which once were nerves twisted his body into knots in the milliseconds before he was flung over the gradient chute. The bogie checked on the rim and dropped down the falling rails, but Dalroi, projected by his own momentum, flew like a wounded sparrow in a hideous, tortured arc between the grim electrodes. Despite his iron nerve a scream rose in his throat. It was still on his lips when he passed in to the realms of transfinite space.

to be continued

in previous ' X '-person stories, John Rackham has always had his central character solving specific problems for other people— in this story, the ' X '-person has to solve one for himself or suffer the consequences

crux

by john rackham

Arthur Sixsmith was pleasantly tired. He sat on the edge of his simple bed, in his plain and unlovely pyjamas, and let himself be aware of the full extent of his weariness, savouring it, analysing its components. It was that bland fatigue that comes from spending a full day doing non-spectacular but well worthwhile things, routinely, competently and with total devotion. Being as he was, a medical generalist, he knew the value of self-appraisal as a catharsis. But he was also too mature to shut his eyes to the danger of being too engrossed in personal ego. This five-minute scan through, to release tensions before sleep was, to him, in the way of medicine, to be employed sparingly.

One of the major defects of humanity, he thought, was the failure to grow out of this pre-occupation with the self, with ' inner space,' with the total absorption in *my* feelings, *his* feelings, *her* feelings, to the utter failure to realise that there was a greater and more important universe out there. As a doctor—he preferred the old-fashioned word—he saw far too much of what this adolescent mentality could do. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, the real thing that ailed his patients was inability to communicate, to establish relationships. And this was simply because they didn't know anything except

themselves, and those not very well. Only the sparse few had the courage to shed the syrupy comfort of ' me, myself and I ' and turn an enquiring, interested gaze on what was going on around, outside, in the world at large. A few grown-ups, and far too many millions of children. The human race was, he sighed, taking an unconscionable time to grow up.

All at once he felt lonely. Not for the mumbling millions who abused themselves in ignorance or stupidity, and then came to him, Arthur Sixsmith, M.D.,D.Sc., to repair the damage so that they could go and abuse themselves all over again, not lonely for them. He was even lonelier in their company than when he was by himself as now.

Lonely, he thought, for someone like himself, more interested in things and processes, possibilities and potentials, than in exulting and agonising over feelings and emotions. But such people, always few, were growing fewer every day. In the sixty years since the death of Freud, mankind had gone back into the cave of the personal, newly furbished with the tricks and trappings of science, but nonetheless a cave. Even doctors such as himself were rare. The idea that a qualified person could stand outside the body-machine, observe it in misuse and prescribe for its restoration to efficiency, never popular at any time, was on the verge of extinction. Now it was a matter of taking the right pill for the right occasion, so long as you were able to, and if you got beyond that, you delivered yourself up to the hospital machine, where you were firmly and efficiently adjusted and rendered ' right ' to return to society. That you might be a unique individual, with unique problems, was an idea too difficult to deal with. Sixsmith smiled at his own cynicism, even while he admitted the truth of it. And his grudgingly rationed five minutes were done. He was about to insert himself between his sheets when his telephone buzzed.

Smothering a bitter comment, he swung his bare feet to the composition floor again, went out into his little ante-chamber and picked up the receiver.

" Doctor Sixsmith ?"

" Speaking . . ."

" Something wrong with your machine. I can't see you !"

" This instrument doesn't have vision," Sixsmith explained, as he had explained thousands of times before. Lord, he saw enough of the silly face of humanity in his daily work, without wanting to import it into his home, but he didn't verbalise that part. " What do you want ?"

" This is Mark Leng . . ." the voice said, and paused significantly. It was a cold, imperious, confident voice, a man of power, a man who expected to be known. Sixsmith frowned, slightly.

" So ?"

" You don't know my name ?"

" I do not, and I'm in no mood for charades at this hour of the night. What do you want ?"

" Your professional services, of course. At once !"

" What's the trouble ?"

" Doctor Sixsmith . . ." that cold voice became steel-hard as its owner ran out of patience. " Two of my men will be calling at your door any moment now. I want you. You will accompany them. This call is just my way of getting you ready. Do you understand ?"

" Not yet," Sixsmith replied mildly. " You omit the key detail. I must know what the trouble is. I cannot carry everything. Nor can I deal with everything. If, for example, the matter is beyond my competence . . ."

" Then ?"

" Then I recommend you to apply for hospitalisation, at once, and bid you goodnight . . ."

" One moment !" Leng's voice fairly crackled. " Doctor, you are, I believe, acquainted with a lady named Normandie ? Janice Normandie ?"

" I am, yes," Sixsmith's voice was still mild, but he had all his faculties out at arm's length, in a flash. " Why ?"

" I want you, Doctor. I want you to come here, with my boys, nice and peaceful. Co-operative and so-forth. Or I will do things to Miss Normandie that would make you sick just to think about. Now do you understand ?"

A small fire began to burn inside Sixsmith, like the first exultant response of a clean system to a generous gulp of strong spirit. It was very like intoxication and he throttled it cautiously, but without extinguishing it altogether.

" I understand perfectly," he said, " but I fear you do not. I must know what the trouble is, a description, at least. An emetic is useless for a broken limb. If you insist on my coming, at least let me come prepared. Let's not waste Miss Normandie."

Leng snarled, quite audibly. Then, reining his temper, he said, " I'm shot, wounded, and losing blood. Let's not waste any more of that, either !"

Sixsmith stared at the instrument as it went dead in his hand, then crowded the riot of his excitement into the back of his mind as he got himself ready. To dress and pack an emergency bag took only the top of his attention. From beneath that he cautiously extracted such clues as might help to identify this power-person. Wounds and injuries inflicted with weapons were rare enough to narrow the field considerably. Divide that small total by the type of person likely to prefer a private doctor to a public hospital, and again by the type who resorts to threats to gain compliance, and the remainder was very small.

Leng, then, was a criminal. Sixsmith's acquaintance with criminals was so slight as to be negligible, and he had studiously refrained from reading or viewing any of the popular mass-communication channels, but there were pointers to guide him. Leng expected his name to evoke immediate response. He was, then, a somebody in his own eyes, at least. He had ' boys ' who carried out his errands. He was in a position to know of the relation between Sixsmith and Janice Normandie and to threaten her with violence. That last was very significant, as Clive Normandie, Janice's father, was one of the really big figures in international finance. If Leng thought he could match forces with Normandie and get away with it, then he must fancy himself enormously.

For the very first time, Sixsmith regretted being out of touch with the common world of sensationalism. Not that he had much time to dwell on it, for he had hardly tied the last knot on his out-of-date windcheater when his door-alarm sounded.

A shaven gorilla in garishly tight human clothes stood on the doorstep. Sixsmith took him in at a glance and knew instantly that such a design could never have become other than criminal, a thug. It was no more the fault of the man than it is the bass drum's fault because it fails to render chimes. The apparition clutched a stun-gun so that it pointed at Sixsmith's middle. The principle of the weapon was known to Sixsmith and he regarded it with a deal of cautious respect.

" Doctor ?" the thug growled, and Sixsmith nodded, kindly. A ham-like paw made a rough but thorough investigation.

" I'm not armed, you know."

" Git in the car !"

The gun-muzzle gestured and Sixsmith meekly obeyed its hints. The massive machine was luxuriously cushioned. He settled in a back corner and the thug scrambled after him. The

driver who was showing only the top of his head and two protruding ears, had the car in motion before the door had closed.

" Where are you taking me ?" Sixsmith asked curiously, as the machine lifted and spun away into the steady stream of automated traffic. He had heard of people who drove, choosing for themselves how best to steer a machine on a roadway, but this was the first time he'd had direct experience. It was somewhat breathtaking, compared with automated uniform movement in a series of straight lines and ordered curves. He felt insecure and almost regretted the question, in case it had taken any edge off the attention of the driver. But the man at the wheel seemed unworried.

" Not far," he called, briskly. " Nadir Club. Know it ?"

" Oh, yes," Sixsmith settled back in his seat. " Oh yes, I know it."

" Shaddap !" the thug stirred, waved his weapon, and looked almost eagerly for disobedience.

" Thank you very much," Sixsmith shrugged. It was a gesture. Inside, his thoughts whirled. He knew the Nadir Club well. Janice had insisted on taking him there several times. It was the place where anyone who was anyone was to be seen this season, and she wanted to exhibit him. In her set, he was something of a capture. He made barely enough to live on, because he would treat the patient as a sick person in need of help, rather than as a potential source of income. Mechanised and inserted into the social network, his talents would have made him comfortably off, but he was genuinely uninterested in wealth and utterly unawed by those who possessed it in large quantities. He was outspoken, regardless of audience, and had not a shred of hypocrisy. With it all, he was effortlessly attractive. He was, in short, a tremendous novelty, and Janice treasured him, for all that she understood him not at all. In all probability, she was in love with him, too. Sixsmith knew all this, detachedly, and it amused him.

What really caught at his imagination was that little inner glow, which had now settled into a steady flame. This was 'it,' at long last. The Nadir Club had the reputation, justly earned, of providing anything you cared to name, so long as it was expensive. The owner, a shadowy figure seldom seen, was immensely wealthy, powerful and utterly unscrupulous. Sixsmith felt he could now fit the name Mark Leng where it belonged. And Leng might provide the test that Sixsmith had

sought ever since childhood. A lifetime might be coming to solution any moment now. He settled more firmly into his seat and tried not to anticipate too much, not to cast his hopes too high.

The car whined to a stop and the thug growled again.

" Git aht !"

Sixsmith went up familiar steps of plate glass glowing with orange fire, to an invisible, but bullet-proof, glass double-door. On the other side a hostess swayed forward in greeting, her responses triggered by his approach, her smouldering smile as false and as dazzling as the winking neon-sign overhead. She wore glowing glass shoes, cut-glass brilliants in her black hair, and three strategically placed patches of fluorescent paint. She was overdeveloped almost to deformity, and Sixsmith wondered again, why. Her overgrowth, like a toucan's enormous beak, defeated its own ends and no longer served any biological purpose. Her smile froze and then switched off as she saw past him to his companion. On her heel, she turned and jiggled back to her alcove. The doors swung open.

As he paddled through the ankle-deep sponge carpet, Sixsmith spared a moment to compare the two extremes of conscious evolution ; the thug by his elbow thrown back almost to ape-man and barely human, the hostess bred forward into a sex-stimulus superlative, but moronic and barely human. And then he turned the critical spotlight inward, unsparingly. He, too, was barely human. If Leng fulfilled the promise he had begun, Sixsmith might be on the point of finding out just what he really was.

The thug paused by a recess in a panelled wall, laid his palm against a nude photograph in a box-frame and the recess became a hole, a compartment. Sixsmith was urged inside. The door hissed shut. The compartment fell with startling abruptness a long way. Then weight was magnified as brakes dragged to a halt and it stopped. There was silence for several seconds. Sixsmith wondered, in the dim red gloom, what they were waiting for now. A small spot of brighter red glowed suddenly, and a familiar, imperious voice, tin-plated now, demanded,

" Who ?"

" It's me, Corey. Brung the doc for ya."

" All right. Shove him in when I open the door and then wait upstairs."

There was a sharp thump, a boom of motor-power, and the wall fell away as Sixsmith looked at it. A rough hand took him in the small of the back, sent him plunging forward three steps over thick-pile carpet. He hung on to his professional bag, caught his balance and froze quite still. At his back the click and hum came again, but he had no time for it. Trick elevators were a bagatelle compared with the chill death that looked him in the eye now. Five feet away stood a heavy crystal-plastic desk. A foot above that glossy surface was a weapon, its dark muzzle unwaveringly on Sixsmith. The hand which held the weapon vice-steady related to a pair of dark eyes, bright from beneath the brim of a slate-blue winged cap. The gaudy cap was a current and frivolous fad, but there was nothing faddish, nor frivolous, about the face beneath.

It was a hard face, swarthy-skinned, handsome in a vivid Latin way, and set in a half-grin that was totally without humour. Sixsmith knew, in that silent second, that he was closer to extinction than he had ever been in all his life. More, he knew, intuitively, that only something akin to a miracle would get him out of this room again, alive. In that moment he knew raw fear. Then it was past, and all his faculties sharpened into knife-edge keenness as he consciously relaxed.

" Mark Leng ?" he wondered, quietly.

" I am. You're Dr. Sixsmith." It was a statement, not a question. The hard voice went on " Look behind you." Sixsmith half-turned, saw that there was nothing to indicate any break in the red and gold wall at his back, nothing but a small square frame which might have been a spy-hole but wasn't. Leng explained. " That's a special door, doctor. It cannot be opened at all from outside. Short of massive destruction, that is. It opens only from the inside, and only for me." Swinging forward again, Sixsmith saw Leng raise his left hand, palm forward. " This hand-print, on this plate, here on my desk, or on that one by the door—but no other way."

" Why tell me all this ?"

" Because I want you to know just how things stand. It saves time and argument. You might, for instance, feel a pain in your medical ethics, and want to protest. You might get some weird notions, like refusing to treat me, like trying to get the drop on me. like trying to call the law, like all sorts of things people try to pull. Such a waste of time ! I like it simple. You treat me here and now. And you do it good, or you don't get out of this room alive. You see ? No need for

argument, once you know. I hold all the cards. I like it that way."

Sixsmith saw a chair just ahead of him and to the right. He went forward a pace, sat carefully, put his bag on his knees, and smiled.

" Good !" he said. " I'm not a card-player, so your allusion loses a little of its point, but I think I understand to the extent of venturing to disagree. General strategy, in card-playing, depends on the ability to estimate the strength of the opponent's holding, is guesswork, in fact. Am I right ? If I am, then I'm afraid you've guessed wrong, this time. Not your fault, mind you !"

" I don't guess wrong," Leng's voice hardened, " and I'm not sitting for no debate, neither. You get busy and treat me, doc !"

" Or . . .?"

Leng's set smile faded and the weapon in his hand drew a small circle of menace. " See this ? Know what it is ?"

" In fact, no," Sixsmith was mildly apologetic. " Not accurately, from this angle. But I'm prepared to concede that it is a weapon, that it is lethal, that you not only know how to use it, but will have no compunction in so doing. But . . ." and he ventured his mild smile again, " . . . you know, if you kill me, that will do you no good at all. You will still be in need of treatment."

" A brain, a brain !" Leng sneered. " You're pretty smart, doc. Cool, too. But you didn't think hard enough. I wouldn't kill you. I'm not that stupid. All I would do would be to carve slivers off you. An ear, maybe, or a toe. Not your hands of course. Those . . . I need !"

" Of course," Sixsmith nodded, judicially. " I'm glad to see you've taken some thought beyond the first crude approximations. But you're still in error, you know. Your levers, so far, have been two. Fear of death—which fails because I'm not afraid to die, and my death wouldn't serve you. Fear of pain, which won't work either. I happen to be very sensitive to pain, and that, as you really should know, is liable to distort my judgment, upset my faculties. And you need my judgment and faculties . . ."

" What kind of nut *are* you, anyway ?" Leng's iron control cracked for a moment, and the weapon shivered in his fist. " Everybody's scared of pain and death. You can't tell me

different. Why don't you get on with it, and stop this crazy talk ?"

" Because I, too, like to know just how things stand, Mr. Leng. Your judgments and guessworks may be reasonably accurate with most people, but you made a major error when you included an 'X' in your calculations." He paused to smile at his own dry jest. " That's rather good. A pity you can't appreciate it."

" What the hell are you grinning at ?" Leng shouted, in sudden rage, and then cringed at some torment, fighting for self-control. " Are you a doctor, or what ?"

" Ah ! Now that is a very interesting question. That is where your calculations went wrong. I am a doctor . . . and . . . " Sixsmith left the words there, waited a moment, then, " May I move ?" Taking silence for assent he put a hand into his coat, got out his wallet, and from it extracted a small square of plastic which had rested there many years. Getting to his feet, he approached the desk, held out the enigmatic square so that Leng could read. The grim, dark eyes, crease-lined with curiosity, shifted downwards for no more than thirty seconds, then snapped up again.

" So . . ." Leng sneered. " An 'X'-person, eh ? A superman ! You think that makes any difference to this ?" and he flicked the weapon in his fist. " I press this stud, doctor, and it makes a hole right through you, and neither your fancy certificate not your super brain power will make the slightest bit of difference to that !"

Sixsmith put away his evidence, sat down, and sighed.

" You make life difficult for yourself, thinking in grooves the way you do. As I have already explained, you won't kill me, or hurt me, because to do so would be contrary to your own best interests. You might as well put down that weapon for all the good it is to you. And I am *not* a superman !"

" I think you're crazy," Leng said, with something of bafflement in his voice. " But you *are* a doctor. And I'm hurt. You must do something for me. You must !"

" Of course. If you hadn't jumped the gun, by assuming that I would need to be driven, we could have saved quite a lot of time and argument. Now, before I can do anything, I need to know what's wrong, and to do that, I must examine you."

" All right," Leng snarled. " You can examine, and about time, too." He let the weapon sag, raised his other hand to his ridiculous headgear and began easing it free of his head, very gingerly. With set face he completed the operation, let the cap fall clear and breathed, shakily.

" Take a look at that," he invited. " Easy now, not too close," for Sixsmith had risen to his feet, involuntarily, at what was revealed. Across Leng's head, diagonally from above the right eye to the left ear, was a gory furrow, exactly as if someone had laid a red-hot bar across the man's scalp. Hair skin and flesh were seared and burned away in a black char that floated sluggishly on an ooze of dark blood and yellow-white mucus.

" A near miss," Sixsmith said, moving close to the desk, his chest up against the muzzle of Leng's weapon. From that vantage, he could look down on it and recognise it.

" A high-frequency pulse-beamer," he said.

" Never mind the toy. What about my head ? You call it a near miss, but the way it hurts, it was a hit !"

" Turn your head a little, to your left . . ."

Sixsmith made quick and gentle touchings and probings and then pursed his lips. Another touch or two, and he shook his head, turned and went back to his seat. That little glow of expectancy, which had almost died in the futile argument, was now burning up again.

" Well ?" Leng demanded, thickly. " Get on with it !"

" There isn't much I can do for you, I fear. I can apply cleansers and dressings, of course, and I will, if you wish ?"

" I'm tired of your funny games, doctor," Leng's face was grey now, with the prolonged fight against pain. " Get busy. Don't forget, I have one more ace in the hole."

" A supply of parafibrin anti-toxin, perhaps ?"

" Will you pack up the double-talk ?" Leng snarled. " Get busy, can't you, before I get really rough."

" Very well." Sixsmith snapped open his bag and got to work with swabs, lotions and antiseptic sprays. It was superficial treatment only, and took him less than ten minutes. Leng was a perfect patient. The cleaning and sponging must have given excruciating pain, but he sat as still as a statue, with neither murmur nor twitch.

" That feels very good," he whispered, as Sixsmith returned the last spray to his bag and stepped back. " You've done a good job."

" Only half a job," Sixsmith returned to his seat. " You were shot, I presume, by a similar weapon to that which you are holding ? How long ago ?"

" About half an hour. A couple of hired butchers. They caught me in the playroom, upstairs, off guard. You needn't trouble your head about them, doctor. They are beyond needing your help. And so are the two half-wits who were supposed to be bodyguarding me at the time. All neatly taken care of. I've got a score to settle with the friendly character who sent them here to get me, but that's my worry. Nothing to do with you. And I'm not finished with you, yet."

" I rather thought you hadn't."

" Now, now," Leng managed a harsh laugh. " I know what you're thinking, but you have me all wrong. I'm not going to have you put away. I don't do things that way. You did a good job. My head feels fine, now. I pay for a service like that." His hand went to a drawer in the desk and a large-denomination note fluttered across to within Sixsmith's reach. " Put it in your bag, doctor. It's yours."

" And I'm free to leave ?"

" Ah no. It's not that easy. You'll stay right here. I have a nice little private suite, right here, just for moments like this. You'll stay as my guest just so long as my head needs attention. *Then* you'll be free to leave, because by that time I will have worked out a way of ensuring that you won't cause me any trouble. In the meantime, what about this ? I will put aside another bill like the one I just gave you. That's more money than you could ever hope to make honestly, doctor. It's yours, but it goes down by a tenth for every week that you have to stay here. In other words, get me well quick, and you're that much richer. How about that ?"

" You like to have things all planned out, don't you ?"

" You bet I do. That's why I'm on this side of the desk, and I'm in charge of things. You're impressed. Go on, admit it, you don't have all the brains." Leng was almost jovial, presumably because of his relief from pain.

" You're quite good," Sixsmith admitted, gently. " I suspect you were, at one time, a gentleman. In the widest sense of that term. However, in adopting the argot of violence, you have fallen into some of the habit patterns of that class. You are still thinking in grooves."

Leng's face darkened, swiftly, and his weapon came up, seemingly a part of his right hand. " Clue me, doctor," he

ordered. " All the time, you've been acting weird and talking like a book. What are you, anyway, some kind of screw-loose fanatic ? Come on, now, talk it out plain. I don't like playing games."

" You think in grooves," Sixsmith repeated. " You have an obsession. To you, no-one ever does anything except under compulsion of some kind. You seek, always, to find some sort of lever to apply ; fear, pain, violence—and now, cupidity. You may be right, of course."

" You bet I'm right. Levers, eh ? I like that idea."

" You may be right," Sixsmith nodded. " I hope so. You see, I'm different. Up to now it would be true to say that I have never responded to coercion of any kind. Not you, nor anyone else, nor any combination of others or circumstances, has made me do anything I don't want to do."

" Up to now, eh ?"

" Exactly. I had hoped that you would produce the ultimate challenge, that you would—find the right lever to move me. So far, you've failed. Death doesn't move me, nor threat of pain, nor am I interested in riches. What else can you do ?"

" Why are you goading me, doctor ? Why can't you just stay here and attend to me, the way I have it planned ? What's so wrong with that ?"

" It's impossible. I can explain if you insist. But, suppose you just accept it, for the moment. Accept that it is quite flatly impossible for me to remain here as your captive and take medical care of you. Now, your problem is to find some way to compel me to do just that, isn't it ?"

Leng was nonplussed, now. He looked at the weapon in his hand, then back to Sixsmith, and dragged his eyebrows down in a hard frown. Then he carefully put down the weapon, put both hands on his desk, palms down, and shook his head, slowly.

" You are the craziest character I ever met," he declared. " You ought to be scared, or defiant, or offended, but you're not. You act as if you *want* something, as if you're trying to manoeuvre me into some corner. I don't understand it. Doctor, I don't *want* to be rough with you. I never want to be rough with anybody. All I do, I show them what will happen if they don't do what I want. All I want you to do is stay here and take care of my injuries until I'm fit again. That's simple enough. It won't hurt you."

" It's not possible."

" Now why do you keep saying that ? It's got to be possible. You're going to stay right here until I let you go."

" And I tell you, again, that it is not possible. It is not possible, Mr. Leng. Now, what are you going to do ?"

Leng sighed, grimly. " You may be making sense, doctor, but not to me. I say you stay here, and I have my ace-in-the-hole to make you." He set a finger on a switch in his desk-top and there was a hiss as a panel fell back, in the wall to the left. Sixsmith half-turned to look. He saw a small but luxuriously appointed bedroom, and a girl. She was very beautiful, in a vivid silver-blonde way, and she was very frightened, although she tried hard not to show it. Sixsmith knew her very well. As she hesitated and then came into the main room, he studied her as if he had never seen her before, but the inner flame was roaring hot now.

" You talk about levers, doctor," Leng said, coldly. " How do you like this one ? Do I need to spell it out for you ? Miss Janice Normandie, a very close friend of yours. She was right here when the nonsense happened. She has often been seen here, in this club with you. So it all works out very nice. I snatch her. I know her boy-friend is a medico. I tell him what to do, and he does it, like a lamb—don't you, Doctor Sixsmith ?"

" Arthur !" her voice shook. " Please be careful. Please do whatever he wants."

" Now there's good plain sense, doctor. And very nice, too, when you come to think of it. You stay right here, plus very attractive company, and you look after me. You behave, or things happen to Miss Normandie. Plain ?"

" Satisfactory," Sixsmith nodded.

" You mean you'll do it ?"

" No. I mean—the scene is now set. Almost all the cards are on the table. There are only two more to play and I hold both of them." He had difficulty in keeping his voice steady, and something of his tension must have crossed the gap to Leng, for the gang-boss became very still.

" What now, doctor ?"

" Two things you don't know. First about myself. Please sit down, Janice, and listen. You know, and Leng knows, that I am ' X '. But an ' X '-person is not a superman. Quite often, he isn't even a success in the regular sense of the word. Very simply, the ' X ' effect shows in early childhood, under

appropriate tests, as an abnormally high intelligence factor, plus something else. There is never any doubt whether the ' something else ' is there, but there is no way of knowing just what that ' something else ' is. As a rule, the individual himself discovers what it is. But, in rare cases, the extraordinary factor remains in hiding, fails to emerge. I am one such. I have a talent, of some kind, but I don't know what it is. It has not yet shown itself."

" You're a doctor," Leng interrupted, curiously. " What more do you want ?"

" I'm a good doctor," Sixsmith replied, flatly. " But I get very little satisfaction from it. I despise my patients, my work, the crude and often silly things I have to do. And, naturally, I am curious to know what I have. Many years ago, because of my curiosity, I went back to the Institute for any help or advice they could give. And they told me that, in cases such as mine, the only way to rouse the dormant faculty whatever it is, is pressure. The pressure of emergency. Under the stress of some desperate strait, it will emerge. But, as I have already explained, I am not the type to feel compelled by circumstance. So, you see, the possibility of being caught in desperation is an unlikely one, for me."

" I'm beginning to get it," Leng growled.

" Be sure you get *all of it*, then. You didn't force me here. I came of my own will. I have deliberately provoked this situation."

" What situation ?" Leng sneered. "What's so rough about this ? You simply have to stay here until I'm well, that's all."

" That is the other thing you don't know. It is not possible for me to stay here until you are well, as you put it. Unless I leave here soon, you will die !"

Leng moved like a cat, his face setting into a mask of menace, his weapon once again trained squarely on Sixsmith. " I don't care for that kind of talk, doctor," he whispered. " You're not leaving. I let you out of here, and you'll scream your head off to the law, and to Crane Normandie, won't you ?"

" Even if I denied it, you wouldn't dare believe me," Sixsmith nodded. " I had already thought of it. But I must leave, just the same." He folded his hands on his medical bag, deliberately keeping his mind steady. " Have you ever seen anyone survive a pulse-beamer wound ?"

" All right, I'm lucky," Leng snarled. " What's that got to do with it ?"

" It's not luck. Victims usually die outright. But there have been wounded ones, and I happen to have treated one or two. Innocent bystanders, they were. But the medical aspects are interesting. Let me explain. The weapon delivers a stutter-pulse of coherent light, backed up by a matched series of pulses of ultra-high-frequency radio waves. The complexity is necessary because a modulated light-beam, by itself, lacks 'punch.' All very technical and by the point. What is of concern, however, is the effect on the white blood cells, the leucocytes. Those immediately struck disintegrate, producing a toxin. This spreads, infecting other leucocytes. In very short order, all the leucocytes in the blood stream are effected. The blood loses its clotting inhibitor. It is a very specific effect. You were shot almost an hour ago, now. That means that about seven hours from now, all at once, your blood will coagulate, like jelly, and you will die, Leng !"

" You're lying. It's a trick !"

" If you think that, then you've missed the whole point. No, it's genuine. It's a real situation, and a pretty one," Sixsmith smiled, over the boiling turbulence inside. " Unless you have a massive injection of parafibrin antitoxin within three hours, you're a dead man. I haven't any with me. It is not the sort of thing one carries. In fact, it is not very readily obtainable. I could get it. I doubt if anyone else can, anyone in your employment, I mean."

Leng's eyes were narrowed to slits, now. " So, if I don't let you out to get this dope, I die. But if I do let you out, you scream to the law and Normandie to come and get me because I'm helpless—and I can't guarantee that you'll come back. Looks like the pressure's on me, not you." Sixsmith said nothing but he was almost holding his breath, and observing himself as a thing apart, feeling for any signs of something new, waiting for the first twinge of whatever it would be.

" I'm not stupid enough to be caught like that, doctor. All right, you'll go, and you'll come back, with the stuff . . . and you'll keep shut about it. And this is why." Leng came out from behind his desk in a cat-like dart, caught Janice by her long, bouffant hair, and held it. " This is why. You get back here, in one hour, with the stuff, or she gets it where it will hurt most. You figure it out for yourself. One fingernail for every five minutes over the hour . . ."

" Arthur !" Janice could manage only a croak, as her head was wrenched back. Sixsmith had no idea what she meant to say, nor did it matter. The full pressure of decision was on him now. On the one hand there was all his personal pattern, a lifetime of refusing to be driven, a mental habit that was as much a part of him as breathing. On the other hand there was Janice, and unfair mutilation, pain, suffering, that she had done nothing to deserve. The two forces beat and rebounded from each other in dark internal thunder, to shake the whole inner fabric of his being. Now he had cause to be glad of his ability to ride above his personal turmoil and observe it. If a decision was to be made, it would come up out of the struggle by itself, and he would let it happen, consciously refraining from interference.

But something was amiss. Over all the mighty thunder of the inner war, an odd image began to form. He closed his eyes, and the shifting shape grew clear. A tube. A strangely shaped, squat tube, with a drawn-out tip, and a vivid label. A vial. Almost with disappointment, he realised that it was a vial of the very antitoxin so crucially needed at this moment. A natural focus for his attention. But wait—the turmoil had died and he could actually *see* that vial, among many more. He was seeing, and knew he was seeing, the *interior* of the cold store, in the City Medical Centre. Without thinking, and still with his eyes closed, he put out a hand, and took that vial. And the chill cold of it shocked him into full awareness. He opened his eyes, to see Leng staring open-mouthed.

Sixsmith looked at his hand, where his fingers held a blue-and red labelled vial.

" This is it," he said, harldy recognising his own voice. " I won't have to go and get it, after all."

" How the hell did you do that ?" Leng demanded, letting go Janice.

" I don't really know. I just saw it, put out my hand, and took it."

" Sure it's the right stuff ?"

" I don't see why not." Forcing a nonchalance he didn't feel, Sixsmith clicked open his bag, drew out a hypodermic, and plunged the bright needle through the vial seal, depressing the plunger to expel air.

" Go easy, doctor," Leng's voice hardened again. " There's something funny going on here. I don't know where you got

that stuff from, but the way it turned up, just when you wanted it—that smells. How do I know it won't knock me out, eh ?"

" It will," Sixsmith regarded him, past the bright cylinder of the hypodermic. " You'll be pretty groggy for a while, naturally."

" Oh, no I won't," Leng waved the muzzle of his weapon. " I'm not falling for that. You pump me full of dope, knock me out, and you'll be away—oh no. You can forget that trick doctor."

Sixsmith looked at him. Strangely, now, he felt no urgency at all, not even interest. Under cover of routine motions he had been analysing the sensations he had felt when ' reaching ' for the vial. Analysing and trying to understand. The word ' teleportation ' came to mind, but much too glibly. There had been nothing of movement, but more of rearrangement, adjustment on a molecular level. And that opened fascinating possibilities. In the meantime, there was Leng to deal with. He lifted the hypodermic.

" This is the antitoxin," he said. " You need it, not me."

" I'm not having it. I don't trust you."

" Very well," Sixsmith held the shining instrument out to one side, pressed the plunger, and a thin, sweetly-smelling spray jetted out and dispersed. " That's it. All gone. Now what, Mr. Leng ?"

" Arthur !" Janice's voice was a shrill gasp. " What have you done ?"

" I've given Mr. Leng back his own problem, my dear." Leng's face was suddenly grey. To suspect the antitoxin was one thing. To see it wasted in front of his eyes was something shockingly final and different. Then, still sitting at ease, Sixsmith closed his eyes once more, but this time he was reaching out for something he knew very well indeed. This was his homeground, in a sense, and he felt supremely confident. As he opened his eyes again, he heard the gang-boss snort, and saw him put a hand to his head.

" Feels—queer," he mumbled. Then his eyes went wide. " It doesn't hurt any more !" He pressed on the spray-skinned wound, or where it had been, gingerly at first, then with confidence. Sixsmith watched, curiously, but with a sense of power.

" You won't need me any more, Leng," he said, and stood up. " I'm very grateful to you for opening the door for me. And I don't mean *that* door, you understand. Come, Janice . ."

" Here ! Just a minute," Leng gestured with his weapon, but Sixsmith ignored it, took Janice by the hand as she crossed the room to him. Knowing precisely what he was doing, he shut his eyes again, and when he opened them, he was in the dark, but still holding her hand.

" Keep quite still," he said, softly, " and don't be afraid." In a moment he had switched on a light, revealing his own small consulting room, and Janice, wide-eyed and pale.

" What's happened to you ?" she whispered, and he stepped back to her side, took her hand.

" Nothing very terrible, my dear. I have discovered how to do properly what I have been doing clumsily all these years. Now I can really be a doctor. I can really cure people, through and through."

" I don't understand. But I believe you, and I want to help."

" I'm sorry," he smiled, " it wouldn't work, you know. I don't need any help, now. Come, I'll see you on a cab . . ." he led her to the door.

john rackham

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it is one thing to give a man bad advice by way of a joke, but quite another when that man takes it seriously, turns it into good effect and then presents the end result—take Ringrose, for instance . . .

the postlethwaite effect

by b. n. ball

Looking at Ringrose's world-famous rodent's face, Bury had difficulty in maintaining the pleasant smile the reunion demanded. He could have rolled on the floor with laughter. But Ringrose's new American wife was quite another matter. You couldn't risk more than an agreeable half-grin or two when she was staring at you as if you were something new and rather disgusting in the microbe line.

She was about Ringrose's age—thirty or thereabouts. But that was all they had in common. Where he was short and physically insignificant, she had the unbounded physical vigour Bury always associated with American women. Undoubtedly, she was a handsome woman, a Corinthian column of a woman, all solid flesh, with a healthy tan, and hair curled like bunches of grapes.

How on earth, Bury asked himself, had the two come together? Just over two years before, Ringrose had taken himself off to the States to do a year on some vast campus, and that was the last Bury had heard of him until he had opened

his morning paper the day before to see Ringrose's ferret's face staring up at him from the page under the headline the British press could always be relied upon to use on such occasions : BRITISH SCIENTIST REVOLUTIONISES PHYSICS.

Ringrose, the Science Correspondent had enthused, was about to do for transistors what transistors had done for valves. And by a tremendous coincidence that Eric's wife obviously did not believe in, Bury had chosen the very hotel in Birmingham where the latest messiah of British science was staying in preparation for his anointing at the local university.

Bury visited Birmingham once a month. He had almost decided to give the Solihull contract a miss for once, but duty nagged until he turned the firm's suave Riley towards that city. Only to find Eric Ringrose again. Complete with a steely-eyed, stern-jawed American wife !

" The joy !" Bury muttered when he saw Ringrose bearing down on him in the tea-lounge. He had picked up the habit of using disconnected phrases from the latest literary fashionables.

" Hello, old boy ! What a pleasant surprise !" Ringrose said. His wife had quickly placed Bury as a college friend, and after a cool appraisal of him, she took charge of the tea-party that Ringrose felt should celebrate the reunion.

" Now, do tell me, Bill, who have you seen lately—any of the old gang ?"

Bury answered as politely as he could with several obvious evasions. Rosamund Ringrose glanced coolly at him in the middle of one. She looked again much more sharply when Bury disguised a snort of laughter as a sneeze—Ringrose had vainly called to a distinguished-looking matron to fetch some cakes and tea for three, Chinese if they had it, please.

" Waitress," murmured Eric's wife, and immediately two smart pert girls raced to the table.

" I've rather lost touch," Bury admitted. He shuddered when he thought of the days when Ringrose had been the butt of the whole university. How could he tell Ringrose that his name was now the synonym for ineptness on a massive scale, and that only two years after he had left lectures paled when eager young students asked them what all this fuss about Ringrose was about ; that he was a legend already, and that his presence was said to haunt the newly-set concrete halls where he and Bury and another thousand had once roomed ?

What was it that Titus used to say about him ? Bury could see Titus's shaven head now, almost wrinkling with the effort of composing epigrams about Ringrose : ' Before I met him, I had no conception of what the ass in man could be : here we have apotheosis of the asinine, the farthest boundary of buffoonery.'

From the moment he had walked into the university, he had aroused delighted attention. He had walked into the main hall, lost his brief-case three or four times within minutes, registered as an outcast Afrikaans Cape Coloured in need of support, joined the queue for membership of the Women's Cross-Country Team instead of for tea, and before his first hour was out he had managed to make a life-long enemy of the Vice-Principal who had never before been known to acknowledge the existence of a student.

Ringrose was a natural. And it was Titus Postlethwaite who had first discovered him. Thereafter, life for Eric Ringrose became a closed circuit of humiliation. Titus lit the matches, and Ringrose hopped.

" Have you seen Titus ?" Ringrose asked eagerly, leaning forward towards Bury. His wife involuntarily glanced at the milk-jug which was just within his range. She looked up quickly to meet Bury's gaze as he speculated as to whether or not she would move the jug.

" I don't keep in touch, I'm afraid," Bury said. " I wasn't very interested in metallurgy, you know. Went over to refractories for my Master's. Now I'm a sort of glorified commercial traveller."

" I do hope you'll keep in touch now we've met up again," said Ringrose. " We're buying a place in town."

Rosamund's expression told Bury that no definite invitation would be forthcoming. Suddenly something struck him. The paper had referred to ' The Postlethwaite Effect.'

" You've not seen Titus since you left university ?" he asked curiously. There had to be some link between them. There was this business of the name.

Eric Ringrose opened his mouth to begin one of his familiar meandering explanations, but he half-glanced at his wife and stopped without speaking.

" Eric still keeps in touch, naturally," she said. " We're always glad to meet old friends. Sugar ?"

" Two please."

Ringrose got none. And he had always been a hog over sweet things. The fondness for fondants, Bury found himself thinking, his face twitching into a smile when he remembered how Titus had once almost killed Ringrose with poisoned chocolates. Ringrose had been lent out by Titus for a party, and this was Titus's way of thanking his host for the drinks. For over fifty hours Ringrose had been unconscious, jerking and twitching in a delirium ; afterwards, there had been a temporary estrangement between them. Even Ringrose had to take notice of near-murder.

His wife chattered on intelligently for the next half-hour. Skin-diving, space research, the British. She left Bury nothing to say but good-bye, and he was about to leave when she was called away to take a transatlantic call. As she went, she skilfully deflected Eric's tea-arm from her handbag.

" Oops !" said Ringrose. " How did that happen ?"

" Yes," agreed Bury, whose curiosity had diminished.

" Funny how things worked out in the States," declared Ringrose, more confident of himself now. He stretched out a hand to the sugar basin and began wolfing lump sugar. He hesitated, and then began on the cream buns.

" The fame !" muttered Bury.

" Oh, it's nothing !" said Ringrose. " Mere chance !" He swung himself back precariously.

" I'm sure it wasn't," said Bury insincerely. There was something hypnotic about Ringrose when he was about to take you into his confidence.

" Well, perhaps it wasn't entirely chance, at that," decided Ringrose. " But I must give Titus his due—I owe it all to him ! Dear old Titus !" he added fondly. " Dear Titus !"

" Really ? You owe it all to him ? Is that why you called something after him ?"

" My theory," Ringrose said simply, grinding on the sugar.

" Really ?"

" And I owe him Rosamund, too. My happiness !"

Certainly, then, that was one up to Titus. He would appreciate Rosamund.

" You know we were close at college, Titus and I ?"

" Of course." Fagin and Oliver had had the same sort of closeness. Bury wondered if Ringrose would take the tablecloth with him when he overbalanced. " Sometimes I envied Titus," he told Ringrose. Other people could sit back and

enjoy the situations Ringrose was forced into : Titus contrived them.

" Dear Titus ! We kept in touch, you know. By letter. What a humourist ! You know I went to the University of the Caribbean—old Doubloon, as we call her ? Well, there I was, the two thousand, seven hundred and eighty-ninth member of staff, and the loneliest. And Titus saved me !"

" He visited you ?"

" Oh, no ! I believe he's still in Manchester—that's where his letters come from, anyway." Ringrose patted his pocket. " His letters made me what I am today."

" Ah."

" There was no-one else to turn to," Ringrose said. " The loneliness ! There was nothing of the—I know this sounds absurdly sentimental, but that's the way I think of it after all this time—nothing of the comradeship of collegiate life."

Bury could picture it exactly as Ringrose chattered on. He had gone in search of adventure with his inchoate hopes, a second-class degree, and a second-hand cabin trunk he had bought from Postlethwaite for an outrageous price because, according to Titus, someone had taken it up the Orinoco to make films. What he had found was a punctiliously-polite staff who had not taken the trouble to ridicule him ; a disinterested professor who stole his students' ideas ; and a meticulous inspection of his work every month. All this while he worked in a tiny corner of an out-of-date laboratory on research that even he knew was trivial.

The fabulous treasure-house of American scientific research had boiled down to snubs, over-cooked canteen food, hurricanes every other week, and fifth-form experiments.

" I stuck it for six months, and I was in despair ! Then I thought of Titus. I wrote to him begging him to open a correspondence with me—I told him just how I was situated, every last detail of my awful life. How he sympathised ! His letters changed my whole life ! Dear Titus !"

He passed a bunch of letters, nine in all, across to Bury.

" Isn't he a humourist ! Look at the address !"

Bury looked. The earliest letter was addressed to : ' The Honourable Eric Stuart Fitzmaurice-Ringrose, Bart., The Chapter House at the University of the Caribbean, in the United States of America.' It seemed a little ponderous for Titus, Bury thought. But Ringrose was beaming.

" What a humourist !" he repeated. " I mean, if he'd just sent it to my rooms, I don't think anyone would have noticed it, but you see there happens to *be* a Chapter House of the Undergraduate Lodge of the Species of Eight, and it was sent there ! Rosamund's the Secretary," he added coyly.

Bury could think of no apposite interjection. He nodded.

" Well, everybody saw it ! And you know what they think of titles over there !"

It became clearer. Postlethwaite's joke had been completely unsuccessful ; the effect was an inverted one.

" Naturally I soon convinced everyone that I wasn't the youngest son of an earl, nor was I a Labour peer's heir, in fact, nothing at all, just plain ordinary Eric Ringrose from Scunthorpe !"

It was Scunthorpe, remembered Bury. There was to be a civic reception for Ringrose.

" Rosamund and you became friends soon after that ?"

" Why, yes ! However did you guess ! But I'm forgetting —you always were one for fathoming human character."

Bury felt vaguely flattered. Then he remembered he was talking to Ringrose.

" And you got your scholarship year extended ?"

" Goodness gracious me ! Yes ! *And* a better job ! How exceedingly ' with it ' of you, as we say in the States !"

Ringrose still could not appreciate what had happened. The more he had denied being a member of the British aristocracy, the more he was disbelieved. After all, he *was* the British ruling class to Americans. Vapid, chinless, physically insignificant and academically a joke, Ringrose had been placed at once : how could such a parasite have acquired a research scholarship, if not by exerting influence ? And in England, where did influence lie ? The Americans Bury had met had all had a healthy regard for influence.

He flipped through the rest of Titus's letters, which covered the next year. Most of the envelopes were addressed in some fantastical fashion, but always to Ringrose's glorification ; each was significantly mis-addressed. Some of the envelopes were those that Titus had picked up—he was a noted pilferer—from clubs he had been invited to. There was a beautifully crested envelope from the Octopus Club, another on the pink cambric-like paper of the Alcibiades Union, and a fiercely emblazoned envelope from some association for the preservation of Scotland.

" The kleptomania !" murmured Bury, slipping back into disconnectives.

The effect on Ringrose's career had been startling. Rosamund turned out to be the daughter of one of the principal props of the university, a disagreeable eccentric who insisted on all of his family being found studentships in the subject which was diametrically the opposite of their abilities and attainments. Rosamund had wished to be a veterinary surgeon. She soon arranged for Ringrose to take over the directorship of a small team of dullard research students all busily creating empires for themselves as they carved up a huge federal government grant for the study of creep in gold-nickel alloys—a completely new field, and an excessively uninviting one.

Ringrose had by this time come to look forward with some impatience to Titus's letters, he explained to Bury. They represented for him the days when he had been young and idealistic, as compared with his present sophisticated worldliness.

" Tell me," said Bury, stopping the flow of incoherencies, " tell me—er, Eric," he managed to say in spite of the distaste he felt, " why did you call your discovery after Titus ? I read about it only yesterday, and you've said once or twice that there's some connection between you two. Was it just affection? Appreciation for his letters ? Some sort of compliment ?"

Ringrose paused in his sucking of the cream on his fingers. " When you owe a man—when you owe a man *everything*, you have to give him what you can. And I have given Titus immortality."

And he believed it, marvelled Bury. " Go on," was all he could say.

" Yes. I have immortalised Titus by calling my discovery ' The Postlethwaite Effect.' To him I owe two things : the Effect itself, and my happiness."

" How ?"

" Well, just as that mix-up over my—ah, my, ah, my title, and do you know," he rambled on, " I think I might be getting a K out of this, and fancy old Eric Ringrose as a Sir !" He lurched backwards, recovered, and continued, " Well, just as that mix-up brought me to my meeting with Rosamund, another of dear Titus's letters brought me to the point of my discovery."

It was so grossly unlike Titus to help anyone in any way whatsoever that Bury had difficulty in not gaping at Ringrose. If Titus had given positive assistance to his tame ape, it could

only be that he had decided to make up for the years of humiliation he had made him endure. It didn't sound like Titus, though.

" Dear Rosamund !" sighed Ringrose.

" Yes," agreed Bury. If Titus had had a hand in sicking Rosamund onto Ringrose, certainly it was one up to him. It was in character. But to help him scientifically !

Ringrose propped one expensively-suited elbow in the remaining cream bun, and pointed out a passage in one of Titus's short letters :

' Delighted to hear you've had your year extended, that your salary has been quadrupled, and that your expense account alone is roughly double my present income before tax in consequence of your being appointed to head a new and vast governmental team,' Bury read. That sounded like Titus. The arsenic was quite clearly visible underneath the sugar.

He read on : ' I am glad, too, that you have been selected as one of the Species of Eight, which, I agree, has a much more distinctive sound than all those Greek letters. I hope you will continue to tell me all about yourself. I always enjoy your seven-thousand word letters, Eric. Now I'd like to put you on to a piece of work that you may like to clear up. I haven't the time, the resources, or the talent to go ahead with it. You have. Why don't you give some thought to the math of electron spin now that you're in a position to branch out ?

' I pass this on for what it's worth : the d-orbital of the transition metals has never been so closely considered as its nature warrants. Have a go at iron and nickel for a start. With your ability, and some sort of organisation to back you up, I'm sure you'll come up with something that will affect your career noticeably before long.'

" You see !" said Ringrose triumphantly. " I've told no-one else why I called the Effect after him, but there it is in black and white !"

" You'll have to explain all this to me," said Bury, who was quite able to work it out for himself. ' With your ability ' had been Titus's phrase, as was the barbed ' affect your career.' It was apparent that Titus expected Ringrose to be completely discredited ; and that once again the thing had bounced the wrong way.

" I was forgetting you're not a metals man" Ringrose said kindly. " Let me put it simply."

As if he could, thought Bury. " Do," he said.

Out of the hotch-potch of garbled theory, surmise, and the few shreds of fact Ringrose threw in with them, Bury was able to fill in the blanks.

Titus had sent Ringrose a molecular conundrum, a laboratory tongue-twister. There could be no conceivable practical application of anything found about the path of the electrons as they spin about in their orbital three-dimensionally; and even to investigate the d-orbital for reasons of curiosity was to chase nuclear wild geese. Any research worker would have smiled at the thought of wasting time on a purely speculative endeavour such as this.

If Ringrose had taken the project to his professor, he would have been instantly, completely, and permanently discredited, just as Titus anticipated ; and when, failing that, his monthly progress chart had been examined, his career would have been blasted.

But Titus's cynical suggestion arrived when the professor was malingering, and Ringrose's chart was not due in for three weeks, and during that time, by some wild freak of mismanagement, Ringrose had made an immediate breakthrough. The papers had not exaggerated. The Postlethwaite Effect was revolutionary.

Blind chance had made Ringrose set up some new, secret USAF equipment, wiring it wrongly into an old, cranky computer, and hooking it up to an electronic camera which had been presented to him by his Rosamund. The billion to one chance had occurred.

One single spoor landing plump amongst the bugs had made Fleming ; now one tiny trail of light left by the electron of the d-orbital had done the same thing for Ringrose. In that grand, random procession of events—the swinging of Galileo's lamp, the rattling of Stephenson's kettle, the fall of Newton's apple—would be numbered the single photographic exposure which had heralded the discovery of the Postlethwaite Effect.

Ringrose's wildly unorthodox maths had been supplemented by the work of one of his juniors, an ordinary, barely-qualified, unimaginative but competent mathematician. Ringrose talked of him rather contemptuously.

" There it was !" whiffled Ringrose. " I'd got it plotted within the week ! Oh, the possibilities are endless. The patents I've taken out ! They're not going to rob me !"

" You're exploiting it yourself ?" asked Bury. The only thing that still puzzled him was how Ringrose had recognised

the importance of what he had found, and having recognised it, how he had kept it for himself.

" Well, actually, Rosamund found out it was worth following through, and she made sure I'd have it recognised as a piece of private research—you know, so that I could use the stuff myself and any of its commercial applications would be my own property. She made sure, too, that I presented the first paper at once to the U.N. Convention in Mexico City. My prof wasn't too keen—I think he wanted me to do some more developing in the labs first, but Rosamund persuaded me to go ahead by myself. We were married in Mexico City," he added.

She had stepped in, blanketed him off from the scientific eclectics who offered to help Ringrose, and chased away the panic-stricken representatives of the radio and electronics industries. Her father had shown her how to patent every aspect of the discovery, and he was to develop the Effect commercially. There was only one thing Rosamund had failed in. She could not get Ringrose to change his mind about naming the Effect after Postlethwaite.

" We did have a little disagreement," Ringrose confessed, his ferret's teeth chattering at the thought of it, " but eventually I got Rosamund round to my way of thinking. She says, though, that we couldn't possibly insult him by offering him any—ah, financial—ah, recognition, ah, that is, no money. Titus wouldn't like that, Rosamund says. Could you pass me that biscuit, that one with the icing ?"

" She's here now," said Bury. He watched as Ringrose visibly grew into the man Rosamund was hoping to make out of him. Ringrose looked across the length of the tea-lounge to where his wife was ponderously negotiating the tables, and he deftly slipped the biscuit under his plate.

Quickly he said, " I *am* looking forward to meeting Titus. Do you think he'll mind my using his name ? What do you think ?"

Bury couldn't answer. It should prove an interesting encounter—the frustration and the malice. But would Titus still be able to appreciate the full piquancy of the situation ?

" I was just going," he said as Rosamund arrived.

" Not the sort to encourage," he heard her say to Ringrose as he left. " A man in your position has to be careful how he chooses his friends, Ringrose."

b. n. ball

civilisation never stands still, it is either progressing or regressing—so, place two cultures side by side, one ascending and the other descending the spiral of cultural activities and the meeting point should present some interesting comparisons

interlude

by john baxter

The tiny battle ended the moment it began ; that second when the cruiser's huge bulk edged on to the scout's screen, devouring every other image like a greedy amoeba. From that moment, there was no escape. The cruiser's computer spread an invisible web that would entrap the scout no matter which way it turned. The strands were possible trajectories down any one of which it could send the black shark-shape of a torpedo, its electronic nose leading it unerringly to the target. The scout pilot knew this, but the urge to flight is too basic a drive to be blocked by reason.

Its drive whining in protest, the scout turned and ran for the nearest planet. In the atmosphere there was a chance of concealment or, at the worst, of ejecting. The tiny ship got as far as the tenuous outer skin . Then, as the nose began to bite into the thin air, a dark shape speared in out of space. A second later, there was only a piece of wreckage tumbling into the sea of air on its long plunge to the surface.

Karl heard the sound first, a throbbing rumble like the echo of distant thunder. He raised his head from the sand and squinted out across the bay at the indefinite line where sea met

sky. It was clear—like most days on Malikuri, this one was hot, lazy, cloudless. Only then did he look higher and see the long white streamers etching across the sky. He jumped up and ran to the water's edge, hardly noticing the savage heat of the sand under his bare feet.

One of the streamers was continuing its perfect arc, but the white was streaked with smoke and fragments broke off to fall smouldering into the sea. *Poor devil* Karl thought—deceleration in an escape pod was brutal. It was infuriating to stand by and watch helplessly as the pilot slowly cooked inside the red-hot skin, but he knew there was nothing he could do. The pilot had been lucky enough to home on the radio beacon before he lost control, so perhaps he would be fortunate enough to get down in one piece. Walking as fast as his leg would let him, he hurried around the point to the village.

The first person he saw was Tagi, his self-appointed assistant, pounding through the sand. He had been on his way to tell Karl the news, and seemed a little disappointed that he had not been needed. But his brown face was split with the easy grin that his people wore no matter what the circumstances. Coming within shouting distance, he waved in the general direction of the plume of steam marking the spot where the capsule had fallen.

" Maj' Karl, Maj' Karl . . ." He was too breathless to say more, but stood there panting like a faithful dog who has found an elusive piece of game and waits to be patted.

Karl walked past him and looked down on the village. They were already putting out in a boat. As he watched, the rowers pushed their long canoe beyond the surf and began stroking rhythmically through the blue water. Their chant came to him clearly, the cadences beating around the cliffs like trapped birds. He turned to Tagi and pointed up the hill where his hut stood, aloof from the simple shelters of the natives.

" Tagi, go and open up the house. Bring me the medical kit."

The native beamed and ran off eagerly. Watching the boat knifing through the waters of the bay, Karl was glad it had left before he had a chance to reach the village. He was left with time to prepare—whether for a burial or an operation he would soon know. The casual indifference that had possessed him ever since he came to Malikuri gave way to the burden of responsibility.

When they had put him on this out-of-the-way planet to convalesce, it had been understood that it was as much a rest

for his mind as for his body. There were radio reports to make every week, and he had a scout ship in case of emergency, but otherwise he was to forget about the war entirely. Apparently the war had not forgotten about him. Unconsciously squaring his shoulders, Major Karl Payne, Terran Space Forces, limped back into service.

It took only a few minutes for the boat to return. Standing on the beach with the crowd of naked chattering villagers, Karl strained his ears for the sound of the approaching canoe. One could tell a lot from the way a crew sang as it rowed. If they had picked up a dead man, their chant would be a dirge. Otherwise . . . soon he heard the sound of a rowing beat coming across the water. It was jaunty, even gay. Gratefully he picked up the medical kit. Two years on Malikuri had made him as uneasy of death as the natives were.

The rowers had made a rough stretcher out of two oars and some matting, and on this they carried the rescued pilot ashore through the shallow surf. They were big men with huge arms and shoulders, yet they handled their burden as gently as if it were a baby. When they laid the shrouded figure down at Karl's feet, it was with a care that was almost reverent. To them, a person saved from death was beloved of the gods.

Karl felt an odd surge of discomfort at the thought of pulling back the matting, as if he would be looking on something rightly hidden from human eyes. But he put the thought out of his mind and drew the sheet aside. When he did so, his heart leaped sickeningly. That the pilot was a woman did not surprise him—there were more female than male pilots in the scout ships—but, against all logic, he had never considered the possibility that she might wear the crossed comets insignia of the Sirian Confederacy.

For a long moment he stood silent, staring down at the unconscious figure of the girl. It was obvious she was badly hurt. Through the tears in her uniform, he could see blistered patches where the red-hot walls of the capsule had pressed in on her. Her face was bruised, and her lips were already turning blue with shock. Then, abruptly, he made the decision. Rummaging in the kit, he found a hypodermic spray and gave her an injection of some sedative drug. The sting of the hypo made her wince and then, as Karl watched motionless, her eyes opened, the lids fluttering upwards as if fighting against a

weight. She turned her face towards him and suddenly her eyes were filled with awareness and alarm. Karl suddenly realised he had automatically put on his old uniform cap. She must have seen the badge on it. Before he could stop her, she had half-risen and was groping at her belt for a sidearm. For a moment, she kept control, but then the drug took hold and she sagged back unconscious.

Now what ? Obviously she was hostile, and Karl was in no position to keep prisoners. He looked down at her face, now relaxed under the influence of his injection. It was, he noticed for the first time, not especially pretty. But it was lively, full of character. In other circumstances . . . He glanced around at the respectful ring of natives, now muttering curiously among themselves. They probably wondered what was keeping him kneeling on the sand when the sun was so hot and there was shade close at hand. Karl began to feel a little foolish. As if there was a big decision to make. The girl was human too, even if she had been brought up under a different sun. She deserved care and attention, just as much as any Terran. He beckoned to the husky rowers who had brought the stretcher ashore.

" Take her up to the house. Carefully now !"

For the next few days he nursed the girl continuously. Injections counteracted the shock to a certain extent, and his medical supplies contained ointments that would regrow burned skin within a week, but still she seemed not to respond as well as she should. She was uneasy in her mind, thinking back constantly to the crash.

Her dreams were full of terrifying fantasies that had to be soothed away with quiet words endlessly repeated. It was exhausting work but in the transient intimacy of the sickroom Karl felt himself drawn closer to the girl than he had ever been to anybody. All his life, he had been dedicated to killing. Now, suddenly forced to reverse his attitude, he found a new world of sensations and emotions opened to him. Politics ceased to have any meaning, race and religion were unimportant ; there was only the complex interdependence of the saviour and the saved.

It was late on the third day when she woke. Karl was sitting by the window going through the papers he had taken from the map pocket in her clothes. Most of them were scorched, but he could make out the words fairly clearly. An i-d card in favour of Leah Condine, Lieutenant, Navy of the Sirian Confederacy: the photograph showed the girl's lively face, though he noticed

the years since it was taken had added lines of strain around her eyes. He put the card aside and leafed through the rest of the papers.

There were lists of figures, probably sector co-ordinates and call signs, but they meant nothing to him. He put them to one side—perhaps Intelligence could make something of them. The others seemed to be personal notes and letters written in the angular Sirian script. Out of curiosity he unfolded one of them. As he did so a photograph fell out. A young man smiled up at him, his face surprisingly life-like in the 3-d colour print. In the background, snow-covered peaks reared against a sullen grey sky. Sirius IV was a cold planet, perpetually locked in the dead of winter. Perhaps the ruggedness of the world had something to do with the Sirian antipathy towards Earth. People brought up hard tended to dislike those who lived in comfort. He looked at the photograph reflectively. A husband perhaps ; a sweetheart . . .

" I see you Terrans have never heard of privacy."

Karl turned, guiltily slipping the photograph out of sight. The girl had raised herself to a sitting position and was glaring at the pile of papers.

" Surely you didn't expect me to ignore them," Karl said. " It's my duty to examine everything for information of military value."

She snorted contemptuously. " Even personal letters ?"

" Everything." His voice was just a shade too emphatic, and he had the feeling she must know he was merely hiding his embarassment under a veneer of briskness. It made him feel unusually vulnerable.

" Typical of you Terrans," she said bitingly. " Nothing's sacred . . ."

Karl felt the last of his control slipping. To be made to feel like a prying schoolboy was bad enough, but when a person you had saved from almost certain death began to dress you down it was more than one should be expected to take.

" Now look !" he said angrily. " I don't suppose you remember too well, but a couple of days ago I dragged you out of the ocean. You were covered in burns and going into shock. Without medical treatment you would have died inside a few hours. But I brought you up here and managed to keep you alive. I'm not asking for gratitude—but the least you can do is make my job a little less uncomfortable. It'll be easier for both of us in the long run."

The girl looked a little shamefaced.

" I don't want to be ungrateful," she said in a stiff embarassed tone. " It's just that . . ." Her gesture conveyed what words could not ; the shock of being shot down and taken prisoner, the shame that any defeated fighter must feel no matter how accidental has been his downfall. Karl felt the sympathy he had cultivated for the girl all through her unconsciousness take on a new dimension. Each new adjustment he made to her presence seemed to bring her closer to him, as if his character had to be focused like a delicate mechanism before he could understand her fully. Almost without thinking, he made yet another concession.

" I . . . I don't know how to put this," he said haltingly. " I'm here alone, and there isn't any sort of military organisation for light years. So . . . well, what I mean is, please don't consider yourself as my prisoner or anything like that."

The girl seemed even more unsure of herself than Karl was.

" You understand," she said, " that it is my duty as a soldier to escape if the opportunity presents itself."

" There isn't any way to escape," Karl said, grateful that he had made a good job of hiding the scout in the forest. " Anyway," he continued cheerfully, " Malikuri isn't a bad place. You may even grow to like it."

She looked at him in silence, as if trying to digest his words and put them into perspective. Then her glance travelled towards the window. Across the bay the sun was sinking into a pool of blood. The sea was like burnished brass hammered into a vast sheet, each wave standing out against the shadow it threw. Forced below the horizon by forces it was powerless to control, the sun seemed jealous to give up its domain, and was flooding the earth with all its pent-up fires.

" That is a beautiful sunset," she said quietly. " More beautiful than anything on my world."

Karl walked to the bed and sat beside her. Together they watched the sun sink and eventually the moon rise to take its place.

In the weeks that followed, Karl and Leah became a familiar sight in the village, walking hand in hand, swimming in the bay, riding off in the flitter. The natives accepted this new development as they accepted everything ; passively, calmly, with a slow smile. Their passivity irritated Leah. One day they spent hours watching the young men fishing. They used spears tipped

with a single barbed point and it was slow work. Like tall water birds they picked their way through the shallows, walking so softly that their feet sank into the sandy bottom without a flurry. After long minutes of waiting, a fish would swim unsuspiciously within range. The spear would flash down, there would be a shout . . . then they settled back into immobility, waiting for the next one.

" How can they do it ?" Leah muttered angrily. " Hours wasted—just for a few fish. They've got nets. Why don't they use them ?"

" There's no hurry," Karl said. " And getting out the nets would be a lot of trouble."

Leah wrinkled her nose in disgust. " I don't mind them being lazy," she said, " but I've got no patience with stupidity."

Karl glanced sharply at her. "Do you think they're stupid?"

" It's obvious."

Looking at the sun, he made a quick calculation. " Would you like to go for a hop in the flitter ?"

" Where to ?"

Karl pointed inland. About five miles away, a group of small hills pushed their heads diffidently above the green carpet of forest. There seemed to be no reason for them to be there. It looked like nature had made a small experiment with the form and, disappointed, not bothered to continue with it.

" What's out there ?" Leah asked curiously.

" You'll see."

It didn't take them long to reach the hills. Skimming in just above the tops of the trees, Karl pushed the nose upwards only at the last minute when the timbered sides of the hills were almost too close. He spiralled around the largest of them, then banked and pointed down.

" What do you think of it ?"

Leah gasped. The top of the hill had been sheared off, and on the hollowed-out summit a huge amphitheatre had been built. It was like a chord of barbaric music struck in the silence of the forest. Wide terraces ran down to a pool that took up the whole centre of the arena. Even though much of it was choked with the accumulated slime of centuries, there were still parts which reflected back the bright blue of the sky. There was no speaker's rostrum, no sports field, no stage. Just the water and the ancient stones.

Turning the flitter in a gentle curve, Karl set it down on the edge of the topmost tier. Anxious to see more, Leah moved to jump out of the cabin but he put his hand on her shoulder.

" Take off your shoes first. This is sacred ground."

She looked at him, surprised. " Sacred to whom ?"

Karl gazed around at the tiers of empty seats. " To the people who built it," he said quietly. " An empty church is still holy."

They left their shoes behind and walked silently around the terraces. The feet that had hallowed the stones were long turned to dust, but an echo of their step still lingered, a faint shadow of their presence still clung to the seats where now only green moss and lichen sat complacently, confident that after man had come and gone, they would rule unquestioned.

" It's a temple," Karl explained. " To the sun. They must have assembled here to watch the reflection in the pool."

Leah looked around in wonderment. " Incredible. A vast place like this, alone, out in the forest. Who built it ?"

He nodded back towards the coast where the village huddled under a haze of smoke. " They did."

" Those people ?!" She was shocked. " I can't believe it."

" Well, their ancestors anyway. Down lower there are carvings ; the people are obviously Malikurian."

" It's so hard to grasp," she said in awe.

" Even harder when you look around you." He gestured towards the other hills that ringed the larger one. " All those mounds, they're not natural. There are buildings under all that greenery. Pyramids, monuments, temples. The forest's taken over now, of course, and crushed most of them, but you can still see the outlines."

Leah looked back at the village, thinking of the quiet tractable people who were all that was left of the mighty race that built this city.

" What happened to them ?" she asked.

" I don't know," Karl said, shrugging. " They just seemed to give up. One day they turned their back on all the things they'd built, the cities and the monuments, and . . . let go. After that, they slid down the social scale into the sort of easy-going anarchy you can see now. Perhaps they decided it wasn't worth it."

" I never realised," Leah said softly. " I never realised . . ."

After their visit to the site, Leah seemed more at home on Malikuri. She let down her barriers and the people grew to like her. Almost imperceptibly they slipped into a routine that was so pleasant they didn't notice the steel bands it wove around them. For the first time, life was uncomplicated. Karl still radioed back his reports, but the task became more burdensome with each passing week. It was his last connection with the old life that he was trying to escape, and he resented it bitterly. He had almost decided to stop signalling—let them come looking for him if they cared to waste their time for one man—but habit dies hard, and he made one last trip to the house before switching off for the last time.

It began as a normal call. Karl read off the figures from the meter dials and through the hiss of static heard the operator's bored voice acknowledge them. Gratefully he reached for the switch that would cut him off from the world and the war forever. The operator's voice stopped him.

" Agent K6, Agent K6, prepare for special transmissions from Terra HQ."

Special transmission ? That was odd. Almost against his will Karl turned up the speaker volume. There was a muffled click and a familiar voice boomed out at him.

" Hey, you there, Karl ?"

Art Braddon had been his exec on the old *Manatee*. His voice brought back a rush of old memories ; some pleasant, others—mainly of the engagement in which he had been wounded—less so.

" Can't hear you, Karl," Braddon said. " Art here. You receiving me ?"

" Yes, I hear you fine " Karl replied. " What's up ?"

" Good to hear you again, pal. How's the leg ?"

" It's O.K.," Karl said, wondering when Braddon would get to the point.

" Great, great." It was a credit to his good humour that, even over light years, he could be expansive. " That's fine, because it looks like you'll be coming back into action pretty soon."

" Into action ?" Karl's heart jumped.

" Yeah," Braddon's voice boomed. " The balloon's gone up. I can't say much on the air, but you know what I mean. We need all the trained men we can get. There'll be a scoutship picking you up inside a week. The pilot'll fill you in on the details. You'd better start packing your gear straight

away. Don't bother about your ship. One of the survey jobs will collect it later."

"But Art, I . . ."

"Sorry, Karl, can't talk any more—they're giving me the wind-up. See you soon."

"Look, Art, I can't come," Karl said desperately, "it's impossible."

But there was only the hiss of static and the bored voice of the operator. "Transmission ended. Over and out." Then the final irrevocable click.

Methodically, Karl locked up the equipment and ripped the typed transcript of the conversation from the machine. Its cold impersonal record would make his task easier. Folding it carefully, he put the paper into his pocket and walked down into the village. Leah was sitting at the door of their hut, making her first fumbling attempts at weaving. Her fingers moved slowly over the fronds, plaiting them into a scrap of matting that would eventually be part of their roof. She glanced up and smiled, but something in Karl's eyes warned her.

"What's wrong?" she said, her voice tense and urgent.

He handed her the transcript. She read it, squinting as the sun glared back from the white paper. At her feet, unnoticed, the piece of matting began to unravel, slowly at first, then faster as the natural spring of the leaves asserted itself. When she raised her eyes again, they were veiled. For the first time since they had been together, there was a secret between them.

"There had to be an end," she said softly. "We both knew that."

Karl didn't answer, but looked out towards the ruined city, shrouded in green.

"My ship's at the base of the nearest of them. They won't be here for a few days. You have plenty of time."

"Thank you." Her voice was almost mechanical in its impersonality.

Karl walked back up to the house. He never saw her again. That night, the sky was lit by the momentary glare of a rocket blast. It cut a track across the blackness, then climbed swiftly out of sight and disappeared. For a while the ghost of its passing lingered on the retina of his eye. Then that too was gone.

Tagi was the first to let his curiosity get the better of him. Around noon he ambled up to the house and watched interestedly as Karl packed up his gear.

After a time, he observed " The lady is gone."

" Yes," Karl replied in a tone that would have discouraged anybody with an ear for nuances. But Tagi was innocent of subtlety.

" We of the village had expected her to stay," he said. " We had thought you and she would live among us."

" I had hoped that too," Karl said, " but it is not possible."

Tagi frowned. " Why is it not possible. Because your people are at war with one another? These things can be solved. You could have hidden. We would have lied to your friends."

Karl paused in his work. " No," he said wearily, " That would have solved nothing. We are at war. For a while we forgot about the war, but then it caught up with us. We couldn't run away any more." He worked through it again, as he had done every hour since Leah had left. " No matter how much we want to forget the war," he said, " we don't have the right to do it. If we forget about war, we forget about civilization, because they're part of the same thing. Once we give up even one part of the thing, we take a step backwards. Your people took that step backwards a long time ago. Perhaps they thought they could train themselves to forget about the problems of being human and intelligent. But they failed, and now their descendants are slowly dying out. We don't want that to happen to us."

Tagi spread his hands expansively. He had not taken any offence at Karl's words. He recognised the truth of them, but his gesture summed up the world of difference that separated the two men.

" But we are happy," he said, smiling.

Karl thought of the long years ahead, the cold lonely dangerous years for both himself and his race. He wondered if it was worth it. Then looking at Tagi's smiling but vacant face he knew that it was. There was no point in living if, like Tagi, you did not realise that happiness is not enough.

john baxter

undoubtedly the Earth belongs to whoever can keep it—and if the human race is not capable of looking after its own property then it deserves to lose it—but perhaps, long ago . . .

return visit

by p. f. woods

During the week of 7th August, 1970, the Receptor Society placed the following advertisement in all London papers :—

> " Polropoc, of Antares, has established contact with the Receptor Society. He will make an appearance, by distant-technique, at the Truro Theatre on Saturday 12th August at 7.30 p.m. Polropoc has indicated that he has something of importance to say to the inhabitants of Earth. Tickets price 10/-d, 5/-d, 3/6d."

James Hardacre read the advertisement with surprised interest. The name of the society struck a chord in him.

In a bar a few weeks previously, his friend Kay Hollerith had given him his card, containing his new address and telephone number. Hardacre had been intrigued to notice that among his other accomplishments Hollerith was pleased to display his new one : vice-president of the Receptor Society.

" Receptor Society ?" he had asked. " What's that ?"

Hollerith laughed. " Come to one of our meetings if you like. See our apparatus. It's fascinating."

But although Hollerith had launched into a confused account of the society, somehow the conversation had drifted off before getting anywhere. All Hardacre had learned was that they were ' doing something.'

He laid down the paper, tightened the cord of his dressing gown and crossed the room to the telephone. Thoughtfully he extinguished the stub of his cigarette and dialled.

" Hello Kay, is that you ? Jim Hardacre here. I've just seen your advert in the paper."

" Have you, old boy ? I expect you'll be going, then ?"

" Well, what's it all about ?"

" Exactly what it says, old chap. Polropoc, he lives on one of the planets of Antares. That's who you'll be seeing."

Hardacre listened to the words disbelievingly. He could hardly credit that such an upright figure as Kay Hollerith, with his clipped, city-office voice, was actually saying the things his ears reported.

" You're surely not serious that you've got a man from the stars to get up on the stage and give a show, are you ? Saucers from Venus and all that ? I didn't think *you'd* get mixed up in that kind of thing, Kay."

A discreet cough came from the other end of the line. " It's all gen stuff, Jim. Everything above board and all that."

Hardacre sighed. " Well, what's it *for* ?"

" Hmm—well, that's what we're not sure about. I dare say we'll find out on the night, though."

" But you *must* know !"

" Well, after all, Polropoc's doing the speaking, not me. Is there anything else you wanted, by the way ? It's time I left for the office."

" Yes. How about a couple of complimentary tickets ? I'll take Judy along."

" Who ?"

" Judy, my girl friend."

" Oh. Actually I don't think I can arrange for a free get-in, if you know what I mean. The Society hasn't unlimited resources, you know. Come on, ten bob won't break you."

" I suppose not," Hardacre muttered, trying not to feel slighted.

" Good. Might see you next Saturday, then. Cheers."

The phone clicked. Hardacre put down the receiver, picked up the newspaper again and read the advertisement anew, then rubbed the stubble on his chin.

" Crazy," he muttered. " Crazy."

But he did go to the Truro Theatre on the following Saturday. The first thing that struck him was the air of poor organisation

about the whole proceedings. He bought tickets all right, the box office was in the province of the owners of the hall. When he got inside, he found that there were no ushers.

Judy clung to his arm. " Where do we sit ?"

" Seems as though we could sit anywhere."

" What, and you just paid ten shillings a ticket ?" She frowned in annoyance. " We could just as well have paid three and six and sat where we liked."

Hardacre shrugged. " That's the trouble with Kay," he said. " He looks pretty efficient, but he's got blind spots. When he embarks on a project he gets one central idea in his head and leaves all the other details to sort themselves out."

" Leaves *us* to sort them out, you mean," Judy laughed, recovering her humour. She watched the rest of the audience sauntering through the aisles—there was a steady flow through the doors of the theatre—and plucked his sleeve. " Let's sit over there. They'll be the ten bobs, anyway."

They took central seats about midway down the theatre, sat back and waited. The Truro had once been one of the main London theatres, but now it had faded a bit and become ' unfashionable.' It looked rather dusty. Hardacre let his eyes roam over the close-pressing, ornately carved and gilded interior. Even in its heyday, it must have seemed cheap.

" I love this place," he said. " It's in such bad taste !"

" That figures."

But the come-back was lost on Hardacre. His interest was taken by the people entering the theatre.

As the place filled, a definite mood took shape in the building. Apart from the usual gathering of cranks, occultists, and people interested in the ' extraterrestrial '—in mystical terms, of course —he realised that the society's advertisement had also attracted a large number of people who were interested in having a good laugh.

He recognised some of them as soon as they came in. Self-styled comedians from the East End. Raffish young men in outlandish clothes who exchanged good-natured banter as they wandered through the theatre.

Nobody seemed to be taking the evening seriously. By Hardacre's guess, the society might be in for a rough time.

The theatre was nearly full. The audience, despite its high spirits, was reasonably quiet, and expectant—except that is, for

a group of rabble-rousers in the front stalls, who had already decided to begin the evening's entertainment on their own.

" Trust them," Hardacre muttered to Judy. " They could have sat anywhere they pleased, but no, they had to take the front stalls. They're just front stall animals."

" Well, why not ? They probably haven't any more idea of why they came here than—than I have ! Or you, for that matter. If you think—"

" Shhh. Something's happening."

Kay Hollerith had wandered on to the stage, and stood in front of the huge, dirty green curtain. Patiently he waited for silence, then spoke.

" Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. This evening we are to receive a communication from Polropoc, an inhabitant of Antares. But first let me introduce you to the president of the Receptor Society, Mr. Browne."

A second man shambled on to the stage, wearing a shabby grey suit, thick-lensed spectacles and with thinning hair. At first, he seemed a rather insignificant figure, but as Hollerith left the stage and he stood alone, Hardacre realised that this was only because he was making no attempt to act. He was not compromising his own casual and vague manner for the sake of the audience. In the few seconds before he spoke, Hardacre's respect for him grew apace.

" No doubt you are wondering," he said, " how this meeting has come about. It is really very simple. The Receptor Society was formed after some of us began receiving enigmatic information during the experiments which comprised our work at the National Electronics Laboratory. The NEL, unfortunately, was not interested in these results, so we formed the society and continued the work privately."

The president's words, delivered without any attempt at oratory, were clearly lost on the audience, except to produce an indefinite sensation of mirth. A restless, almost inaudible chuckle shivered up the galleries.

" The information," continued Browne, seemingly oblivious to how his speech was received, " which was a kind of ' contact signal,' as it were, showed us—or rather, we were able to deduce—how we could construct apparatus to make full communication with Polropoc, the source of the information. Since then, we have received one communication from him, in which he made known his wish to speak directly to a large audience, to impart the message to Earth which he claims to have."

He paused. " The appearance of Polropoc on the stage might be quite a shock. I feel I must warn you of that. You must understand that the principle by which he is brought to you here tonight is not television. In a sense, Polropoc is really here—even though, more really, he is hundreds of light years away. He is here, and yet he isn't."

A burst of laughter came from the audience, already raised to a pitch of hilarity by the proceedings.

" Now you see it, now you don't," shouted one of the wags in the stalls.

The president smiled good humouredly. " The method of communication involved also means that Polropoc's image must be presented to you *life size*."

With that, he retired by slipping behind the curtain.

For a while nothing happened. The audience grew restless at being faced only with a blank curtain. Wise-cracks began to issue forth from the coterie of wits in the stalls.

Hardacre smiled wryly. " It's worth the price just for this," he said.

Judy laughed, a little uneasily.

Suddenly, Browne reappeared on the stage. " Ladies and gentlemen, Polropoc." Then he vanished again.

After a few moments, the curtains swished aside swiftly. The audience gasped with shock and horror.

The stage, which was a large one, was filled by an enormous foot.

A woman screamed. Rapidly, jerkily, the curtains came together again.

Judy rose, pale-faced. " I'm going."

" No, stay." Hardacre caught her arm. " It looks good."

" Good ? Why—" Judy looked down at him. " It's *disgusting*."

Hardacre pulled her down into her seat. " Sit down and shut up."

She acquiesced. Looking round him, Hardacre saw that the audience wasn't taking this so neatly in its stride. The wags in the stalls were silenced. Everyone seemed paralysed, except for a few who, like Judy had risen and were leaving. That's another thing about Kay, he thought to himself. No foresight. Damn it, even cinemas have nurses on hand during a horror film. Some of these people look as though they need a psychiatrist.

Mr. Browne slipped between the still-swinging curtains, looking harrassed.

He coughed as if to gain attention. Perhaps he didn't realise that every eye in the place was already rivetted on him.

"I regret this little hitch, ladies and gentlemen," he said mildly. "Unfortunately our receptors seem to have been focussed wrongly. Polropoc is too big to get him all on the stage at once. In a minute or two we hope to be able to show you a more sociable part of him."

He smiled reassuringly, and vacated the stage again. Presently the curtains opened again, more leisurely, and Polropoc of Antares confronted them.

Of the same proportions as his foot, his enormous head filled the stage even more completely, his chin just rising off the boards and his bald pate swelling up to be hidden by the upper limit of the proscenium. Both his ears were well within sight, the stage being broader than it was tall, leaving several feet to spare.

Now the audience's demolition was complete. Not a whit of sauciness was left. For one thing, there could be no doubt in anyone's mind that Polropoc was genuine. The sense of his presence was overpowering. He lived, moved and *breathed.* The blood could be seen glowing and pulsing under his skin. Furthermore, his titanic breath exuded a hot, acrid smell into the audience which reached Hardacre, even here halfway up the theatre. Down in the stalls it must have been unbearable.

He nudged Judy. "Serves 'em right. Front stall comics."

Polropoc's features were full of interest. There was something about them that was definitely not human. The eyes were too high in the face, the ears too low. The bones of the face were formed according to a different model from the human. But for all that, expression came over remarkably well. The corners of the eyes were rayed with wide laughter-lines. The corners of the lips were perpetually lifted, which together with the snub nose gave a strong sense of joviality.

Polropoc gazed blankly into the theatre for a couple of seconds, as if waiting for a cue. Then his mouth opened in a huge grin.

"Greetings, Earth creatures! Polropoc brings you a warning from far away in the light years!"

The voice was boisterous and good-natured, so much so, that at first Hardacre thought that Polropoc was joking. The

voice carried no hint of threat. Rather it was a kidding, slap-on-the-back kind of voice. Glancing about the audience, Hardacre smiled to himself as he realised that the roles of spectator and society had been reversed. It was Polropoc who held the whip hand of humour now, while the people who had come to heckle him were stunned into silence.

Hardacre noticed something peculiar about Polropoc's eyes. They seemed to stare into the audience without focussing. Suddenly, the answer hit him. Polropoc couldn't see his audience. The communication was one-way.

" Out in the beyond-your-orbits, in the great space-times gulfing the stars, events move again. Beware !"

The Antarean's eyebrows rose and his thick lips bunched out in emphasis. " As in long past, more than you know takes place in the space-time. No matter, only energy ! Great blocks of energy-levels, transforming ! He, the evil one, never rests and indicates himself again."

As he listened to the rumbustious voice, Hardacre became aware of a strange phenomenon. The words spoken by Polropoc were not explicit. If he listened carefully, he seemed to hear other words behind them, like a resonance, containing meanings approximately the same but not quite. It was as if Polropoc gave alternative words to help put across the sense.

He leaned forward to catch these harmonic words. They lent a precision to Polropoc's weird manner of talking which single-instance speech could not match.

" He, Lussfer, as in your millions-of-orbits-ago, attacks you again ! He is effective again, in the aeons manipulating the energy-entities, rising to his eternal power ! As in the past, he is coming now to possess your planet."

A chill passed up Hardacre's spine. Lussfer ? *Lucifer* !

Polropoc let a long moment pass before he spoke again. " That evil one of great power covets these little globes. Out in the galaxy, many are his battles ! Alone, he can contend with many. Death and horror much worse he brings with him. These are his life ! Soon, he will be with you !"

The conviction came across. A murmur of fear passed through the theatre, and for a while Hardacre began to suspect panic—indeed, he felt it himself. But Polropoc's voice cut across it.

" Yet be cheery, little Earth-creatures ! Never despair !" A huge chuckle escaped from the Antarean's throat. " When in the millions-of-your-orbits-ago, Lussfer came to claim your planet, you fought him off with your weapon. If through the ages you have not forgotten it, prepare your weapon now. Although I sought for my appearance immediately, it seems you could not arrange for it until now. But precious of your weeks have passed. Now Lussfer comes immediately !"

Kay again ! Probably he wasn't able to book the theatre.

" What's he mean ?" Judy whispered. " What weapon ?"

" I don't know," Hardacre muttered.

" I have warned you how I can. Do not complain that I came too late. The difficulty in interstellar talking is time. We are light-years apart. So I must save up time ! For hundreds of orbits I have saved my time, so that I may speak to you today. Not again for hundreds of years."

A faraway look came on Polropoc's face. " I feel by my calculation Lussfer driving in his approach. You must face him now. I shall not be capable to maintain my image against his Malignancy."

Another pause. " I do not know what your weapon is. Being young in your last attack, I had not developed my communicator. Of your episode, I have heard only by hearsay from another planet."

Emotions chased each other across Polropoc's face, ingenuous concern, jocularity, readiness to flee. " He comes now, flashing down my own vector in his convenience. Be ready ! And remember, little ones, Lussfer is a giant ! Towering above you, above all his kind. Not as I am, a dwarf."

My God, Hardacre thought, if he's a dwarf, what's this other one like ?

Suddenly Polropoc vanished, and the stage went dark.

A wave of terror swept through the audience, a terror that was not just hysterical. It was *induced.* Hardacre could feel it sliding through him, emanating from the dark stage up ahead. Judy buried her face in his arm.

People began to whimper. Gradually, an eerie green light suffused the stage, starting at the back and spreading, moving forward until it cast a wan and weird glow like a mantle over the first few rows.

The sense of evil and malice that was coming from the stage now was unmistakeable even to the dullest. Controlling himself, Hardacre peered forward.

There, occupying a position on the centre of the stage, was a black object about three feet long, standing on low insect-like legs. Hardacre couldn't get rid of the impression that it was regarding every one of them balefully.

The tension in the audience broke. Panic started, as people quit their seats and ran for the entrances. Hardacre started for the aisle, then felt himself being buffeted by the mob.

" What shall we do ?" It was Judy.

We'll be crushed, Hardacre thought. He glanced upwards. A number of empty boxes lined the upper parts of the walls. " Up there."

Somehow he managed to get them both to the wall, then through the narrow doorway that led not to the exits, where the jam was already insufferable, but to the boxes. Once there, he peered over the side down at the stage.

Lussfer resembled a huge scorpion. His lashing, curved tail poised over his head, pointing this way and that. Wherever it pointed, the fear of the escaping mob rose to a frenzy. A strange croaking reached Hardacre's ears.

He felt sick.

The dismay which overwhelmed him came from the certain knowledge that Lussfer was invincible. He did not know where this knowledge came from—probably just from being in his presence. Lussfer was magnificent ! He had such power and intelligence that no human agency could stand against him. Polropoc's warning was useless. There was no weapon against the evil one. What weapon could get near that gleaming black armour ? What could get past the scrutiny of those dull eyes ? Lussfer created through God knew what process of the universe, was already master of the planet.

Eventually the crush died away, and Judy left. But Hardacre stayed. He was fascinated. He almost wanted to be Lussfer's servant. He watched while the army broke in, pierced Lussfer's motionless body with a dozen searchlights, and opened fire.

Nothing happened. Lussfer's confident croaking rose like laughter. The firearms melted into slag. The soldiers fled, screaming, leaving the searchlights to pin-point Lussfer's form in their yellow beams.

All night Hardacre crouched there. Did the invader know of his presence ? He was sure he did. Why did he not destroy him, then ?

Because it did not matter.

His eyes glanced around the deserted theatre. Some of the Receptor Society's equipment had fallen on to the stage—complicated electronic stuff trailing broken leads.

His mind still felt too overloaded to really take in what had happened. Was it real ? Was it a nightmare ? Could things like this *happen* ?

He turned his imagination to the outside world. Had they tried to blow up the theatre yet ? Why didn't they flood it with gas ? As Lussfer's influence grew, he imagined London being atom-bombed, first by the R.A.F., then by the Americans, the Russians . . .

Towards morning, he dozed, even his sense of horror dulled by the body's fatigue. So that when he woke in the morning, the process of Lussfer's expulsion was already under way.

He awoke to a silence. Not just an absence of sound, but a real, deadly silence of unbelievable tension.

Peering over the edge of the box, he saw Lussfer squatting on the stage as before. But this time—edging back, slowly, inch by inch with spiteful reluctance.

Something tickled his hand. He looked down. It was an ant.

Then he shook himself awake. The whole box was full of them. Ants !

Something like a pained grunt came from Lussfer. Then he saw that the stage was stained—stained with an advancing carpet of ants. From all over the theatre they converged, relentlessly, climbing over the seats, along the aisles, festooning themselves from the footlights.

They must have collected from all over London !

" Gotta get out," he mumbled to himself. " Get eaten alive."

He turned to leave the box. But as he did so, a chugging, vicious and tortured sound came from the stage. Lussfer was reared up on his rear limbs, clawing at the air, his hooked tail swishing and darting frantically. Even from this distance, Hardacre could see that he was half covered with ants.

Then he vanished.

At once the air of menace vanished from the theatre. It became an ordinary building of brick and stone. Except that it was full of ants.

Hardacre bent to look at them. Just ordinary brown ants. He laughed and staggered out into the sunlight.

The whole affair had blown over by next day. A lot of people asked for their money back. The newspapers didn't give it much space. The Receptor Society joined the ranks of all 'weird societies' in the public mind, except that it was rather more disliked.

It was a week before Hardacre eventually met Kay Hollerith again. "What did he mean," he asked, "when he said Lucifer was a giant? He was no bigger than a dog!"

Kay laid down his Scotch on the bar and sighed. "He is a giant," he said "in the insect world."

"But we're human beings."

"Don't you understand, old boy? Polropoc didn't know who he was speaking to. When Lucifer made his last attack, the human race hadn't evolved. He was beaten off by the creatures who were lords of the Earth at that time. The ants. And they've never forgotten. They've never forgotten him, or how to lick him. Damned lucky for us, too." He smiled. "When Polropoc calls us again in a century or two, we shall be able to tell him Earth's well defended."

"Ants, eh?" Hardacre laughed. "So they reckoned they owned the Earth! Well, it's ours now."

"Is it?" Hollerith gave him a hard look. "I'd say the Earth belongs to whoever can keep it."

p. f. woods

'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.

cleanliness is next to godliness
states the old adage
but so, too, could be madness,
if it could be defined—
given immortality, how deeply would
a mind be affected ?

no ending

by david busby

There is a quality about danger that will arouse some perceptive people immediately to even the faintest of its implications. So it was with me.

This man was danger : I was warned by a depressing sense of impending and omnipotent doom. He radiated an uneasy and indefinable impression of menace. Not direct menace, rather he seemed to me to be a catalyst.

But for all that I chose to ignore the warnings, I was curious, and as I watched the lonely figure climb wearily up the hill towards me, my curiosity became greater. A traveller from another rural community is rare and subject to gross suspicion, but a visitor from the City is unique.

No man had ventured beyond the safety of the City's womb-like protection for something near ten millennia. A long time by any reckoning.

The man himself was tall, and as he drew closer I could see his face, it was almost apocalyptic in its harshness, yet there was also a hint of pathetic bewilderment, childish resentment. He wore a long flowing robe, to which was attached a cowl, open sandals and carried what was obviously a heavy knapsack.

Strange dress indeed ! Yet it was vaguely familiar.

At last the man caught sight of me as I stood not twenty feet from him, regarding him in incurious silence. (I *was* curious but I'm sure he didn't realize that. I'm sure of a lot of things.) We stared at each other for some long moments ; or rather he stared and I glared and neither of us spoke. He frowned slightly as the silence began to grow from moments to minutes. Obviously he was wondering when this little tableau would end, by this time he was probably beginning to feel rather foolish, but then, I, being a fool, was not worried for my part. A madman, it is said, cannot experience such human weaknesses as embarrassment or other's discomfort, and I, on the whole, am mad.

Finally the Man-From-Afar stirred himself, reluctant as he seemed to be to break the silence.

" I am from the city," he called out.

The profundity of the man ! were my thoughts. Astonishing! Those words should have been accompanied by the inspired thunder of some mighty symphony.

" Aha !" I yelled maniacally. (Nothing strikes terror into the heart like the shriek from one insane). " Another, (there had been no others) " and lost ! A toiling traveller, lost in an alien and undoubtedly hostile land. Longing, in the fastness of the wilderness, for that Babylon of spawning lusts that you put behind you, with great sacrifice to self, for a pilgrimage into this land your cities forgot. Babylonian! What a mission, what a worthy *mission* !"

What a speech !

" Traveller," I called again. " You must have travelled far. Welcome, then, to Greenslades—humble last outpost of men, the last place of human presence in this wilderness. Population: Nine hundred and ninety-four. Oldest inhabitant : Unborn ; youngest : Dead ; (or is it the other way round ?) Local idiot, clown and Lord and Master : None other than my noble self.

Welcome again, weary Babylonian, to Greenslades, village and haven of tight-lipped self-righteousness and shocking conformity."

After this there was a silence. A silence which was broken only by the wind in the few skeletal trees that somehow managed to survive on the hillside. The Babylonian (what else could I have called him ?) was confused and he masked his confusion behind an expression of patronizing suavity all men of the city must wear when trying to fathom the idiot ramblings of the local yokels.

The Stranger was visibly shaken by my words, that much was obvious, no matter how hard he tried to obscure the fact from my sharply analytical gaze. But then, all men are shaken before the wild eyes and wilder tongue of a mad man. I, you see, am mad.

But I must admit he recovered remarkably quickly. He took a step forward in the half-light, as though to affirm something he couldn't be quite sure of from his previous position.

" I have known others like you," he declared in a voice of one in awe. " Always behind the locked doors of a clinic for the insane—the mad," he added, as if doubting my ability to handle the former word.

For a few moments I considered what he had said in lofty and dignified silence only befitting to a man of my station. Then I posed a question of weighty significance, designed not only for the sake of argument but to demolish some of the other's damn confidence.

" Ah," I replied finally, " but what is madness ? Have you considered that, my friend ? A definition for you : An arbitrary scale with which an individual can measure himself against his contemporaries. Oh—what a limited scale ! How artificial it is ! A man can utter such absurd half-truths as ' you are mad, I am not,' or vice-versa. And they mean absolutely nothing. How can they ? Can that individual measure his *worth*, not the state of his sanity, against the worth of his fellows ? No, of course not. Anyway, who can judge or define madness when the yardstick a man will use is one in which he is the only norm, as an absolute ? And what man conforms exactly to his neighbour ? All men are individuals and deviate from each's assumed norm. All men imagine they are islands of Reason in a sea of Insanity, or at the very least *un*sanity."

I sneezed (I sneeze a lot: yet another symptom of my madness no doubt) and gaily stampeded off on a new and completely irrelevant tack.

" How long," I asked with joyful cunning, " is the duration of the present ?"

The Babylonian remained silent. Perhaps he was meditating the profundity of that last question. More likely he and his vocal chords were paralysed by the crazy bizarreness of our one-sided conversation. But being bizarre myself I am left with the inability to comprehend such a state.

" Like the definition of madness, it defies definition, does it not ?" I prompted. " The definition of madness is based on the judgment of the ignorant and biased individual who is seeking the definition. Madness, therefore, is the x quantity in the equation. X = unknown. No man is mad by his *own* standards and so there can be no madness. Thus x = zero. Nothing. Yet madness—insanity (it sounds more polite) *does* exist. How long does the present last ? Can I count the seconds of its duration. No. The present can have no arbitrary existence. Yet that, too, we know exists."

I sometimes wonder if we know even that. But we must assume we know. Life must have some constants. What a merry time would be had if the reality we base all on should one day suddenly become a collection of continually unfixed variable factors.

Old Sol had sunk well below the horizon by this time and in the west the sky was stained a dirty ochre colour. The hills behind us loomed up into inky darkness like malevolent brooding giants, alien and wholly menacing. Desolation, a starkly graphic landscape of unrelieved gloom improved little by a distant thunderstorm which was muttering bad-temperedly to itself.

I turned and looked at the Wayfarer—(or Babylonian or Traveller or Stranger, whichever of the names I had assigned to him first and fancied most at a given moment) and felt for the first time some sympathy for the man. In his position he no longer cut a figure of city-bred arrogance ; he had been humbled by me and his realization of what he was outside his Babylon : Nothing ! Now he was only a pathetic and frightened man, frightened at his first ever experience of absolute *loneliness* and utter isolation. A feeling that one had been *deserted*, a feeling that stripped off all dignity and self-significance. He was beginning to realize that away from the neurotic, subdued multitudes of the cities, he was a stranger. Where was the familiar, the comforting ? What can any man think when he is completely alone in an unknown land ? What can he feel when his only company is the doubtful and possibly sinister company of a madman ?

Yes, I could feel pity.

In a sudden fit of sentimentality I said, " No doubt you are wondering where you might find accommodation for the night." I glanced up at the sky. " There is a storm riding in on the

winds from the north," I observed poetically. In the half-light I could see the dark clouds piling up against each other to form great towering ramparts across the sky. The wind was rising, it whistled about us, bringing with it a hint of rain. Soon it would be a deluge and the wind a gale. " Therefore," I continued, " let me be your guide and mentor. Only one such as I would willingly shoulder the burden of such a task."

The Babylonian started, as though it had only just occurred to him it was more desirable to have the protection of a roof over one's head and the comfort of food in one's belly, than to cower unsheltered and hungry on the bare hillside while the storm draws about and fills the atmosphere with electric unease and rain. I sometimes cannot help spicing my thoughts with a little poetry. Ah, if only the world knew what a poet it had in me. But alas, for the greater part the world is ignorant.

" There is, of course, the tavern," I ruminated thoughtfully. " Ah now—no. I remember now that in a zealous moment of missionary fanaticism I closed the place down. Quite a den of iniquity." I should know !

I fell into deep and cogitative thought.

" Aha ! of course !" I exclaimed suddenly. (I frequently spice my conversation with ahs and ahas.) " How could I have considered anything else ? My castle ! Where else could I have such an honoured guest as yourself to stay ?"

" Castle ? Your castle ?" he asked blankly. He still seemed a little dazed by the speed of recent events.

" My castle !" I cried impatiently. The stupidity of the man ! I pointed to what I must call my Imperial Seat of Residence. A latter day sugar-plum mountain eyrie, perched precariously atop a fantastically steep hill around which the hovels of Greenslades huddled as if for protection. An architectural nightmare of spires and gables, turrets and towers, a jumbled mess of many epochs where all the generations of my family had been born, added something extra on, and died. Not always peacefully.

It was from there that I, in splendid isolation, watched over and guarded jealously my little kingdom, a defending fortress against all comers.

" Come along," I said finally, " it starts to rain." I took him by the arm then started to chuckle. " How little we know of each other ! We don't know each other's names even. Count Belvedale. The last member of three thousand years of

Belvedales. A sad end to a glorious dynasty. And you, my friend ?"

He looked up at me uneasily. I was taller than him, but then I am taller than all men, not just in the sense of stature either.

" Fath—" he hesitated, for a moment unsure. Then : "Just call me James." And he left it at that.

The rich mellow light from the log fire in the huge fireplace of the great hall warmed us pleasantly as we dined at the enormously long banqueting table. It had been long years since it had been used for such sumptuous purposes, though at the Twenty Years Festival I always invited the children of the village for a great feast, as tradition prescribed.

" I'm afraid our meals here on the Outside are a trifle spartan," I said apologetically, " especially after the great piles of synthetic—er—food you must be used to. But we depend on farming for our life and farming is neither favoured or fruitful in this land. The soil is too infertile. Still, there is wine in plenty, excellent wine too, by any standards."

The Babylonian did something vague with his hands that I supposed was to be interpreted as a gesture of dismissal. Patronizing bastard. But my general air of geniality introduced by the meal belied the malice of that thought.

Eventually the remnants of our meal were cleared away by two servants and I sat back into my chair and belched contentedly. There was a comforting sense of security sitting there, watching the yellow flames flickering in the hearth, drinking wine, talking of nothing in particular with the Wayfarer, while, outside the thick stone walls the wind howled and the storm raged.

Like all great halls, those walls were magnets for an unbelievable amount of ancestral junk. Trophies, placed along the walls by my forebears to prove their valour in forgotten deeds to an indifferent world. A whole stack of bloodied spears from some ancient territorial dispute or other, a dented shield taken from an enemy, a short-sword which had been the instrument of its owner's beheading, a rusting and useless household robot, (heaven knows where that was acquired) and even a much battered suit of space-armour.

I was watching him curiously while his eyes roved over these artifacts with a light of fascination. Yet when he saw the suit I observed a strange expression leap into his face, a sudden

animation ?—familiarity ?—fear ?—terror even ? It was hard to tell. Perhaps an amalgam of all those emotions. The suit obviously evoked something in him. But what ?

He at last turned to me and quite seriously asked, " Tell me, were you—the Belvedales, a space-faring family once ?"

For a moment I stared at him, rocking with astonishment, then, unable to hold my mirth any longer, roared greatly with laughter.

" Oho—oh !" I cried, vastly amused. " Fredrick the third, one of my ancestors, would have knighted you on the spot if he were alive to hear that tonight."

The Stranger looked slightly puzzled.

" The Family Archives are full of his daring exploits around Aldebaran, 40 Eridani, Procyon and Wolf 359. But he was born long after the technical knowledge of the Star-drive died. It was wishful thinking on his part. He was a dreamer of that Golden Age before the years of the Exodus and before Earth was sucked dry by it to feed the stars."

" But—the suit ?"

" Ah yes, the suit. The space-armour came from an orbiting derelict which—to put it simply—unorbited. Not much survived, certainly little of the town it fell on did, the space-armour, however, fell into our hands—almost literally—intact."

The Babylonian, (I still couldn't think of him as ' James ') digested this little bit of information in silence. I had the feeling that somehow he didn't approve of my sardonic sense of humour. Still, you could hardly blame him. There *wasn't* anything funny in the virtual annihilation of a whole town.

Yet it must have been a quick death, and it forestalled an attack one Belvedale had been about to mount against the town. Those people would have died a lot slower and a lot more painfully under the infamous hands of that rather barbaric ancestor of mine.

Who is this man, I asked myself, in a long period when both of us sat in brooding silence. He was from the city, that much was obvious, but for that he was a complete enigma. What had brought him out here ? We sometimes get visitors from the few neighbouring towns, but never from the great glittering artificial Babylons after which I had named this man.

It was an interesting story—of the City and what they of the city called the Outside—the great rural districts which were

ninety-nine per cent of the planet, and how these two arose as so sharply defined areas and contrasting cultures. It was also a long story. Ten thousand years long. Then, at twilight, that knowledge which drove mighty ships across the galaxy and scattered the seed of men far became lost to the uncaring parody of men who inhabited the now largely emptied world. Even when that knowledge had been available in the closing years of the Exodus, Earthman showed no interest in exploiting it. Were there not humans enough in the Milky Way already? Contemptible children of the stars who had forsaken their world, are we to become one of them? And so the men of Earth sank lower and lower into their social stagnation, closing their minds to all new frontiers and turning inwards to eternally regard their navels.

Even if, in those years of decline, anyone had wanted to use the secret of the Star-drive which had not yet quite been forgotten, they would have failed in the attempt. Earth's lack of technological sophistication would have doomed any reoccurrence of another Exodus.

What was the Exodus? It had been a mad, uncontrolled migration from the earth. The Exodus in less than one century had drained from Earth all that which had made Earth. The vital people had left, lured by strange adventures around nameless worlds and suns, and had taken with them all the world's dynamism and drive. And all that was left were the colourless dregs. People, who when they occasionally looked into the night sky, saw the stars as little points of light placed there by the grace of God for their benefit as nice decorations, not as places in their own right, where other people lived and died, worshipped and blasphemed, not as minute parts of the cosmopolitan whole of the Universe.

That was humanity. That is what the Babylonians are today. For them I *spit* !

For the greater part the populace retreated into the robotic womb of the cities, escaping the harsh realities of their culturally dying planet. A few others elected to live in, and fight against, an uncontrolled rather than a controlled environment, outside the cities. The simplicities of rural existence—bah ! It was tough, and that simple life made tough men and women. There was no other kind, there could be no other kind. It was those people, us of the Country, when we eventually united, who would one day relight the beacon and once more carry it to the

stars. The peoples of Babylon grow fat and soft and useless, great limpid slugs. Ambition was not for them, or *of* them. It had been bred out by generations of generations of slughood, it had been forever banished from their stupid little minds. Who needs drive when a robot will perform every function for you down to wiping your nose ?

It is strange that I sometimes include myself with men, when I am no more a part of humanity than an alien non-human would be. Does the creator sometimes identify himself with his creations ? I think he does. I do, even though I am infinitely Man's superior.

The fire had burnt low and I went over and threw on some logs and a sudden shower of sparks roared up the chimney with a satisfying *whoosh*.

I turned to the Babylonian who had not spoken a word in the last hour.

" You do not talk much, do you ?" I paused. " Perhaps you are a thinker like I. But then I doubt if you can combine both thought and action like I myself can. Such an ability is to be found only in a few."

" Yes, I was thinking," he answered.

I nodded wisely. " Ah, but all men think. They must think as they must breathe. Were your thoughts specific ?"

" Yes, my thoughts were specific. Specifically—you."

Because I have no false modesty I made no effort to hide the fact that I considered myself a worthy subject of his thoughts.

" You know," he said, leaning forward, showing a mild intensity, " it is astonishing that such an hereditary system of rulership still survives. It really is quite astonishing."

The humour of the fellow ! I thought with a great shout of merriment. How can one be so naive ? Ignorant, narrow, Babylonian. What do you know of time and the world in the complacent insularity of your protective cities ?

" My dear Metropolitan," I said, wiping my eyes and grabbing the wine flagon, " except in the few isolated islands of what you so laughably call civilization, Democracy has been deader than the dead this last ten millennia or so. Leaders cannot be elected, they are born and they are always born to be leaders."

" And what happens when you die ?" The Babylonian was looking at me, calmly, calculating. Amusement danced openly in his eyes. " You are not married, are you ? You have no heirs, have you ?"

That made me angry. Oh so angry. " Why you insolent pig !" I roared crashing my fist upon the table in terrible rage. " I could wring your scrawny little neck for less than that. By God, if you're not careful I'll—"

Control, *control* ! a voice whispered from within me.

This was his revenge. I had made him feel small and now he was going to make me look a fool. Damn him ; he won't !

I suppressed my boiling emotions with an incoherent snarl and subsided into my seat.

" There are plenty of nubile girls in the village," I growled. " I could take any one and have an heir. I can take any girl for my bed-mate, anytime."

" But you haven't, have you ?" he insisted quietly. " You are what ? Fifty ? You have had thirty-five years to fill this place of yours with an army of brat potential leaders. But you haven't, have you ? No girl has shared your bed. What are you afraid of, Count ? Women ? Children ? Are you afraid you will only sire females ? Or do you fear your possible impotency ? What is it, Count Belvedale ?" His voice was triumphant now. " Which one ?"

I slowly raised my eyes to him. When he saw them he must have felt fear.

" Get out," I said between my gritted teeth. " Get out ! *Get out* !"

He left the room in a hurry. Scuttling past all the ancestral trophies he had so recently been admiring, opening the great doors and disappearing from my sight. His flight reminded me of a crab desperately fleeing to the sea. I had seen a crab only once, the sea only once. A long time ago. A very long time ago.

' What are you afraid of, Count ?' he had said.

I leapt up restlessly.

No, it wasn't fear. I *was* impotent, or at least not impotent but sterile. I knew that. It was not that which worried me. I would have no heirs, as the Babylonian had said. But I would never have need of heirs. I was the last of the dynasty, but I would last longer than all the previous generations of Belvedales collectively. An immortal ruler does not have heirs to follow him because he doesn't need them.

I was born a Belvedale, yet was more than a Belvedale. I was born of humanity, yet I was more than humanity. I was leader, but not only of Greenslades but of every dumb idiot who was a member of the human race.

Who was I ? It had taken many years before I found the answer.

The Babylonian was wrong about my age. It had taken four hundred and forty years of my life before I discovered myself.

You are . . .?

. . . God !

I looked out of the rain-lashed window and watched the lightning scratch the darkened sky as the elements put on a good imitation of a wet Hell.

My roses, I thought with dull incongruity. They will have been beaten down.

So the days passed and my anger with the stranger receded. I saw little of him, though if it were for fear he avoided me, if indeed he was avoiding me, I at that time did not know, or particularly care.

It is strange that I, poet-philosopher extraordinary, the Prime-Thinker, the Architect of All, who has spent the greater part of his existence pondering deeply the stuff of Reality, the enigma of Life, should have been so blind to those more immediate happenings that threaten the present order of things with complete disruption. Ignorance finds refuge in the fool ; and I was both a fool and ignorant. Such was the depth of my preoccupation that *nothing* external came above the horizon of my enquiry : when certain, rather earth-shattering events arrived, their arrival was unexpected as a sudden thunder-clap on a cloudless summer afternoon.

The degenerate Babylonian seemed to represent no intrusion into my profound and meaningful meditations, although his presence irked me slightly because I thought he might become an intrusion. And while many subjects came under the focus of my mental microscope, Greenslades was being convulsed by the austere figure of the man from the city.

The dusty streets of squalid hovels were a cauldron's brew of rumour and cross-rumour. All eyes were turned upwards, gazing with surmise at the enigmatic fortress which had dominated their idiot lives for a century of centuries and whose monopoly of domination might topple yet under the subtly unsubtle exhortations of the Babylonian. But, of course, I was ignorant of all this, and my ignorance would be something I would bitterly regret.

It was three weeks since that night of the wild elements when we had first met, the Babylonian and I, and for the most part I had all but forgotten him. Other things dwelt in my mind, among them my garden, whence I would retire when not in a mood necessary for contemplation. It was a rare and beautiful oasis of ordered nature in the courtyard. Here I was a happy and tender slave to my much beloved roses. But now there was little to tend. Those roses seemed as if they were very weary and heartily sick of the whole dirty business of survival. There had been no rain since that storm which had so well beaten them down, and the earth was returning to dust. It needed but lacked nourishment ; all nourishment went into the soil of the farmers. Roses are beautiful, but one cannot live alone on their scent and sight.

" Alas," I said aloud, bending down to the lone bud of a small bush, " will you live ?" It was my prize of summers past. Usually there were many blooms, many exquisitely delicate petals of shimmering gold, but this year there was one bud. *One* ! Oh, where are all the joys of life ?

I turned slowly away from the garden and mounted the worn steps that led up to the parapet.

From there I could look out across my little kingdom with an unobstructed view. I could see the jumbled wilderness of the great wastes against which we were constantly fighting a slow, implacable war. The land, centuries before the Exodus, had been scorched with nuclear weapons and it still left its mark with the occasional appearance of a mutant animal or human.

There was a certain therapeutic value in coming to the high place : my heart, heavy with depression, was nearly always lightened by the gentle sense of isolation and calm. There was nothing above my head except the blue infinity of the sky, or, at night, the stars.

My *little* kingdom, I thought then, in sudden wonder.

" This Earth is your kingdom," I murmured aloud. "All men are your kingdom. And beyond this tiny green speck, beyond the nine planets of Sol, beyond even the mighty galaxy, to the very limits of the limitless universe, that is your kingdom. Every atom of matter is yours, yours by right of creation. You made the universe, it is yours."

And must I convince myself so ? Do I need such assurance?

The burden of being God weighs heavily upon my shoulders, and its weight horrifies and terrifies me. It is hard to imagine that I have carried that burden for all time and will continue to carry it for all time.

Perhaps that is why I have doubts. Maybe I hope that I am not God, and, by doubting, will miraculously cease to become anything more than a mere mortal. But I am God. And though I sometimes wish I were not, I shall always be God.

When will there be an end for me? When will there be *termination*?

Never.

It is only madness that shields me from the ultimate terror of that one word. Without insanity I cannot think how my existence would be.

Isn't it funny—hilariously funny—that I, God, should so *dread* immortality.

But why am I God? And to that I know there is no answer. I *am* God; an irrefutable fact. No reason given, just fact.

Then I heard the bell. At least I thought I heard one. The sound of it was just as I imagined it would be, though I had never in actuality heard one. It was a strange but musical sound, a sound that came to my ears clearly through the evening air, unmuffled. The distant sound evoked in my mind's eye a picture of a man wearily pulling on a rope while a great bell boomed its toll above him.

But a bell . . .? Where . . .? I had never heard a bell, therefore I should not be hearing one now—if in fact it was a bell. It was real though, not a part of my thoughts; my ears *were* hearing it, not thinking they heard. Yet if it was real, someone must obviously be ringing it. And who would do that? Why? What purpose would be gained?

There is logic to this problem, I thought uneasily. That is, very simply, to find out. Just that. Simple.

Simple yet difficult. The sound did not seem to come from any one fixed point, but seemed to keep shifting its source so that it seemed to be everywhere at once, echoing off the hills, bounding and rebounding into the valley until it eventually reached me.

Realization didn't slowly dawn on me, but came with terrible swiftness, striking a blow from which I nearly did not recover. I knew now. Oh yes I knew. I was angry, angry at my own stupidity, angry at my complete refusal to see what was so clearly presented to my eyes.

It was indeed a blow. For a moment I tottered, the very fabric of my being shaking like an autumn leaf in a storm. My coherency, my reason, *me*, all that made up the individual that was myself, all that receded to vanishing point, while the cold, cold forces of *unreason* swept chillingly through my soul in a raging welter of disruption.

But the foundations of my mind were strong, and I brought control back with a supreme effort of will.

I ceased gibbering and tried— Oh God, how I tried !—to force that terrible emotion of absolute rage back from where it came, but I failed.

A vision of the Babylonian mocked me, challenged me with that most ultimate of blasphemies which violated the very thing that justified my existence as God. I had to destroy him before he took that justification from me, before he made me *nothing* !

I went up the dusty road that led over the hills that surrounded Greenslades, conscious of the fact that what I was going to do might destroy me. I was conscious of this but I continued, for there was nothing else I could do. I didn't question too closely 'why,' as logic doesn't associate with subjective self-rationalization. To put it in such simple terms as the Babylonian was a threat to me and that I must remove that threat would be too easy. But basically it was *not* a self-rationalization, it was the truth as I conceived it.

There !

I reached the top of the hill and looked down on a small knell not far below. There were people there, from Greenslades of course, not many, mostly rather old, a number of whom I knew were edging into senility. And the Babylonian was there.

The bell, which had been fitted so that it hanged down from the cross-trees of three poles, was no longer being rung.

My eyes slid across the scene to the Babylonian. He was standing on slightly higher ground than the others, behind him there was a large wooden cross which had been shoved into the ground with little care and was leaning slightly. He was speaking, and though I couldn't hear his words I knew what they must be.

I felt sympathy, only for a moment, but it was there. The fool ! I should have recognized him for what he was, much earlier. The dress should have marked him down the first instant I set eyes on him, his manner immediately after. He was a Babylonian still, but different from all other, of his kind.

For how many Babylonians were priests ?

Perhaps now there is a glimmering of understanding as to my motives ?

He was a priest, in the service of God—myself, in other words—and he worshipped me. But men always interpret the works of other men wrongly, often they are never meant to be interpreted by any other than the creator ; then how near can men come to interpreting the *hugeness* of my plans correctly ? Men are presumptuous enough not only to consider that they know what God is doing but tell him how to do it better.

The Babylonian—the priest—was telling these people what he considered God would be telling them if He were there.

He was telling them that I, their master, was evil and was a madman. He was telling them that God was evil and was mad. Yet is my Universe evil or mad, it cannot be. Otherwise it would never exist.

This was what made that rage erupt from my brain and explode into every nerve of my body in a gale of raw, shrieking emotion. An elemental reaction.

But it was not this that evoked the much greater terror that I felt as well.

I was God ! Yet what if I was not ? Then the whole justification of my life would suddenly cease to exist. Everything that was the *foundation* of my basic philosophy would be demolished, if for one moment I doubted myself. I dared not let the Babylonian instil those doubts. Yet he was threatening to do that very thing. He was threatening to destroy me so completely that nothing would remain.

I AM GOD !

How often must I scream this to those questions which I feel beginning to form ?

I must never stop trying to convince myself. No matter how contrived my rationalization I must never, even for an instant, start to disbelieve in myself.

That was why I was going to kill the Babylonian, that was why I *had* to kill him.

From the moment he chanced upon Greenslades he had been marked down for death, and I was going to be my own instrument.

I walked quietly into the congregation's midst.

They saw me and watched to see what I was going to do. They were without fear, these old men and women. They were too

near their end to fear it. And what little fear was left had been eradicated by the verbal soma of their priest.

They believed in God, and nothing, death included, could touch or shake that belief.

I reached the front of their pitifully small number and turned. " Go," I said. That simply. Go. And they went. No man could have refused.

Then I turned to the Babylonian who was waiting quietly beneath the cross, his body relaxed, arms down at his sides.

" You are wrong, you know," he said.

I was not surprised by his assurance.

" You know I'm going to kill you ?" I asked him. " Don't you."

He nodded. " Yes, I know that. And I think you are wrong to do it. Oh, I don't mean on moral grounds. Your reason for killing me is wrong. I can understand why you *must* kill me, but you are still wrong." He looked at me closely, his eyes luminous with something I could not define. " Are you surprised I know ?"

" It doesn't matter if I'm surprised or not," I answered.

"No it doesn't, does it ?" The latter two words were doubtful, questioning.

" I am going to kill you because I dare not do otherwise."

Is this the way it was to be ? So strangely calm, without feeling ? So cold, like a laboratory experiment ? Yes ! It was the only way I could do it.

" Then do it quickly," he murmured, closing his eyes. " Do it very quickly."

My extraordinary strong hand moved unhesitatingly to his throat.

" You are not God," he said before he died.

Killing him was like killing a rabbit. I could do it quickly, painlessly and efficiently.

The man slipped to the ground like a doll.

" What is it to be sane ?" I asked quietly into the still air. I realized I had been insane until the Babylonian had come. The doubts that had poured in were the doubts of a sane man. An insane man has no doubts. And perhaps, when all is said and done, that is what a mad man is.

My insanity was returning now he was dead. My mind had to do something, and I went berserk.

When the cross was shattered and the man's body a bloody pulp I stopped. I smiled, lifted up the Babylonian and walked slowly home.

I had plans for the Babylonian yet.

They came for me three months later, as I realized inevitably they would.

They arrived in a devilishly cunning flying-machine which hung in the air on whirling vanes that dissolved into circular silver mists in their motion.

It descended slowly and landed with a bump on the wilting square of the now yellow lawn. No doubt it would have been just the same to that heathen Babylonian pilot if he had brought it to rest amongst my roses.

Arrogant men, they were. I could see that as they stepped from the craft which still rocked on its suspension. Arrogant men in shiny black garb, calf-length boots and a terror-evoking walk. Theirs was the practised ease of long experience. They were good at their trade as merchants of terror. Mask-like they wore the expression of cruelty on faces which were hidden like coldly aloof insects, behind the great blind eyes of the green-tinted visors of their helmets.

They expected me to cower as they glared across to me, their hands pointedly never far from the holstered weapons that swung at their hips.

I am not easily cowered.

" Good day, gentlemen," I said mildly enough, putting down the insect spray I had been using.

I had thought of them as insects, but their death would not be that of DDT-poisoning.

The leader of them stepped forward. It was easy to identify him as the leader, for his aura of authority seemed greater than the others.

" Count Belvedale ?" he demanded of me.

I bowed ironically. " At your service."

It was obvious the man had little contact with aristocracy such as I, but still, he seemed impressed and made an effort to be civil.

" I am Captain Murray of City Police. We are investigating the disappearance of a priest, a Father James." He gave a description. " We have reason to suppose he is staying, or was staying, with you."

He waited for my reply.

Getting none he asked, " Is he still here ?"

" He is," I said thoughtfully, " in—er—part." (I resisted a temptation to put the last word in the plural). " But surely there are more interesting topics for discussion than a missing religious maniac. I'm sure you'll agree there is. Just look at that rose bush, for instance." I pointed to the plant with a smile. " And to think two months ago it was dying. Unbelieveable, isn't it ? The soil in this area is poor, and the nourishment it needs goes into the fields of my farmers. But sometimes I can make good the deficiency."

One by one the Babylonians backed away from me, there was a massed indrawn breath of horror. Squeamish fools ! I thought contemptuously. What's a priest ?

The Captain took a hesitant step forward. His strangely untanned face paler than ever.

" You—you don't mean . . .?" He choked. " You didn't . . .?"

" Oh no, of course not !" I cried, laughing. " We aren't *that* uncivilised out here, you know. Oh no, we do have such fruits of technology as refrigerators. I mean why waste a good thing? I only put in part of him, the rest I froze till next year. You know," I added wondrously, " I never realized how fruitful religion was till that rose bloomed." I smiled benignly at them.

" I arrest you, Count Belvedale, for the murder of Father James," he managed to mutter, severity of expression fighting with a desire to be sick. Several of his men, I noted, had already succumbed to the desire.

" Gentlemen," I drew myself up before them, " I accept your invitation. I want to make it clear that I am going of my own free will. I shall not be arrested."

This was my trial ! With what exceptional speed it had been set up ! Within two hours of my arrival in their Babylon I was facing justice. But strange justice, to me, it was.

The judge a technician, the jury a machine. Called—with great originality—the Justice Machine. How any artifact could handle such abstract concepts was far beyond me. Men had started their tinkering anew since the Exodus. They were eager to play with their toys. I was not so eager. But then it was my trial.

" Sit down," I was told by the technician. He pointed to a chair which looked very much as if it had been removed from the control-centre of a spaceship.

I was strapped in carefully, my hands bound to the arm-rests, then a band placed carefully around my forehead. Now I only had to wait patiently.

I looked up into the face of Captain Murray and said jokingly, " You look worse than I feel. It's me who is sitting here, not you, Captain."

" It is never pleasant watching a man being judged by the Machine," he said.

" Oh well," I answered. I was still flippant.

" Hold still," the tech commanded, brandishing a hypodermic. With a flourish he pushed the needle deep into my right arm. I winced involuntarily, intra-muscular injections are never pleasant.

" Tell me," I said, turning to the Captain," how does this machine operate."

It was the tech who answered : " You won't understand. But, in a nutshell, it has the ability to scan your memory. From your memory it can gain all information concerning any particular crime you may or may not have committed. It is also able to analyse your personality. In other words—in your particular case—it'll be able to tell us if you are God." He smiled ; it was the smile of the lips only.

" Very interesting," I breathed, pretending comprehension.

The band which encircled the bare skin of my forehead seemed to be growing hot. The room was wavering, gently out of focus. Somewhere an insect was buzzing around in futile flight. It wasn't until some moments later that I realized that the buzz was not of an insect but a product of my own mind. I was drowsy, warm and secure, or at least that was what I thought. I felt consciousness slipping away from me as the ebbing tide slides off the beach under the gravitational summons of the moon.

" Then," I said slowly, carefully, trying not to slur my words and speaking as if in conclusion. " Then it will know. " The latter sentence was very distinct.

" It will know what ?" came the distracted answer.

" It will know," I said with an effort, " that I am God. That's all." I slept.

I awakened and found myself still in the grips of paralysis which must have been induced by the drug the tech gave me. There were voices . . . distant voices which grew louder then

faded. They grew less distant, and now they were no longer voices but words as well. I had been hearing, now I was understanding.

". . . Just as I suspected," I heard the tech say with infuriating smugness. " A paranoiac. An interesting and rather rare facet of paranoia. More strictly speaking it is Paranoid *Grandiosity*." One could fairly hear the capitals and italics. " His delusions are highly organized, extremely complex, very persistent and very closely reasoned. He came to the conclusion that he was God only after it seemed to him that there was no other answer to what is—in effect—his immortality."

" *What* !" It was an ejaculation.

" You forget," the tech said with some impatience, " that several gene mutations have been appearing over the years in that particular area, where the original inhabitants were exposed to a high dosage of radioactivity. Our friend here is just one such. And in a way you cannot blame him for deciding he was God. What else would a man, already not wholly sane consider, when the average life span of those around him is forty years and he is four hundred and forty years old ? Would he credit such arguments as ' radioactivity,' ' latent mutation,' and so on. Is it surprising that he resorts to metaphysical logic to explain the unexplainable ?"

I felt a sudden weariness drop upon my shoulders. " Have I been tried ?" I asked tiredly into the silence.

Pause.

" Yes."

There was another long moment of silence. There were no other sounds beyond the self-satisfied buzz of the machine somewhere behind the blandly blank walls of the little room.

I turned my attention to the two. They seemed to be waiting. For me ? No, my answer, my reply.

" Yes, you have been tried," the tech said at last, breathing laboriously. His voice was flat, completely devoid of any human feeling. " The machine has learned all there is to know about you. In fact—to commit a gross cliche—it knows more about you than you do yourself. It knows for instance that you are not sane, but it also knows that you knew that. It knows that your life is dominated by a very strange delusion." He leaned forward, his breath coming in harsh gasps now. " The machine knows you are a man—no more, no less. A madman. You are, Count, completely mad. You are not God, you are just insane."

I stared into those pale disks of his eyes in horror. I shuddered for they were were empty, blank, meaningless.

" You lie," I said dully, not convinced he did.

" No, I am telling the truth as the machine gives it, and it can do no other thing than to tell the truth.

" Your sentence has been passed," he paused. " It should appeal to your sense of irony. Your sentence is to be cured of madness, that will be enough. It is terrible enough to need no other punishment added."

My sentence didn't interest me. Why should it ? Nothing these mere men could do could harm me. I was God !

Was ? I screamed in silent agony. *Am* ! *Am* ! Present tense, not past.

My unconscious mind knew the truth, it was only the other part of me which refused to see the truth. How long before the cure took effect and started my thoughts along rational self-questioning ?

" Whatever you do," I whispered, " nothing will harm me, nothing will *ever* harm me." It was all a futile gesture, but I continued just the same. "You see, gentlemen, I am immortal."

" We know," the tech said seriously. "That is part of your sentence—that you should continue to be so."

" What do you mean ?"

He smiled without humour. " Your sentence is immortality. If you are God then you will already have been sentenced, but we both know you are not God, and that is what will make the punishment so much more terrible. You see, Count, Father James was doing more than just preaching the doctrine of Christianity, he was, in his own stupid way, trying to prepare the people for a stupendous evacuation of the Earth. Our social field workers would have done a better job, but that's beside the point." He hurried on, fearing I would interrupt. " This planet is entering another Ice Age, a long one, a million years long. You will be alive to see the ice retreat again *after* the Age has passed."

" I am immortal !" I cried. " What is a million years to God ?"

" A more pertinent question would be : What is a million years to a man ? And the answer, again, is a long, *long* time. You will be bored and lonely, more lonely than any other man in history.

" We have rediscovered a faster-than-light drive and shall leave this Earth and you. We shall leave you with the knowledge that there is no human kind within one thousand persecs. That there is no human companionship within the distance of the visible stars to be seen from this part of the galaxy. Normally you would have the safety mechanism of madness, but you are already mad although you won't be for long. Already a cure for madness is—has—been introduced. Soon you will be incapable of returning to insanity. You will face all eternity sane. You will live forever. You will live forever, and you will live with the knowledge that you must face the infinite future a man not God. I don't envy you, Count, I don't envy you one bit."

Suicide ? I thought. No, that too was temporary insanity. If I were incurably sane I would never take my own life. Even when I wanted to, my whole being would fight to survive.

" Goodbye Count Belvedale, goodbye for ever."

What dreadful finality those words had.

They have left now, streaking upwards to the stars. I am the only one now. There are no others.

Yesterday I became sane. Yesterday I realized I was not God. I've tried suicide. It didn't work, now, though it nearly did before.

Already I am bored. What will my boredom be like in a million years hence. I dare not think of that. And I am *lonely*. The loneliness is unimaginable. Tomorrow what will it be like?

Goodbye ships ! I call into the wind, chill as it sweeps down from the north, as the last alloy needle ascends. Goodbye men !

Goodbye Man !

david busby

In the next issue of Science Fantasy

Skeleton Crew

by BRIAN W. ALDISS

Complete short novel of an unusual Future

guest editorial continued

imminent. I also recalled that Torre Bert was run by two brothers, Achilles and Giambattista Judica-Cordiglia. They had both been briefly in the news with a rumoured Russian in space *six* months before Gagarin went up !

Yes, I was interested, provided they had a story !

I switched on the tape recorder and listened.

Several months later, long after my science editor had disdainfully rejected follow-ups to what he considered a doubtful filler rather than a news story, and long after both Prof. Heinz Kaminski of the West German State Observatory in Bochum and NASA had confirmed the Turin station's findings, I decided to get the full story of the brothers' work. To me these two young men, medical students both who had given up their studies in favour of radioastronomy, were an extension of the worldwide interest all space experiments aroused. And their work, in short, made me stop—and think!

On November 28, 1960—before Gagarin's historic flight, the brothers tracked and taped signals from space. Three days later the Russians officially announced the launching of Sputnik VI. Until 9.03 p.m. there was nothing unusual about the signals when suddenly Morse signals broke in, loud and clear, giving a continuous " S.O.S., S.O.S., TO ALL," lasting several seconds. The same signals were heard in the United States and Germany. The period of rotation of the mysterious satellite the brothers had tracked was virtually the same as that of Sputnik VI, its inclination showed a difference of 2 degrees, its broadcasting frequency was identical. It was probably launched from a base on the Aral Sea, as was announced officially for Sputnik VI. Two details were later revealed by the Russians : Sputnik VI weighted some four and a half tons and disintegrated on re-entry. Food for thought—was Sputnik VI manned by some unknown predecessor of Gagarin ?

On February 2, 1961—two months before the 27-year-old Russian signalled his " all is well "—another unknown satellite was orbiting earth in 89′8″. It was tracked along eleven orbits by the Turin brothers and their oscilloscopes showed the characteristic Doppler effect of a vessel in space. By 5.30 p.m. on February 4th it had completed twenty revolutions when the official Soviet news agency, Tass, announced the launching of Sputnik VII.

Suddenly that same evening, the signals changed. Against the background of static burst the hard, rasping breathing of a man, the labouring heartbeat of a pilot which the brothers recorded on film with a phonocardiograph.

Hoping they were wrong, but fearing the worst, the young men called in three of Italy's top medical experts, amongst them internationally famous heart surgeon Prof. Mario Dogliotti. Their verdict was unanimous : the sounds were biological.

The following day an excited correspondent of United Press International rang up the brothers. " The Russians have sent up a six and a half-ton spaceship," he said, " but Tass doesn't say what's aboard !" And in the United States a Texas tracking station also successfully recorded " human respiratory activity " and " heartbeats."

All this had occurred prior to Achilles Judica-Cordiglia's call to my office, and convinced me that the brothers were well qualified to observe and record the strange happenings in space. The dramatic account they dictated to me, and the recording of the unknown voices, speaking calmly at first, then crying out as the terrible truth must have grown clear to them, which I listened to, made me suspect how hard the road to the stars was and how lined it was with tragedy.

That night back in May 1961, the brothers first, then myself over the phone, found ourselves listening in to two men and a woman conversing in Russian on the customary satellite frequency. The transmission was made from a sealed cabin, for there was considerable resonance. It also came from a ground station for it lacked Doppler effect.

On May 17, during a seven-minute broadcast at 2.10 a.m. something changed. Other signals broke in. Then the Doppler effect came on. The brothers later told me they had switched over to a vertically polarized aerial. From the carefully taped voices we gathered there were two men and one woman aboard a ' Vostok ' type capsule.

On May 18, amidst bursts of static, the automatic tape recorders took down the following :

" The altitude is correct . . . conditions are good . . . we hear you clearly . . . no, the signals are confused . . . that's better . . . we can see nothing behind us . . . we had better check on everything and report back . . .

" Look through the porthole . . . right in the sky . . . too dark . . . visibility zero . . ."

Later that morning, towards noon, came a series of signals, then a man's voice saying : ". . . speak louder . . . we are changing position . . . one of the stations is tuned in . . . we have some difficulty . . . so long as the world never knows this . . . at eight o'clock Moscow time . . . understood . . ."

May 19th : transmissions were irregular but the brothers were able to establish that the new satellite orbits earth in 88′ at a height of a 100-130 miles. Fragments of conversation were taped, such as : " we can only obey instructions if you co-operate closely . . . those in charge know this well . . . air pressure the same, 10, 12, 13 . . . we still can't see outside . . . in any case we'll check again . . ."

During the following days the Torre Bert station continued to keep track of the satellite, communicating all information to Jodrell Bank and the American NASA. Later tape recordings bring incomprehensible phrases such as " don't touch the green " until, on May 22, the woman's voice shows up shrill with sudden panic : ". . . breathe deeply now . . . oxygen . . . still increasing . . . too long and too powerful . . . stop !"

The dramatic tape is interrupted by a man's voice, cold and metallic : ". . . why don't you reply ?" Then : ". . . conditions are very bad . . . we are slowing down . . !"

Silence, and the faint background crackle of static, then covers those final instants with its dark cloak. Did the capsule disintegrate when its retro-rockets failed ? We may never know.

But before the silence returned on the ship's frequency, smothering those voices, a Russian ground-station cut in on a lateral wavelength to cancel out the agony of the two men and woman as they perished.

Other unsuccessful launchings, confirmed by numerous sources, are known to have taken place on June 23rd, 1961, on October 14th and December 11th that year, and on September 6th, October 17th and November 8th 1962 ! The last is of particular interest, for signals were intercepted by Torre Bert twice during the morning, very powerful and clear, before they were relayed by a man's voice giving a short report on cabin conditions, in Russian. The signals then grew steadily weaker until they faded out completely. Once again a Russian ground station cut in, cancelling out any further

possibility of reception. Did the orbiting capsule snap out of control and is it still travelling a cold and lonely tomb, through space ?

Last but not least, what happened between June 14th and 16th this year, when Valery F. Bykovski and Valentina V. Tereskova were launched from their base at Baikonur on the Aral Sea on their record-breaking flight ?

Officially, Valentina Tereskova went into space at 10.30 a.m. GMT on June 16th. But, on June 14th, at 9.04 p.m., Torre Bert as well as an American tracking station recorded a feminine voice reporting from space ! All the elements proving the origin of this broadcast were present : Doppler effect, polarization of aerials, orbital period (88′) and the frequency employed in agreement with the Geneva Convention of 1959.

The question, purely academic as it may be, remains : was Valentina sent into orbit two days *before* the official Russian announcement or was another woman cosmonaut originally launched shortly after Col. Bykovski and later *replaced* by Valentina *after* the unknown woman had made a forced landing ?

The facts speak for themselves.

There can be no doubt today that several men, and possibly women, have given their lives to pave Man's way to the stars.

Nobody can deny or even attempt to belittle the magnificent achievements of the Russians, or of the Americans, in this titanic and costly race for the conquest of space. But Russian successes have, with the exception of Valentina Tereskova's flight, hitherto lacked those essential, so deeply stirring human elements the science-fiction writers of only a few years ago managed to convey so well in their descriptions of a launching.

They lack the excitement, the fever, the emotion that grips people as they watch and listen to the count-down, as their hearts beat faster at the fateful " zero " and as they watch the huge, slender rocket rise majestically, riding high on its tail of flame. The sights and sounds of Russia's launchings remain invisible to the world.

In short Russia's achievements, contrary to those of the U.S., lack the human touch !

The feats of Gagarin, Titov, Nikolaiev, Popovics and Valentina Tereskova are accepted as *fact*, impressive but cold.

But the whole world participated in those humble fifteen minutes of Shepard's flight. His launching and the experiences of Glenn and Carpenter, Schirra and Cooper, were shared by millions throughout the globe. What man, woman or child could resist the emotion? What youthful imagination that did not live each moment, from ground-zero to orbit, and that did not, in those unique minutes, seek and identify himself with the space pilot out amongst the stars?

That is where, I believe, the Russians have gone wrong. They have attempted to impose upon an admiring world an impossible infallibility, an invulnerable perfection.

But infallibility and perfection are not human qualities!

It is more tragic still that we may never know, for sure, the full story of those last, bitter moments of the brave men who went into space, and who never returned. Perhaps, decades from now, some roving spaceship will stumble across one of these relics of another age. But it will be too late for the great, pitifully human, adventure to be shared by the present world.

john ashton

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the literary line-up

Overshadowing the short stories next month is, of course, part two of Colin Kapp's serial "The Dark Mind," and this is where events and characters really move literally and figuratively into another dimension as Ivan Dalroi combats the fantastic power of his darkling mind. Nevertheless, there is an excellent supporting cast, with Philip E. High, Robert Presslie, R. W. Mackelworth, new author H. A. Hargreaves (a professor at the University of Alberta, Canada) and the return of one of our earliest contributors, Jonathan Burke, who has made something of an outstanding success for himself in other literary spheres.

Story ratings for No. 131 were:

1. Window on the Moon (conclusion) - E. C. Tubb
2. The-Old-Man-in-the-Mountain - - Joseph Green
3. End Game - - - - - - - J. G. Ballard
4. Dipso Facto - - - - - - - Robert Presslie
5. Occupation Force - - - - - - David Rome

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